### The Sunset Kingdoms

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### The Sunset Kingdoms

by [SerGoldenhand](http://archiveofourown.org/users/SerGoldenhand)

#### Summary
PART TWO OF THE CHANGING OF SEASONS.

Fire and blood have come to Westeros. AU continuation.

The Lannisters are bowed. The Targaryens are bent. The Starks are broken. For all of these families, all of these kings, home and reunion seems a distant dream. The last war before the long night will consume them all. And in the north, the dark is rising, the wind is rising, the wolves are rising. Perplexed by his visions, Bran Stark and his half-brother Jon Snow are running out of time to learn the song of the long night.
For against the backdrop of this mangled kingdom, winter is coming.

COMPLETE.

PRAISE FOR THE SUNSET KINGDOMS:

“Simply stunning in the way it is so multifaceted.”

“An epic worth your time to read.”

“An absolute masterpiece.”

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
This is the second instalment in the series entitled THE CHANGING OF SEASONS, following A COAT OF GOLD. It is highly recommended that you read ACOG first.

LINK TO PREVIOUS PART: A Coat of Gold

INFO FOR READERS: THE SUNSET KINGDOMS is a story taking place in an alternate universe, where the point of divergence is Tyrion Lannister being freed from his trial for King Joffrey’s murder. Though set in the universe from the books, younger characters are typically aged up about 4-5 years to their show counterparts, though this is not consistent for all characters. The year is 300AL, roughly nine months in. Not all chapters take place in chronological order.

DISCLAIMER: Sadly, I do NOT own A Song of Ice and Fire, nor the show Game of Thrones, which are the property of George R.R. Martin and HBO respectively.

THE SUNSET KINGDOMS

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

- Edmund Burke

PROLOGUE
The night stirred with the cawing of crows.

A weirwood stood before her, its twisted limbs sticking out in all directions. Like as not, it had been dead for centuries. The cracked white branches were bare of leaves. A few sad dribbles of purplish sap spilled down the cheeks of the carved face and pooled in the snow at her feet.

Somewhere above a crow flapped its wings and cawed. *Death*, it said, turning to stare her in the eye. *Death*. Then it launched itself upwards, and disappeared into the night, black against the blackness.

Could the old gods still hear her, a dead woman kneeling before a dead weirwood? She had never known Ned’s gods as she had known the Seven, and had never worshipped them with the same fervour.

*Why should I?* she thought. *What have the gods ever done for me? They gave me my children, sons and daughters both, yet they stole them all away. Arya and Sansa, Bran and Rickon, Robb…*

She didn’t speak, but she remembered. Remembered the sound of steel twisting into flesh, of a pink cloak flecked with blood. “Jaime Lannister sends his regards,” he said.

A crow cawed again. The wretched thing had chosen to roost here. Crows were evil birds, and she had never liked them. *The Stranger’s children*, Septon Osmynd had told her. But that was long ago, when she had still been afraid of death…

She turned back to the tree. For the longest time she stared at the weirwood face, admiring the intricacies of those almost-familiar features. *It is only a face. A face of some foreign god. Not my gods.* She had no gods.

How long had it been since she’d stood in Riverrun’s godswood, with a smile on her face as a solemn Northerner pressed his lips to hers and the septon said, “One heart, one flesh, one soul.”

*Oh, Ned.*

Whatever heart she’d once had long ago turned to stone.

“My lady,” said a voice. She ignored it for a moment, trying to discern what mystery lay behind the eyes of that face in the trunk, and only then turned to the speaker. He was all in grey mail, save for the lemon-coloured cloak that streamed down his back. The cloak was starting to fray round the edges, she noticed, and the bottom half was torn and patchy, spotted with mud and blood and time.

“My lady,” Lem Lemoncloak repeated. “Ser Brynden is here. When you’re ready…”

The hooded woman rose slowly, pulled her cloak around herself, and followed him out of the grove.

The camp was in a clearing beside a trickling stream, surrounded on three sides by trees. The stream ran south into a river, and that river ran south into the Blackwater, and that river ran east towards King’s Landing. But this place could not have been further from the capital if it had tried. Instead of hovels and houses, there were tents, two or three dozen of them, arranged around a central campfire. Shadows flitted across the canvas roofs. There were more men than there were tents, but most of them chose to sleep under the stars. She could see some of them now, laughing and drinking and talking around the fire. They were so lost in themselves that they paid her no heed. For that, she was glad.
She saw Ser Brynden’s shadow before she saw his face. He was leaning against a tall redwood, dressed in his familiar black chainmail and plate and a dark blue cloak that danced in the mounting wind. She knew the familiar line of his face, the shape of his jaw, the way he stood and the way he walked, all of it. She knew him as well as she knew herself, or better. As they climbed, Lem went away behind her, and they were both alone.

There were no cold courtesies here, no formal truths, no apprehensive silences. Only the names they had always called one another.

“I told them that I was riding to talk with Clement Piper at Pinkmaiden,” he said. “They let me ride alone, to my surprise. Most unbecoming of Stannis Baratheon, but I insisted. Yet… this cannot continue forever, you know.”

“Soon,” she croaked, “We’ll be riding closer to Riverrun. We can talk more easily there.” She swallowed. “Does Edmure know?”

“Edmure?” Ser Brynden shook his head. “No… should I?... we can…”

“No,” she murmured. “Edmure has enough to deal with. That Roslin girl looks apt to give birth any moment, you know.” His voice dropped to a guarded tone. “As does Jeyne Westerling.”

The hooded woman nodded. “She lives, then?”

“Aye. But the child…” He held his hands up, shrugging. “We do not know… Lady Sybell gave her moon tea, she says. We sent her back to Riverrun with Lady Roslin - the maester says maybe two moons before the time, and then—”

“How did Jeyne survive?” she asked.

“I haven’t asked her,” said Ser Brynden. “I figured that Sybell Spicer has something to do with it - she might have swapped her girls or something - but none of that makes sense. Why would she stay on our side?”

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“The wedding.” It always comes back to the accursed wedding. “They killed her son too.”

A moment passed without a word, and then another. “Petyr still holds Harrenhal in young Robert’s name,” Ser Brynden said eventually. “Or in the name of the Lannisters, rather. He has sellswords with him, and some of the Lords Declarant.” He smiled. “Likely we are riding there to relieve him of his lands soon. And then…”

“Justice.” But there’s no justice in this world. Not unless we make it for ourselves.

“And…” Uncertainty tugged at her. “My son?”

“Rickon is well,” he said. “I wish I could—”

“No - he can’t. Not like this.”

Ser Brynden nodded. “Stannis wanted him as his squire, but I didn’t want to subject the boy to that unwarranted torture, so I took him on myself. He’s stubborn, but he learns well once you can get past his complaining and get him away from that bloody wolf. With luck, he will be a very good swordsman one day.”

“He takes after his father.” She tried to think of Ned’s face, but when she did she only saw a featureless, blind head, rotting on the walls of King’s Landing. Oh, Ned…
“Stubborn as a Stark, aye,” Brynden said. His voice softened. “But he has your look.”

My look? she thought. She could feel the scars on her cheeks where her own nails had scratched them, and her hair had all but turn to white. No, she remembered thinking, as they put a knife to her throat, so long ago, no, not my hair, Ned loves my hair.

“There’s another thing, though,” the Blackfish said, licking his lips. “Rickon says… Bran is alive. They are both alive. They parted ways at Winterfell, he says.”

She nodded and tried to smile, but the fact did not come as a shock to her. She knew that she would have felt some greater pain if he was dead, the pain she’d felt when Roose Bolton shoved his sword into Robb’s heart. Jaime Lannister sends his regards… sends his regards… regards… regards…

The night had suddenly gotten a lot colder. She shoved her scarred hands deeper into her pockets. “It is getting late.”

“Aye,” Ser Brynden murmured. “It is. I must start back soon if I am to make it to Riverrun by week’s end. When you want us to meet again, your red priest…”

“Thoros will know.”

Ser Brynden stood there a moment longer, his mouth half-open as though he were about to say something. But the only word he said was “Farewell,” and then he turned around and walked back into the trees.

Lem Lemoncloak was waiting for her at the foot of the hill. It was starting to rain again, as it had been raining on the day of the wedding at the Twins, she recalled. Grey Wind had kept howling and snarling and biting at any Freys who came near. We should have known, she thought.

But how could they have known?

“Lem,” she said.

“My lady?”

“How far can I trust you?”

“To the ends of the earth, my lady.”

The hooded woman frowned. We went beyond that a long time ago.

“Fetch him,” she ordered.

“My lady?” Lem did not understand at first, but after a few moments sudden realisation dawned upon him. “My lady,” he said again, bowing. Then he was gone as well.

She went and found a familiar place, a circle of tree stumps on the crown of the high hill. Mushrooms grew from between the bark, and the grass was damp. She could feel worms and dead leaves moving in the soil between her feet. The air smelled of rot and rain. I am rotted, the dead woman thought. A rotten, bitter husk with a thirst for blood. A crow cawed once more.

I’m the Stranger’s child, not you, she thought. That made her want to laugh, oddly, as she had when they’d slit her throat, and let her blood spill out all over the floor. She remembered every moment of it; the thrum of loosed quarrels, the warm wet rush of Jinglebell’s blood all over her hands, Walder Frey licking his lips as he watched, the drums pounding, pounding, pounding, as the lutes played that terrible song. And who are you, the proud lord said, that I must bow so low…
Then Lem was back. He held another man by the scruff of his neck, his mouth curled in disgust. With a grunt, the man stumbled and fell into the dirt at her feet. His eyes were sightless as he stared up at her. His hair hung down in ragged strings matted with muck and mire, and his clothes were filthy. His torn white cloak had turned almost brown, and his roughspun was soiled. Yet his golden hand gleamed as ever, droplets of rain reflecting the moon in its polished surface.

Lem Lemoncloak went to haul the man back up to his feet, but she held up an arm and warded him off. “Leave,” she told him.

He frowned. “My lady. This is the—”


He hesitated a moment, but in the end said nothing. Instead he bowed his head, turned away, and disappeared down the hillside.

“My lady…” came the hoarse voice of the man on his knees. “Lady Stark.”

“Kingslayer,” she replied.

“Jaime…” he said, “please… if… if you mean to kill me… call me… Jaime.”

The world was quiet. The rain and the howling wind mingled to make a song among the tree trunks.

“I’m not going to kill you,” the hooded woman said.

If Jaime Lannister felt anything at that, it never showed on his face. “You’re not?” he rasped, before his voice trailed off into nothing.

“I’m not going to kill you,” she repeated. The words felt strange in her mouth. “As we sin, so do we suffer. And that is what you will have, Kingslayer. Suffering.”

His voice was thick. “We’ve both suffered enough.”

“Not you,” she replied. “Not you.” Jaime Lannister sends his regards, he said.

He stretched out and grabbed her hand. His fingers were as cold and stiff as hers. “Look at me,” he hissed. “Look. At. Me. You made me put a sword through my father’s heart. I was always a Kingslayer, but you made me a kinslayer.”

“I made you do nothing. I gave you a choice. Robb never had a choice.” A rage went through her, sudden, inexplicable and violent. She tasted bile in the back of her throat. “Where is Sansa?”

The Kingslayer glanced at the ground, still gripping her hand in his. “In King’s Landing, I assume,” he said. “With my brother.”

“Your brother is dead,” she told him.

His fingers tightened in hers, and she could feel the bones cracking beneath the skin. “Tyrion,” he whispered.

“Aegon Targaryen took King’s Landing, and killed your brother. Our vengeance is equal.”

“Aegon,” Jaime muttered. “Rhaegar’s son… oh, such irony, Lady Stark…” He bit his lip, so hard
that it began to bleed. “If I told you the story I know of Aegon... well, all I did, I did it for the realm.”

“You?” She gave a scornful half-laugh. “You acted for the realm? You dare to claim that?”

Jaime Lannister pulled her close, so that her hands were around his neck. She could feel his throat working beneath her palms, hear the ragged breaths close to her face. “For... the... realm,” he whispered. “Always.”

The hooded woman leant close to his ear and said a single word, colder and harsher than she had ever spoken it. “Bran. Was that for the realm?”

“Your son.” Jaime swallowed. She could feel his throat bobbing as he breathed in. One movement of her hands, a locking of her fingers... but that was what he wanted, of course. “Bran,” he murmured, and gave a slight nod. “I pushed your son out of a window, yes. And yes, it was for the realm, Lady Stark.”

It took every inch of her willpower not to strangle him then and there. She had had so many chances to kill this man over the years, and she had thought about killing him hundreds, if not thousands of times. Yet here, now, with his fingers clutching at hers, him all but begging for death, she knew that she must relent.

She knew what she must do.

“Bran,” she said again. “Why?”

Jaime Lannister twisted his lips into a smile and she hated him even more. “I have children too, Lady Stark,” he said, “and a sister, whom I love dearly. But... the choice was your son or mine. Do you think my father would sit still and do nothing when young Bran reported his findings to the king? Robert would have wanted all our heads.” A hacking cough took him. “Heads,” he rasped. “Spikes. Walls.” He grinned hideously. “Like I said, it was for the realm...” Then he let go of her fingers and collapsed into the mud.

She stood over him, and lowered the veil around her face, so that he could see what had become of her, every line of it, every pain and every wound. But the Kingslayer did not even flinch. “Know this,” she whispered in his ear. “I pay my debts as well.” Then she pulled up her hood and sat down on the stump. It was damp with rainwater, but she barely noticed the cold.

Jaime Lannister crawled onto his knees and scrabbled in the soil with his golden hand, then turned his gaze skyward to meet her eyes. “Tell me, Lady Stark...” he said, his tone bordering on amusement. “Do you think that I’m an evil man?”

For a moment, no words came to her. “Evil?” she hissed. “You, who...”

“Me,” said Jaime Lannister. “The Kingslayer, who murdered his own father, fucked his sister, and threw a child from a window in the hope that he’d die. Me.”

Something made her words stick in her throat. And before she could answer, the men had returned. The ground shook with each fall of their footsteps. There were far more than she had asked for, forty or fifty of them, or thereabouts, and Lem Lemoncloak leading them all.

Jaime Lannister coughed out a humourless laugh. “An audience to watch me die?” he asked her.

The hooded woman rose from the tree stump. “You don’t deserve an easy death,” she said. “Not you. Sansa is in King’s Landing, you said?”
From the ground, Ser Jaime nodded.

“Ride, then,” she hissed. “Ride for King’s Landing. Find Sansa. Lem will bring her back. As for you… I’m sure the Targaryens will… be…” She forced herself to smile.

“I’m sure they’ll be accommodating, my lady,” said Lem Lemoncloak. He took Jaime Lannister by the scruff of his ragged white cloak, and dragged him backwards through the dirt, away from the hill, and all at once she was alone.

The hooded woman turned back to the circle of stumps and took her place. The question he’d asked nagged at her, insistent, an itch she could not scratch. *Is he evil? The Kingslayer, the oathbreaker, the man without honour.* Her fingers opened and closed.

*He is no less evil than the rest of us,* she realised. *No less evil than I am.*

“No less evil than I am,” she murmured to herself. “And no more.”

The moon was rising above the hillside. Bright silver dew speckled the grass. Somewhere up above, crows resumed their cawing, and the rain continued to fall. The droplets were salty as tears on her cheeks. The stars were coming out.

Catelyn Stark sat on her tree stump, and waited for dawn.
Chapter Summary

Thorns among the roses. Wolves among the thorns.

Chapter Notes

A RECAP:

Sansa fled King's Landing with the aid of her husband Lord Tyrion and Varys during the Battle for King's Landing, then evaded the Spider's spies and met with Brienne of Tarth, Sandor Clegane, and Podrick Payne. However, the group were captured by Loras Tyrell on the first night of their reunion. Sansa suspects that she is being brought to Highgarden to wed Willas Tyrell.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA

The knights went first.

Most of them wore the golden roses of House Tyrell on their breastplates, wrought in bronze and iron. Some had been riding with the party all the way back from Duskendale. Others joined them as they followed the roseroad further south. They were Cranes and Footlys, Oakhearts and Norridges and more. With them came grooms, squires, potboys and stable-hands. Hedge knights too, clad in mismatched plate and patchy cloaks and boots that had seen far better days.

Then came the Reachlords: Lord Merryweather and his wife and Lord Crane of Red Lake, Lady Leygood who was too feeble to sit a horse, little Lady Alysane Bulwer who rode with her septa in the wheelhouse. Sansa had supped with them many a night, but trusted none. Ser Loras Tyrell was an acquaintance at best, and a captor at worst, and his companions no better than him.

Sansa cast her eyes to the top of the next hill. For there sat Highgarden, the ancestral seat of House Tyrell and the Gardener kings before them, all white stone and green towers.

“Home, my lady,” Ser Loras Tyrell said. “The most beautiful place in the world.”

Sansa could not disagree with that. But when she thought of home it was hot springs and godswoods she remembered. Glass gardens and roaring hearths and her mother’s gentle smile. Things bowed,

“I was sorry to hear about your lord husband,” Ser Loras said.

“No, you aren’t.” They had received that news from Lord Caswell at Bitterbridge. Sansa had wept a tear or two, for ceremony, but no more. Because Tyrion isn’t dead. Her husband would find some way to wriggle out of any difficult situation. Wouldn’t he?

Ser Loras bowed his head. “He died defending a valiant cause,” he said. “For justice and for his king – there is no more valiant way to die.”

“For courage,” Sansa said, remembering Robb and her mother. “For what is right,” she said, remembering her father. “For vengeance,” she said, remembering herself.

Ser Loras nodded. “For vengeance,” he said, and rode on ahead.

*He still means to avenge Renly,* she realised as he drew further and further away. *And all for the sake of love and honour…*

“M-my lady.” Podrick’s stammers brought her back to the real world. She looked it was Podrick Payne, Lady Brienne’s squire.

“What is it, Pod?”

“My lady – Lady Brienne, that is, I mean – was asking if you were all right. And now I am. Asking if you are all right, I mean.”

She smiled. That only made him turn red and shrink in his saddle, as a lizard might scuttle under a rock. “I’m fine,” she said. “You may ride with me, Podrick, if you like. We could talk more about your adventures.”

That made him smile. Everywhere they stopped, Pod had been keen to tell her some of the story of his and Brienne’s travels in the Riverlands. But his nature meant that the tale often derailed into pointless anecdotes, and they were still nowhere near finishing it. “We met ser - I mean, S-Sandor at the Quiet Isle,” the boy said. “The Elder Brother told us that he had repented his sins, and was looking to serve a worthwhile cause. Ser, my lady, that is. I mean… Lady Brienne, my lady. Not you… though I suppose he was serving you also by joining us. I suppose I’m doing that as well…”

They came upon Highgarden sooner than Sansa had expected. They turned away from the roseroad at Ser Loras’s lead, and followed a wide track up to a postern gate. Lady Brienne rode up beside her, and Sansa could see the Hound a little ways behind, her stalking shadow.

“Lady Sansa?” The lady knight leant across to her. “Are you all right? I told Podrick to ask, but—”

Sansa smiled. “Yes, thank you, Brienne,” she said. Sansa had only known her for a matter of weeks, yet she thought that she could trust in those blue eyes. She was not such a fool to actually trust her, though.

The path widened out as they passed between two wooden watchtowers. They rode half a mile further, through fields of golden wheat and rosy gardens, and through another set of gates into the widest courtyard Sansa had ever seen. She had only a moment to admire it before the servants and grooms fell upon them in a swarm of green cloaks, with a clamour of hasty greetings of ‘my lord’ and ‘my lady’ and ‘ser’. Horses whinnied as men led them away to the stables. Squires offered their masters refreshments after the ride. Tyrell guards patrolled the wallwalk with shields and spears.
Ser Loras offered her a hand to dismount. “Welcome to Highgarden, my lady,” he said. Sansa took his arm, and followed along the marble colonnade and up a flight of stairs. Tyrell guards followed them, while Brienne and Podrick watched from across the yard. Sansa did not see the Hound.

“How is Ser Garlan?” she asked, remembering her courtesies again.

“His arm is broken,” the Knight of the Flowers replied. “The battle was not kind to him. “He will not fight again for quite some time, they say.” Then he turned away from her, and said nothing more.

They came to a pair of big bronze doors guarded by a pair of seven-foot guards. She calls them Left and Right, Sansa remembered. They let her pass, but raised their weapons when Brienne and Podrick tried to follow.

Ser Loras turned. “I am sorry, Lady Brienne, but you may pass no further. My grandmother wishes to speak with the Lady Sansa in private. I promise you, she will come to no harm.”

Brienne’s fingers hovered over the hilt of her sword, and her mouth half-opened. But in the end she said nothing. Sansa let Ser Loras lead her inside.

The room was all oak and dark mahogany, with a dozen wood-backed chairs around a stout table at one end, and a roaring fireplace at the other. The floor was mosaic tiles and Myrish rugs. Roses grew wild from the gaps in the opposite wall, climbing towards the ceiling.

Ser Loras directed her towards a pair of sheer velvet curtains. “They’re through here.”

Sansa stepped through, and felt a sudden breeze brushing her face... then came someone’s sudden embrace, smelling of wildflowers and tulip blossom. “Lady Sansa!”

“Your Grace.” She curtseyed. “It is good to see you.”

“None of that silly ‘Your Grace’ thing here,” said Margaery Tyrell. “I save courtesy for court, and informality for my friends.”

“Will you stop smothering the poor girl, Margaery?” asked a hawkish old voice. “I would say welcome to our humble abode, Lady Sansa, but these are your chambers now. I picked them for you yourself. Do you like them?”

“My lady, I—”

“Nevermind. You’ve barely been here ten minutes. I don’t imagine you have much of an opinion,” said Lady Olenna Tyrell, the Queen of Thorns. She extended a crinkly hand for Sansa to kiss. “The gods be good, you will feel the same about Willas.”

“Grandmother!”

Lady Olenna smirked. “Oh, sorry, dear… I forgot – how silly of me - we must be subtle with these things.” She turned to Sansa. “I want you to marry my grandson Willas. Margaery would have me pussyfoot around the proceedings, but I am old, soon to be dead, and not fond of wasting time. So what do you say to that, Lady Sansa?” She did not wait for an answer. “Is Loras still outside? Loras, go away! It is rude to listen to a lady’s conversation. I think he’s gone now. Have a seat, Lady Sansa, don’t just stand there looking like a lost lamb. There, isn’t that nice? Very comfortable, I’m sure you’ll agree. The Lord Oaf had these chairs made in Tyrosh, one of his better investments if I may say so myself. Did you know that he has a Hand-shaped chair now? Of course, I told him that the only place that hand belongs is up his fat—”
“Grandmother!”

The Queen of Thorns did not pause for breath. “I was going to ask the cooks make lemoncakes especially for you, but alas, I forgot. Anyhow, no more timewasting. Tell me, do you like my grandson? Loras, I mean?”

“He is… Ser Loras is very…”

“Gallant? Charming?” suggested Lady Olenna. “A true Knight of the Flowers? Oh, no one can deny that, but as I am certain I’ve told you before, he has Willas to thank for the name. The boy has always made good use of his imagination. It almost makes up for what his father lacks. Anyhow, a question, child. Do you remain a maiden?”

Sansa was expecting the question, but the old woman’s brazenness still came as a surprise. She had to blink three times before she could speak. “I—I—yes, my lady. I am still a —”

“Good,” said Lady Olenna. “Very good indeed. But I trust that you know how to make a man work for what he wants… come now, child. There’s no need to feel embarrassed – we’re only women here.”

“I – yes. But why—?”

“Why?” The Queen of Thorns leaned forward. “I don’t think we should lie to Lady Sansa, do you, Margaery?”

Lady Margaery smiled. “House Tyrell has far has a vested interest in the North, just as you do. The Boltons and the Freys are no friends to us.”

Olenna patted her granddaughter’s hand. “Thank you for saying that, dear. I must admit, I do sometimes get the names of all the families mixed up and everything. You’ve done your job well, but Lady Sansa and I would have a moment alone, if you please?”

Margaery made as though to protest, then sighed, turned on her heel, and departed. Sansa bit her lip. “Stannis…” she said, remembering. “Stannis Baratheon, he has forced the Boltons out of Winterfell… and the Twins have fallen too.”

“Correct,” said the Queen of Thorns. “That is true. But we have whisperers far and wide, Lady Sansa, and most of them say that he means to take your family’s seat for himself. House Tyrell could deliver you the North… and all you have to do is say the words before the septon… Willas will make you a good and gentle husband.”

Sansa chose her words carefully. “I have not met Ser Willas. Yet.”

The old woman snorted. “Of course you haven’t. We just dragged you here without any of the preamble. Welcome to Highgarden, my dear, by the way. It is a wonderful place, with a court as fine as anything in the capital. And unlike King’s Landing, it doesn’t stink of shit. I do beg your pardon.

“When you do meet Willas, ask him to show you the armies of Highgarden. We can raise thirty thousand men in a moon’s turn, and have them ready to march on Stannis in another moon. I will not claim to know much of warfare, but the side with more men has a tendency to win.”

She glanced towards the window. “Will you take my arm, child?” she asked. “It is time for both of us to attend to this accursed feast.” She held out a stick-thin hand, which Sansa accepted. Lady Olenna moved surprisingly fast for such an old woman. “There has been news from the north, my lady, perchance you have heard,” she said, rising. “Lord Tywin is dead, and not a moment too
“Dead?” Sansa blurted. The Old Lion had seemed like the sort of the man who would live forever.

“Aye,” said Lady Olenna. “Dead. Dead as a doornail – though I can never fathom the meaning of that expression. All I will say is that I doubt I will be seeing him ever again, save for when we meet in the seventh hell.”

“The seventh hell, my lady?”

Lady Olenna snorted. “I’ve done plenty of despicable things in my time, Sansa. I suppose you know by now who it was that killed Joffrey.”

Sansa nodded. “The amethysts.”

“Mmm.” The Queen of Thorns steered her into another hallway. “I had quite expected the snake to tell you of my role in it, if only to make himself seem somewhat less culpable. Of course, he instigated it – I would never be so foolish to trust Petyr Baelish as a conspirator in a plot of my own making – but we shared a common goal. He would do well to heed my warning, though. If the mockingbird should tell too many tales, they’ll never even find what’s left of him.” She pottered along, her steps sharp and stubby against the marble colonnade. “How would you feel if you never had to set eyes upon Petyr Baelish ever again?”

_He was my saviour once, thought Sansa, my protector… the Lord Protector._ “I would feel fine, my lady,” she said, “just fine.”

“Oh, aye,” said Olenna. “With Willas you need not worry about other… ah… suitors. The boy will not defend you himself, of course, that is rather difficult with a lame leg. But only a foolish man would challenge Ser Garlan the Gallant to single combat, and Loras’s silly sobriquet is world-renowned. We Tyrells have a strange sort of familial allegiance, much as you Starks do. And speaking of family…”

Carved oaken doors swung open before them, and golden light flooded out onto the terrace. Highgarden’s feasting hall was all rowan-wood panelling and marble columns wrapped in green ivy. Stone busts of Garth Greenhand and other Kings of the Reach through the ages stood along the back wall. The room was big enough to seat five hundred, and the lower benches were busy with knights and men-at-arms, while the lords of the Reach sat above the salt.

The meal had already begun. Page-boys scurried everywhere in green-and-gold tabards, bearing platters of suckling pig with apples for the lower benches and quail poached in butter sauce for the high lords and ladies. A knight wearing the butterflies of House Mullendore was dawdling a serving girl on his knee. A not-so-fair maid was quaffing an entire flagon in one to raucous laughter from her fellows. Butterbumps, Lord Tyrell’s fat fool, was riding up and down the hall on a wooden pony, swinging three melons like a morningstar. For a moment he reminded Sansa of Ser Dontos Hollard, who had given his life for hers. _My Florian._ She could not forget him.

They led her and Lady Olenna up to the high table. At the same time, a steward directed Brienne and Podrick to the benches. On the dais Sansa saw Queen Margaery sitting between two of her brothers. She looked happier than she ever had in the capital - but she was home, after all. Ser Loras had freshly changed into a light green doublet with the golden rose of Highgarden blazoned across his chest. His untidy brown hair hung down in lazy strands.

Ser Garlan was wounded… so the other brother must be her intended, Willas – _Ser Willas _now, after his knighting in the Battle of Oldtown. He was handsome too, Sansa thought, but in a different way.
He had the same wavy brown curls as his brothers, but his hair was cut shorter. His eyes were liquid gold like his sister’s, but wiser somehow.

The herald bowed before the high table. “My lords,” he said, “my ladies. The Lady Sansa, of House Stark.”

Sansa curtseyed.

The herald let out a brief, almost inaudible sigh. “Lady Sansa, you stand before Lord Mace, of the House Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden, Warden of the South, Lord Paramount of the Mander, Knight Commander of the Order of the Green Hand, Defender of the Marches, High Marshal of the Reach… and Hand of the King.”

Which king? Sansa thought. There came the sudden realisation of how little she knew about these people and what they wanted.

Mace Tyrell stood up, puffing out his chest. “It is my utmost pleasure to welcome you to Highgarden, my lady,” he told her. “I offer you the hospitality of my home, and the friendship of our House.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Sansa returned. She had much and more to say, but this was not the time. She would not make a scene at this feast, in front of the great and the good of the Reach.

“You have little to thank me for, my lady,” Lord Mace said, gesturing to the dais. “There is a seat for you beside Willas, over there.” He pointed.

Of course, Sansa thought, how better to force two people into marriage? At least she might be able to become acquainted with her betrothed before her wedding day. And so she took the seat without complaint, and waited for the exchanging of pleasantries.

Ser Willas made the first move. “My lady.” He rose to his feet and bent to kiss her hand.

A voice in her ear whispered, sing him a pretty song, little bird. And you may outlive us all yet.

“Ser,” she said, and gave him her warmest smile. “I am honoured to meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

Author's Thoughts:

No real Sansa/Willas yet, though these two will have interactions prior to the wedding, of course. This was more about setting the scene in Highgarden, and a conversation with Olenna seemed as good a starting point as any.

I probably went a bit overboard with the description on the roseroad, and some of the dialogue felt a little awkward, but I'm happy with this.

Next up: Davos.
A RECAP: Following his surrender of King's Landing on the advice of Varys, Tyrion remains an 'honoured guest' of King Aegon Targaryen's court.

TYRION

Tyrion awoke to darkness and the ragged hiss of his breathing. Something was hammering in the back of his head, loud as thunder. A dead man's heartbeat, he thought.

He blinked twice, adjusting his eyes to the gloom. His bed, chair and dresser were vague grey shapes with vaguer shadows. One of the shadows had the shape of his father, glaring at him with barely hidden malice. Go away, my lord, he willed it. You're dead. Go back to hell.

The hammering continued. Louder and louder still, a heartbeat turned to thunder. It was half an age before he realised that it was real. Someone is outside the door.

The knocker could at least wait until he had dressed, Tyrion decided. Someone had brought up a basin for him to wash in. He wiped the sleep from his eyes with a wet cloth, took off his nightshirt and washed under his arms, then untangled the wiry knots of his black-and-gold beard. Then he donned a velvet doublet and warm woollen hose, laced his boots and pulled a black cloak over his shoulders. Only then, once he was quite ready, did he open the door to the Dornishman outside.

“My apologies for disturbing your rest, little man,” said Prince Oberyn Martell, in a tone that suggested anything but. “Sleep is particularly important to people of your stature, I hear.”

Tyrion scratched his chin. “And yet, knowing this, you disturb me from it all the same.”

“Was it a pleasant dream?” Prince Oberyn asked.

“Not particularly.”

“Prophetic? Magical?” Oberyn ushered him through the doorway. “Or somewhere in between? Those sorts of dreams are not worth dreaming about. The same goes for nightmares.”

Oh, I know all about nightmares, my lord. Rather more than I’d like.

The king’s personal standard of a golden dragon on black flew from every tower and rampart. The
tower stones and the tree branches were speckled with a coating of pale white hoarfrost. “It will not be long until the white raven arrives,” Tyrion said.

“The maesters may never let those ravens fly. Hardly anything has left Oldtown since Randyll Tarly imposed a curfew there.”

Tyrion thought of the letter he had sent to Lord Randyll, naming him Lord of the Reach in place of Mace Tyrell. *Only time will tell whether that was wisdom or a great oversight.* So far Tarly had not committed himself to King Aegon… but he had not gone against him either.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked.

Prince Oberyn said, “I am not taking you anywhere, my little lordly friend. You are following.”

“Naturally. I am your captive.”

“Have you tried escaping?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know that you are our captive?”

Tyrion cast a sidelong look at the Red Viper. *I could run away if I managed to incapacitate him,* he thought. *And if I were such a fool to bet my life on that. Still, what do I have to lose, other than a little dignity?* But the guards on the gate would quickly stamp out any hopes he had of fleeing. “I won’t risk my head on a foolhardy escape.”

Oberyn’s dark eyes met Tyrion’s mismatched ones. There was sadness in them, and tiredness too. “We do not take people’s heads for those sorts of crimes,” the prince said.

Tyrion bowed his head. “Forgive me… your nephew, and Lady Ellaria… that was…” He bit his lip. *And in one foul stroke Cersei ended any future Dorne and the Lannisters might have shared.* “I am sorry.” He had meant to sound sincere, but instead he sounded bitter.

“Perhaps you are,” said Oberyn. “That will not change anything.” He paused and leant against a merlon, staring Tyrion down. “I am not here to pursue vengeance, though. If I wanted you dead, I would have sentenced you at your trial.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“And the verdict still stands, for good or ill,” said Oberyn. “We were both accused of killing King Joffrey, my lord. And both of us found deliverance. Perhaps there was some reason for that.”

“I don’t believe in fate,” said Tyrion.

“Yes, you do.” The Dornishman turned away and kept walking.

The king’s chambers were up on the seaward side of the castle, instead of in Maegor’s Holdfast as they had been in the days when his father and sister had ruled. They were more spacious than the old royal apartments, and the balcony provided a view over Blackwater Bay instead of the Holdfast’s spiked moat.

The King’s Hand was leaving when they arrived. Jon Connington was frowning, as was his wont. “Well met, Prince Oberyn,” he said, “and Lord Tyrion.” He sounded even less pleased about that.

“You rise too early for my liking, Lord Connington,” the Red Viper said. “I was certain that I would
be the first to call upon the king this morning...”

Connington frowned. “There is still no word from your brother,” he said coolly.

“Doran likes to take his time, especially with his letter. He once told me ‘Oberyn, there is nothing as dangerous as a misspelled word.’ I suggested a sword through the bowels; he replied ‘a sword through the bowels can kill one man, a letter sent to the enemy or a misunderstood battle plan can kill ten thousand.’ Ever since then I have taken great care around envelopes. You never know when they will strike...”

He clapped his hands suddenly and loudly, then pushed his way past Connington and towards the door. But the Hand caught his arm. “Why have you brought the Imp with you?” he asked.

“The king would have words with him.”

Connington frowned even more. “He has not told me that.”

“Aegon does not tell you everything, my lord.” There was a half-smile on the Dornishman’s lips as he ushered Tyrion up the spiral stair into the royal bedchamber.

The king’s rooms were bright, and flapping silken curtains hung from the windows instead of shutters. The floor was pale cream flagstones, with a mosaic pattern of nothing in particular. King Aegon himself was over by the window, sitting beneath a tapestry of a snarling dragon.

“Enjoying the view?” asked Prince Oberyn.

The king stood up, smiling. “Uncle,” he said, “and Lord Tyrion. I trust you have found your chambers comfortable?”

“Hardly comfortable, but certainly sufficient.”

“Good,” he said with a smile, and glanced to Oberyn. “Uncle, you can leave us now.”

“I am somewhat hesitant, nephew,” the prince said. “Lord Tyrion has a habit of killing kings.”

Tyrion held up his hands, feigning shame. “I only commit one regicide each year, Your Grace.”

Aegon laughed. “There you are, uncle. If Lord Tyrion kills me, I hold myself entirely responsible.”

When Oberyn was gone, the king gestured Tyrion towards a table in the corner of the room. Cyvasse. Of course. “I have heard that you are quite the player,” he said, taking a seat opposite. “I thought we might have a game, and share a few words. I’m afraid I don’t have any wine, though. Tell me, what sort of king am I when I do not even have wine?”

“I fear that my sister took all of it with her when she went back to Casterly Rock,” Tyrion jested. “She does have a certain fondness for it.” As well a tendency towards madness.

“Don’t we all?” asked Aegon. He was smiling, but his brow quickly became with concentration as he watched the cyvasse board. This one knows his tactics, Tyrion realised, but does he know his politics? He picked up one of the onyx elephants between his stubby fingers and began to whistle.

“You have the first move, Lord Tyrion,” the king said.

“Thank you,” said Tyrion. He pushed a crossbowman piece forward two spaces. “I always appreciate any advantage I am given.”
King Aegon smiled. “Well, we have to take the opportunities that are offered to us.” He glanced down at the _cyvasse_ board. “Not the most unexpected of moves, I must admit. I had heard that you were something of a risk taker.”

“I like to keep my best tricks until the end of the game, Your Grace.”

“Would you care to tell me any of those tricks?”

“Now, that would be cheating, Your Grace.”

The king’s light horse advanced two spaces ahead and one to the left. Tyrion countered his move.

“I do love this game,” Aegon said after a while. “I always have, ever since I can remember. But I daresay you have many more years’ experience at it than I do, my lord.”

Tyrion picked up one of the elephants and traced its movements in the air experimentally. “It was my uncle Gerion who taught it to me,” he said. “My favourite uncle and by far the most interesting of them. He had been to Volantis and Lorath and even all the way to the Isles of Ibben. Adventure has always been my dream.” He allowed himself to smile as he moved the piece forward. “Of course, dwarves often have many adventures that you might see as nothing out of the ordinary. Climbing stairs, for example. Casterly Rock has a few particularly vicious ascents.”

When the king looked up his friendly demeanour was gone. “Your nephew is at Casterly Rock,” he said. “And your sister.”

“No doubt they are worrying over me this very moment. I hope that you do not mean to hold me to ransom, Your Grace, for your sake more than mine. My sweet sister would not spend any more than a copper star for my return.”

_According to Aegon, this was fair, since he would not spend more than a copper star for her._

Aegon’s purple eyes flashed a little. “Adventure is your dream, you say?”

“It is, Your Grace.”

“Would you consider this an adventure, then? Being in King’s Landing.”

“A curious question.” He cocked his head to one side. “Would you understand my meaning if I told you that I love and despise this place in equal measure?”

Aegon squinted a little. “So you are… indifferent, then.”

“No, Your Grace,” Tyrion said, moving his piece. “When you first arrived in King’s Landing, I daresay you noticed the smell. Treachery, poverty and… well… _shit_ , if you’ll pardon my language. But… after a while, one ceases to notice the smell. It no longer smells of shit. It just smells of King’s Landing. It even smells of home to some people.”

Aegon made his move. “Carry on,” he said.

“Eventually, you decide to leave King’s Landing for a while. Strange as it sounds, you begin to miss the smells of blood and piss and death in the mornings, so you decide to return to your beloved city, and—”

“You find that it smells of shit all over again,” Aegon said. “And so the cycle continues.”

“And so the cycle continues,” Tyrion agreed.

It was not long before he won the game. The king was not a bad player, truthfully, but he was rash
with his moves, and easily distracted by Tyrion’s whistling. By the time Tyrion knocked down his foe’s king, Aegon was frowning, and his eyes were cold. Could this be a hint of the Targaryen anger? Tyrion wondered.

Aegon stood up and went out to the balcony, glaring down over the city below. “Come and look, my lord,” he said.

Somewhat anxiously, he waddled to the balcony, half-fearing that Aegon would pick him up and throw him over the edge. There would be little that he could do if it came to that. Aegon stood nearly twice as tall as he did, and he looked strong as well as quick. I had an advantage at the cysasse table, but not here, Tyrion thought as he stared down over the parapet. This is a fight I will not win.

“What do you think of it?” Aegon asked.

Tyrion shrugged. “Very nice.” The parts of it that my sister did not burn, at least. Then he began to notice the little things more closely, and all of a sudden he could smell bread baking instead of burning, and the sea waves lapped gently against the coast instead of battering the walls. Was it his imagination, or did everything seem so much happier now than when he had ruled?

Aegon pointed to the walls of the city, below the keep. “Red walls,” he said, “built on black soil. Red and black, my lord. This is a Targaryen place through and through.”

“So it is,” said Tyrion, feeling uneasy.

“Just as Casterly Rock is a Lannister place.” He was relieved to see that Aegon was smiling again. “I could make you one of the greatest lords in this kingdom.”

Tyrion gave a bitter laugh. “You think I can convince Casterly Rock to surrender by the power of my authority? My uncle will not recognise me as its lord, nor my sister, nor even my nephew. I am just a dwarf, Your Grace, and I fear you’ll find nothing hidden within my heart but my own special kind of evil.”

“You are your father’s eldest son, if Ser Jaime is dead. Even if he lives, he is of your nephew’s false Kingsguard, and thus you are Lord Tywin’s heir, by all the laws of the realm.”

“By the laws of your realm. My sister plays by different rules. And if you think that Cersei will ransom me—”

“You’ve already told me that she won’t. But if you ride with me when we take Casterly Rock, she’ll have no choice but to bend the knee to you.”

And how I’d love to see that, Tyrion thought. Sadly (or perhaps fortunately, depending on how you looked at it) that was impossible. “Casterly Rock is the strongest castle in the Seven Kingdoms, Your Grace. The walls of the ringfort are twenty feet thick, not that it matters. The castle is a mountain in every sense of the world, built of the sheerest red rock, too steep for climbers to scale. They would die of thirst before they reached the top. The Lion’s Mouth has four gates, each ten feet thick and made of cold-rod steel, and the cellars of the castle have enough food to survive ten, even twenty years of siege. Even if by some miracle you manage to fight your way to the gates with all of Westeros at your back, my family will hold out for far longer than your army can be motivated to keep up the siege.”

“And yet there is still a way in,” the king said, a smile creeping onto his lips. “You speak often of your family.”

“Not always in a favourable light, mind.”
The king smiled at him. Tyrion could see the Targaryen purple in his eyes, clear as day. *The blood of the dragonlords.* “You forget one thing, my lord Tyrion,” he said. “I have a family too.”

*Oh, Tyrion thought. “You mean to treat with your aunt?”*

Aegon shrugged. “It seems the wisest course.”

“A king must be wise,” said Tyrion, “but if I may advise Your Grace in some capacity… you seem to forget that Her Grace desires this Iron Throne just as you do.” *I’ll wager that she desires it more, in fact.* News of Daenerys Targaryen had never been far from his ears when he had reigned as Hand, but Aegon had made his appearance on the shores of Westeros almost overnight, and he had taken Storm’s End within a week, and King’s Landing less than three months after. His advance had come so suddenly that even his supporters doubted his legitimacy, and thought it too good to be true. *Prince Rhaegar’s son died during the Sack, they whispered in back-alleys and pot-shops. Whoever this boy on the Iron Throne is, he is not a Targaryen.*

“I don’t suppose you have seen Lord Varys this morning?” the king asked.

That *was* unusual, come to think of it. Varys was usually the first person Tyrion saw when he woke, even occasionally finding that the eunuch had slipped inside his own rooms during the night and seated himself at the foot of his bed. “No,” he said. “If we are playing a game of assumptions, then I must presume that you have ordered Lord Varys to Dragonstone?”

“Aye,” said Aegon. “So I have. And my lord uncle Oberyn will meet him along the way, before sailing to Dorne.”

*Two dragons and a viper,* Tyrion thought. *‘The game never ends’, the eunuch told me. I do hate how he has this tendency to be right.*

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Some of my advisors were opposed to it, but Varys and Prince Oberyn convinced me that you would be useful.”

“Another thing I must thank my dear friends for.”

“You should. Half of them wanted me to chop off your head and send it to your sister in a box.”

*And knowing Cersei, she’d likely have it gilded.* “Then I am glad that you listened to wise counsel, Your Grace. Though I fear that in this situation I will be little help—”

“You were Hand of the King.”

Tyrion nodded. “For a time.”

“As Hand, you held a great measure of authority over the lords of all Seven Kingdoms.”

“I am the most powerful dwarf to have ever lived, I suppose.”

“And the rightful lord of Casterly Rock, the way I see it.” Aegon’s lips twisted into something that was almost a smile. “Some of my allies might see you as a traitor, but I see you as the man who opened the gates of King’s Landing to his rightful king. And the first Westerlord to come over to my cause.” He paused a moment. “Doubtless you have debts to pay to your nephew as well. But I pay my debts too, Lord Tyrion.”
Tyrion chewed his lip. “What would you have me do?”

“The Stormlands are divided in their loyalty. Some of the lords would have me as their king, others have declared their fealty for Tommen… and a couple remain fervent in their support for Stannis. We shall have to deal with the latter sort another time, but those who are loyal to your nephew might be converted to our side…”

“…if a representative of House Lannister was on hand to encourage them to lay down their arms and surrender. A sound plan.” And yet, he was hesitant. “What of my nephew? And my niece? Most of my family are vicious bastards, but… I confess that I am rather fond of a few.”

“No harm will come to them - so long as they surrender when the time comes.”

“Lannisters do not kneel easily, I warn you.”

“But that is a matter for another time,” the king said. “So what say you, Lord Tyrion? I think you know full well what your prize will be.”

“My rights,” Tyrion said. “My debts.” He took King Aegon’s outstretched hand. “And a way to shit on my father’s legacy. What more could I ever want?”

Chapter End Notes

Tyrion is unsure where his loyalties lie in King's Landing. He still has a debt to pay to some of his family, but he despises many of them. However, Tyrion is a pragmatist, so he is not opposed to the idea of taking up Aegon's offer. We'll have to wait and see what comes next.
A Lie Kindly Meant

Chapter Summary

If a lie is kindly meant, what is the harm in it?

Chapter Notes

A RECAP:
Following the Sparrow Crisis in King’s Landing, Cersei Lannister was returned to Casterly Rock by the order of her father, Lord Tywin. She has been recently joined by her son King Tommen, wounded at the Tumblestone, and her daughter Princess Myrcella, sent by Lord Tyrion from the capital as Targaryen forces arrived. The pair have intentions to take the Lannister name. Ser Kevan Lannister has taken the role of Lord Regent and Hand of the King.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MYRCELLA

Seven septons stood around Lord Tywin Lannister’s bier, bearing seven holy crystals and seven censers, each scented with one of seven different smells. Seven stalwart knights stood sentinel, seven golden swords resting on the stone floor. Seven of the great lord’s bannermen gathered closest to the bier to light seven candles in his memory.

Ser Kevan Lannister was chief among them. Out of respect for his brother he had taken off the Hand’s golden chain for the day, though his tunic was as sombre as ever. “Father Above,” he said, leading the prayers, “May you judge our beloved Lord Tywin justly…”

*Your beloved Lord Tywin would have laughed at all this,* Princess Myrcella thought. *Saying prayers before an empty tomb.* There was no body on the bier. Likely the Riverlords had strung the lord of Casterly Rock’s corpse up and left it for the crows to feast on. *The crows are here too, but they stand around that bier, feasting on the last remnants of the Old Lion’s power.*

“He was the greatest hero of our time!” The new High Septon was a short bald man with a stammer. “His-his name was… loved... and feared, yes, rightly feared... by thousands! Let the earth itself tremble at his interring! Let the world shout out in pain! O Seven Who Are One, unto you we return our glorious lord, our gracious master and yet your humble servant! Lord Tywin Lannister! Seven blessings on his immortal soul!”

“Seven blessings,” chorused the crowd. Then the seven chief mourners made speeches in testament to the dead man, while the rest of the room stood in impatient silence, waiting for it all to end.

That seemed to take forever, but eventually the seven mourners left with the seven knights and the seven septons and the rest of them were allowed to approach the bier. Myrcella made three circuits
around the corpse, trying to look suitably distressed though the stupidity of the ceremony made her want to laugh.

After, those attending the funeral proceeded to the Great Hall, so that they might celebrate the great man’s life together. The Rock’s biggest hall dwarfed the throne room of the Red Keep several times over. At one end was a raised dais where the lord’s high seat was situated, a great stone chair with carved lions in the arms. Black drapes hung from every wall and covered every window. The room was lit by seventy-seven braziers.

Myrcella made her way through the throng, trying to find the darkest part of the hall to hide in… and failing. “My princess!” a voice called as she passed one of the braziers, “my princess! My lady!”

“Ser Damion,” she said, turning to look the portly man in the eye. “Is there something you want from me?”

Casterly Rock’s former castellan might have been a powerful-looking man were he not surrounded by those far more powerful. In present company he seemed somewhat decrepit. “From you?” Ser Damion’s blond moustache trembled when he spoke. “I would not dare beg a favour... you said that I was to come if I heard anything... odd...”

“And?”

He sighed. “Ser Kevan was heard to say that this funeral cost us great expense, and that it—”

“Lord Tywin Lannister was Hand of the King for thirty years, and lord of Casterly Rock for nearly forty. I would say that he deserves a proper burial, wouldn’t you?”

My loyalty is not to Ser Kevan, Ser Damion had told her, when she had enlisted his service. It was to Lord Tywin, and only to Lord Tywin. And now it is to the king. “Well… uh… yes...” he said.

Myrcella sighed. “I will hear no more on it—”

“It was Ser Kevan who—”

“Forget Ser Kevan.” She waved a hand. “Do you have anything from my mother?”

He nodded. “Queen Cersei called Ser Kevan is a drowned rat. She said that a drowned rat deserves no less than a drowned mine like Castamere, so...”

“My mother loves throw words around. A shame that she often forgets what they mean.” She was looking for a way to get herself out of Ser Damion’s presence when she saw her deliverance.

“Excuse me, ser.” Myrcella all but shoved Ser Damion aside. She took three swift steps across the floor and turned almost immediately into Sybell Spicer’s upturned nose.

Lady Sybell was a handsome woman, but not beautiful. She bent her stiff knees into a curtsey. “My princess,” she said, not unkindly. “How may I help you?”

Myrcella offered her arm. “Will you walk with me, my lady?”

Lady Sybell could hardly disagree. “I was most aggrieved to hear of your husband’s death,” Myrcella said as they walked. “He was a good man, and he did not deserve to be cut down by the traitors.”

“Alongside so many others,” Lady Sybell replied. “I try to move on from it, but knowledge of that
massacre, and of the Red Wedding before it... I lost a son at the Red Wedding, did you know?” She stared into the middle distance. “Raynald, my eldest. He was Gawen’s heir, until that day when they shot him full of quarrels and threw him into the river.”

Myrcella nodded. “I trust that you would do anything for your children, my lady?”

“Without hesitation.”

Slowly, Myrcella raised one eyebrow. “For all of them?”

Lady Sybell licked her lips. “But you aren’t talking about all of them, are you? You mean Jeyne.”

“Naturally.” Robb Stark’s widow had mysteriously disappeared sometime during the journey between Riverrun and Casterly Rock, and her whereabouts were a complete mystery. No doubt Lady Sybell knew perfectly well where her daughter was, but it seemed she had no intention of revealing that information. *Traitors in our midst, indeed.*

“Jeyne has always been a strong-willed child,” Lady Sybell said.

“Eleyna seems the strong-willed sort, too. But she knows where her loyalties lie. Think very carefully about what your children know, my lady, and what they might say. Remember that until two months ago the Westerlings were the most impoverished of all the houses in the Westerlands. Yet now they are among the richest, your son serves as lord of his own newly renovated castle and as a companion to the king, and your daughter is handmaiden to a princess.” *Rich rewards for turning your cloak. But the Freys and Boltons reaped similar rewards, and look at them now.*

*And look at us. Forced away from King’s Landing, forced to hide and cower and scrape and beg. Lions do not kneel, though. And a Lannister always pays her debts.*

Myrcella smiled. “You only have what you have because of House Lannister. But we are generous in rewarding our allies as well as prudent in punishing our foes. You could become greater still, if only you tell us the truth about Jeyne...”

“House Westerling is loyal to House Lannister,” Lady Sybell said measuredly, “I’ll bring Rollam to you. I’ll make him swear his fealty again to your brother. He’ll—”

*Yet you’ve said nothing on the matter of your daughter. “It would be such a shame if your children were forced to answer for their mother’s crimes and their sister’s follies, wouldn’t it?”*

“My princess—”

“I’ll give you some time to think on it,” Myrcella said, turning on her heel. “Good day to you.” And she left Sybell Spicer there to think on her words.

The walk through Casterly Rock’s long corridors gave her plenty of time to reflect. It had been mostly fruitless, but she’d expected nothing more. *I may have to question Eleyna instead. Sharply, not softly.* That would not please her, but Myrcella had learned that the world was full of necessary evils. *What does it matter if one more is added to the pile?*

She had no intention of returning to Lord Tywin’s wake and making small talk, but fortunately there was someone else who would not be attending either.

And that happened to be the very person she needed.

The Kingsguard had been outfitted in new armour, with the seven-pointed star wrought large in
silver on their breastplates. All the brothers in white looked the same, save for their cloak-pins. Myrcella approached the knight with an oak-leaf pin. “Lord Commander Oakheart.” Tommen had named Ser Arys to the post in the wake of their uncle’s disappearance.

“My princess.” The knight bowed; so did Ser Jasper Peckledon beside him. Myrcella did not trust him yet, but better him than Meryn Trant or Boros Blount, she thought, as she walked between them.

Lord Tywin’s old rooms were located somewhere up above in the belly of Casterly Rock, rooms as impressive as the man himself. But her brother had chosen more modest chambers on the seaward side of Casterly Rock, all high ceilings, graceful curving staircases, and tall windows with silken drapes.

She found Tommen upstairs, staring out to sea from his window seat, holding a black-and-white striped cat in his lap. When Myrcella came up onto the landing it turned and mewed at her, once, twice. “I’m still surprised that you managed to bring him here,” Tommen said.

“I almost forgot about him,” Myrcella admitted. “When we were leaving he ran out of the shadows and jumped up into my arms. He must have climbed out of a window or something. He’s cleverer than he looks.”

“So am I,” said Tommen. He stroked Ser Pounce and a smile crossed his face. “He likes you as well, I think. Watch.” When he let go, the cat jumped into the air, yowling, then darted round Myrcella and fled down the stairs at breakneck pace, sprawling into a table at the bottom.

She raised an eyebrow. “That was spectacular.”

Tommenn nodded. “Uh, yes.” He stood up and limped across the room, grimacing every time his injured leg came down. Myrcella went across to help him, but he waved her away. “Fight my own battles…” he muttered, then stopped abruptly. “Why are you here?”

“Am I not allowed to spend time with my favourite brother?” Myrcella asked sweetly.

“Well…” Tommen said, as they went down the stairs. “I could hardly not be your favourite brother, could I?”

“Don’t make jokes about that.”

“Joffrey?”

“You shouldn’t talk about him. Especially with—”

Tommenn stopped on the stairs. He looked somewhere between confused and angry. More likely the former. Myrcella had never known her little brother to be angry. “I’ve changed now,” he said. “I’m not scared of him anymore.”

*I wish you were a better liar, little brother,* Myrcella thought. *Lying is something that will come in rather useful in the wars to come.*

She took another step down the stairs, but Tommen did not follow. “Is there a reason why a letter just fell out of your sleeve?” he asked.

“Oh. That’s, uh, nothing.” She picked the letter up and held it awkwardly in her hands, unsure of what to do with it.

Tommenn smiled. “I’m supposed to be the bad liar here, not you.”
She led him down the steps and sat down beside him on the bed. “Fine.” She threw her hands up in admission. “I’m having dinner with mother tomorrow. It’s... it’s to do with your marriage.”

“I am married,” Tommen reminded her. “Happily married, in fact.”

Who were you saying was the bad liar here? Myrcella thought, smiling to herself. “She abandoned you in the capital. She abandoned me and she abandoned uncle Tyrion.” She curled her fingers into his. “Uncle Tyrion was planning to get you out of your marriage. He said that you... well...”

A note of weakness entered Tommen’s voice. “What did he say, Myrcella?”

“She said that you never consummated it.”

He fell silent almost at once. For a few seconds the only sound was that of the waves outside, lapping gently against the rocks beneath the castle, and the gulls cawing as they took to the sky. Beyond the curtains, the sun was setting. “He wasn’t lying,” Tommen said.

Myrcella bit her lip. “You didn’t?”

It was a long time before he shook his head. “No.” It was scarce more than a whisper. “I-I’m sorry. But I couldn’t. I didn’t really want to, especially with... We slept... in the same room. But we... neither of us wanted to...”

“You didn’t have to—”

“I’m not stupid, Cella.” He laughed humourlessly. “Nor am I... anyway... what did uncle Tyrion say?”

“He wanted to betroth you to Sansa Stark,” she said. If a lie was kindly meant, there was no harm in it.

Tommen scowled. “But... they were married.”

“And they never consummated their marriage either. I asked Sansa about it, and she agreed. But Sansa is at Highgarden now, and...”

“I can’t just end the marriage, Myrcella,” he said. “I can’t steal Willas Tyrell’s bride. We need the Tyrells on our side.”

“I understand,” she replied, squeezing his hand a little. “But... we can’t trust them while Margaery remains in Highgarden. The queen should be here, at the Rock. With her husband. Now, you don’t have to do anything, but she should be here.”

Tommen nodded. “You want me to send a letter to Highgarden and tell her to come here.”

“Yes,” Myrcella said. “The problem, though, is that they might not agree. Lady Olenna is not called the Queen of Thorns for nothing. She’ll try and scheme her way out of this agreement in a hundred different ways. But on the other hand, Mace Tyrell will want to keep his daughter beside you. He wants nothing more than for Margaery to be queen. And so if we threaten...”

Understanding shone in Tommen’s eyes. “If we threaten to end the marriage and wed me to somebody else... wait, who are we talking about?”

“One of the Western lords, preferably. Ser Kevan agrees with me on most of this, but he wants you
to marry Alysanne Lefford, a widow of one-and-twenty, the lady of the Golden Tooth. Lady Lefford is both too old for you, and reports call her cunning and devious. Some accuse her of poisoning her previous husband.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Tommen said. He twisted his hand out of her grip and looked out towards the window.

Myrcella feigned a sigh. “Fine,” she said, stuffing the letter back into her sleeve. “But... will you at least write a letter to Mace Tyrell?”

“Yes,” Tommen snapped. “What about you?”

“What?”

“What about you?” he repeated. “You need a marriage... if it’s not too early... I mean, Trystane... he...”

She glared at him until the pair of them managed to reach some unspoken vow of understanding. “How’s your leg?” she asked.

He patted the limb softly with two fingers, but she could see that it caused him pain. It was strange to think, but Tommen was too proud to let it inconvenience him. “It’s... healing up,” he said. “Slowly. Maester Creylen says that I’ll be alright to walk properly again by next week. The other one... the one that hit me here... that one sort of... deadened my left arm. I can’t really feel... I’m fine, Cella.”

He did not sound fine, and Myrcella knew it. She wondered if she was supposed to feel more worried about these injuries, like her mother. The queen would come to Tommen’s rooms every day to make sure that he was not dying and the pair of them spent long hours together between council sessions. Not that she didn’t care about him, but Mother didn’t have to be so clingy, did she?

“Do you remember how it happened?”

Tommen shrugged. “When we got trapped against the bank... Storm... he sort of bolted into the river. I fell off my horse, I suppose. When I stood up, I heard Ser Arys saying that Ser Meryn was running away. And then the arrows were everywhere, and I was all bleeding and... I think I saw Father.”

“Father?”

“Yes. Only it wasn’t him. He was wearing golden armour and... but he had his warhammer and... I don’t know.”

She felt sorry for him then. Part of her wanted to tell him everything, to tell him that it was all right to be what they were, but she could not do that. Not when he was in all this pain anyway. Let him keep believing, she told herself, let him believe that Robert was his. If a lie is kindly meant...

A sudden yowling interrupted her thoughts. Ser Pounce came bounding out of nowhere and jumped up between them, then snuggled down in Tommen’s lap. He stroked the kitten’s fur and smiled. “I’ve decided to... go ahead with it. Naming ourselves Lannisters. I like it here.” He glanced at the ceiling. “And... while uncle Renly helped me with my letters and things, it was uncle Tyrion who sent us north, and it was uncle Jaime who taught me how to fight, and it was Grandfather who taught me how to rule. And Father... he never really... wanted us, did he?”

I wish I knew, Myrcella thought. “No,” she murmured. “You’ve made the right decision, Tommen.”

He seemed pleased by that. “I’m going to sit on all of the small councils once my leg’s all right again.
And I want you to sit beside me. You know what you’re doing, Cella.”

“I’ve been sitting on your council for weeks. But she only nodded, like the docile sister he wanted her to be.

“I’ve got other ideas as well,” Tommen continued. “If Stannis tries invading through the mountains, I’m going to war. No - you’re not going to talk me out of it, Myrcella. I’m going to fight, and I’ve made up my mind. Joff never fought with his men, and they never respected him. But... along with the Kingsguard, I’m going to set up my own personal order of—”

The doors came open with a loud creaking. Ser Balon Swann entered the room, accompanied by their mother. Queen Cersei was wearing black today in mourning, but she kept her gold: a necklace of linked lion heads around her throat and bracelets on her wrists.

Ser Balon stood to attention. “Your Grace, Princess Myrcella, Her Grace the—”

The queen waved him away. “We don’t need the introductions, Ser Balon. I do seem to recall giving birth to my children, after all.”

*How odd. Do you perchance recall the time you killed your daughter’s husband?*

Ser Balon bowed his head, blushing with embarrassment, then turned around and went back through the door, muttering apologies. The queen stood regarding them, lips pursed in disappointment, glaring at Myrcella without a word to explain why.

“Mother,” she began.

Tommen crossed the room before she could say anything more and accepted their mother’s embrace. “Myrcella,” the queen said, moving away, “you should be helping your brother more. Our brave young soldier has taken a wound... just like his father before him.”

Tommen looked and sounded embarrassed. “Mother, you don’t need to—” he started.

“I do,” she said. “I am your mother, after all. Sit down and rest your leg. There.” She all but forced him into the chair.

Myrcella turned to the queen. “I trust you are well, Mother?”

“I suppose so,” their mother said, and raised an eyebrow. “Actually... there is a matter I would like to talk to you about.” She turned to Tommen. “In private, if you wouldn’t mind, Your Grace?”

He shrugged. “Of course. Take as long as you need.”

Myrcella led the way along the corridor through the royal apartments, and eventually found a room at least a hundred yards away from Tommen, an antechamber with some bookshelves and a few large chairs. Her mother went before her and sat down in one of the chairs, gesturing for Myrcella to sit opposite. “You’ve done well,” she said mildly. “I’ll speak to Lady Sybell on the morrow. Has Tommen agreed to it?”

“He says that he’ll write a letter to Highgarden, telling them that Margaery must be brought here.”

Cersei nodded. “Make that Margaery and Loras. The Fat Flower will never consent to part with two of his children.” She cocked her head. “Understandably. He is a parent too, however incompetent he might be. I’m glad both of you are here.”
“As am I,” Myrcella said quietly. It was mostly the truth, after all. Then she steeled her gaze, “Just remember that I’m not doing this for you, Mother. And I’m not playing a part in any of your other schemes.”

The queen shrugged. “Very well. But I hope that we can work together on this.”

Myrcella said, “If you convince Tommen to send the letter and get Lady Spicer onside... I’ll bring her children to the table. Eleyna is a good friend, and a sweet girl, but she has more than enough control over her brother. And in the end, this will be Lord Westerling’s decision.”

Cersei Lannister tapped her hand against one of the bookshelves and nodded. “In the meantime, I’ll start looking for actual brides.” Her mouth contorted into a snarl. “The Westerlings were impoverished until only a few months ago. I have no intention to find a royal bride at the Crag.”

“The Tyrell bannermen might—”

Her mother leaned across the table. “I do hope you haven’t shared this with anyone else. Kevan has spies all over the Rock, and many of the other lords have set their sights on the Lefford bitch.”

Myrcella shrugged. “If the worst comes to the worst, we could just poison her.”

“I wish I’d done that to Margaery Tyrell,” her mother muttered. I can’t disagree with that, Myrcella thought. “Is there any news of Jaime?” she asked.

“None yet. You needn’t worry yourself, we’ll find him soon.”

Myrcella felt more than slightly skeptical. “And why would you think that? If you haven’t found him yet, then why—?”

“Jaime always comes back,” her mother said. Oddly, her mother’s overconfidence filled her with inexplicable anger. “What about uncle Tyrion?” she asked.

“Tyrion... I don’t know... he’s little.” She smiled, a little bitterly. “I’m sure he’ll wriggle his way out of it.”

“Have you even started searching for him yet?”

Cersei’s voice dropped to a courteous monotone, her eyes like dull green stones. “Our efforts are primarily concentrated on finding Ser Jaime at the moment,” she said evenly.

“Of course they are.” Myrcella raised her eyebrows and gave a little shrug, then stood up from her chair and crossed the room. “But don’t you think that Hand of the King and the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard carry equal weight?”

“Tyrion was never Hand of the King,” her mother said calmly. “He was the Acting Hand.”

“Yes... I suppose he was.” Anger was rising inside her now. I hated Joffrey, but his life still had some small meaning to me. How dare she not even consider Tyrion’s fate? She meant to go and have stern words with Ser Kevan about this, but first…

She turned to the door and opened it wide, took half a step through, then turned back to her mother. The biting remark was on the tip of her tongue, and unwise as it seemed, there had never been a better time to use it. “I do hope they find Jaime soon,” she said in a voice oozing with courtesy. “He
must be the only man in the realm who has killed one king and fathered two.”

For if a truth was truly meant, there was no harm in it.

Chapter End Notes

This was one of the first chapters I wrote, and one of the fastest. It needed a bit of editing, but I was happy with it in the end.

*If a lie was kindly meant, what was the harm in it?*

This is really the main theme of this chapter. It's all about Myrcella Lannister, master manipulator, and decidedly nihilistic princess. We didn't see much of Ser Kevan in this, but the three-way power struggle between Cersei, Kevan and Myrcella. They all have their different self-interests here, and really Tommen is just sort of stuck in the middle. He isn't as dumb as in the show (see: the High Grandpa's radicalised-Crown-supported-Sparrowification of KL, and all that) but Myrcella is about five levels above him when it comes to intrigue.

Cersei and Myrcella are working together, which is a fun dynamic. The Westerlings are going to become important very soon.
Chapter Summary

*Can I trust you, my good onion knight, and trust you wholly?*

Chapter Notes

A RECAP:
Following the slaughter of the Lannisters at the Second Red Wedding, and the defeat of the Boltons and the Freys at Winterfell and the Twins respectively, Stannis Baratheon is now owed the loyalty of the North and the Riverlands, though there is some dissent among his ranks. At the suggestion of several Northern lords, Stannis has discussed the betrothal of his heir Shireen to young Rickon Stark.

DAVOS

Across the yard, dead men kicked in their gibbets, their lifeless feet swatting at the air. Some were old men, others only boys. The onion knight had told the king that he ought to take them down, but still the traitors swung from their ropes, growing more bloated, blacker, and fouler by the day.

Ser Davos Seaworth climbed up onto the merlon and looked out over his king’s realm. Beyond the high stone walls of Riverrun, the lands were flat and fertile as far as he could see. The Lannisters had razed the fields and burned the stubble in the years past, but now the Riverlands were in recovery. Yet this final harvest had been too little, too late. Maester Vyman had brought word of the white raven to the king’s solar as he was hosting Edmure Tully. That had brought the day’s first argument. Stannis might rule in the Riverlands, but Riverrun was firmly in the demesne of House Tully, and so Ser Edmure had decreed that the smallfolk be allowed into the yard to collect the start of their winter rations, despite the king’s argument that the army needed the use of the stores.

The first snows had fallen overnight.

The drifts were a couple of feet deep in places, but for the most part the snowflakes had settled only lightly. Davos stamped his feet hard against the boards, then pulled the door open and ducked inside the tower.

The torches hung low. Candlelight flickered incessantly throughout the rooms. Ser Godry the
Giantslayer and Ser Malegorn of Redpool stood guard at the foot of the stairs, with one hand on their swordbelts. “Well met, Ser Davos,” the Giantslayer said. “We did not expect to see you so soon.”

“Is His Grace preoccupied?”

“Not as far as I know, ser. This way, please.”

The tower was chilly today. Davos only saw two fires burning; all the other hearths were caked in black ash. “Is the queen not around?” he asked.

Ser Godry nodded. “Her Grace went down into the courtyard with Lady Melisandre,” he said, “and took most of the court with her.” Queen Selyse and her following occupied the Red Tower, the largest of Riverrun’s three, as well as the River Keep and one of the main yards, where Melisandre built her nightfires to keep the dark at bay. “Princess Shireen has gone down too,” the knight added, “with the Stark boy and his wolf.”

“I mislike that creature,” said Ser Malegorn.

And he mislikes you, it would seem. The wolf was fond of Davos, but not of Queen Selyse or her knights.

At the top of the stairs, they found his son Devan waiting. The boy wore a grey tunic, brown leather gloves and the fuzzy beginnings of a pale brown beard on his cheeks. “Lord father,” he greeted, “have you come to see the king?”

“I have.” Davos turned to the knights. “Leave us, sers. I believe we know the way.”

Ser Godry and Ser Malegorn looked hesitant, but they retreated down the stairs, the echoes of their footsteps fading. “How are you finding guard duty?” Davos asked his son.

Devan shrugged. “Boring. But it’s supposed to be, I think. The king says that we need to grow used to the mundanities of life, so that we’re alert even when things seem quietest.”

“Well,” said Davos, “life has a lot of mundanities, I will say that.” He turned the iron ring of the nearest door and pushed into the king’s solar.

The room was sparsely decorated, a high-ceilinged space that Davos found too imposing for his taste. Stannis seemed entirely impartial to it. A desk of heavy black wood occupied the centre of the room, laid with ordered piles of parchment and bottles of coloured ink. “Ser Davos Seaworth, Your Grace!” announced Bryen Farring, the king’s other squire.

The king was at the window. “There is no need to shout, Bryen,” he said, turning. “I am perfectly capable of seeing with mine own eyes.” He frowned at his squires. “Both of you are dismissed for the day. Ser Davos and I are both grown men, perfectly capable of pouring our own wine.”

When the boys were gone, King Stannis brought out two cups and sat down to pour. “Your son has esteemed himself, ser.” In the half-light he almost seemed to be smiling. “I’ll make a knight of him yet. And Bryen is a good lad too, true to his king. Aye, good squires both.”

Davos took a seat opposite the king. “Your Grace. Maester Vyman has received more news from Wayfarer’s Rest—”

The king sighed. “None of it good, I’ll wager.”

“Lord Karyl Vance has raised his banners for the Lannisters, and Lord Piper of Pinkmaiden too.”
Stannis snorted. “Piper is a weasel. That naked maiden on his shield is more of a man than him.” He scoffed, plainly disgusted. “Though truth be told, I expected nothing less. As for Karyl Vance, that is somewhat discouraging.” A thoughtful look passed over the king’s face. “Vance has an uncle, the lord of Atranta. Perhaps he means to steal Lord Narbert’s seat. I am no stranger to rivalries among family.”

“If it please Your Grace—”

“It does not.”

“Your Grace, Lord Vance has two sons held captive by the Lannisters. And they hold Lord Piper’s younger son as well.”

The king shrugged. “You say captive, I say honoured guest. That is, an excuse for their fathers to remain loyal to the Rock. Tywin Lannister would not hesitate to kill children, I do not doubt that, but Tywin Lannister is dead, and Ser Kevan is not made of the same stuff.” He ground his teeth in frustration.

“There is more news, Your Grace.”

Stannis sighed. “More bad news, you mean.”

“As you say, Your Grace. We heard it from Mya Stone—”

“Robert’s bastard?”

“Aye, Your Grace. She arrived at the gate this morning ago, begging audience with you. Lord Edmure decided to receive her instead.”

“And what did this Mya Stone have to say?”

“She was dismissed from Lord Arryn’s company a few weeks past, Your Grace, and has decided to join you in your march.”

“Wonderful,” the king said acidly. “We cannot hope to win this war without Mya Stone. News from Harrenhal, you said?”

Davos sighed. “Anya Waynwood and the Knight of Ninestars are at Harrenhal now, seeking terms with Petyr Baelish. They have brought with them some three thousand men, enough to turn the tide of a siege in Baelish’s favour—”

“—unless I should send more of my own men to assault the castle. And I will not. If I divert any more men from our westward course the Lannisters will fall upon us in the mountains and tear us to shreds. As it stands we will be delayed at Wayfarer’s Rest, and like as not at the Golden Tooth as well. But once we are through, we are through. The western lords will not flock to their bastard boy as they did to Tywin Lannister...”

Davos said, “And lastly, Ser Quincy Cox has sent a letter from Harroway, reporting what he has learned from the sailors on the cog Daffodil, out of King’s Landing. The rumour is the same as the last: Daenerys Targaryen has landed on Dragonstone, with three dragons.”

“Good,” the king said coolly. “Let her bring ruin upon the Lannisters and the Targaryen who sits the Iron Throne, as Rhaenys did to Aegon the Second. And when the time comes... well, the girl has been fighting a war for days, but I have been fighting for years.” He drained his cup and set it down on the desk.
Davos heard Ser Godry Farring’s familiar footsteps climbing the stairs. The king heard them too. “We have visitors, Davos,” he said, even as the door swung open.


There were three of them. Tytos Blackwood was tall and gaunt, with pale skin stretched over a narrow face. He looked beaten and battered, not unlike his armour, a dark grey suit adorned with niello. Lord Jonos Bracken was his opposite, a ruddy red-faced man with big shoulders and a broad chest, breathing heavily from the ascent. And then there was Lord Edmure Tully, who wore a cloak striped with a blue as blue as the Trident and a red as red as his hair.

“My lords.” Stannis’s voice betrayed nothing. Jonos Bracken bowed deeply, while the other two offered scarce more than the barest suggestion of a nod in tribute. “Do not trouble yourselves with sitting,” the king said, “There is a chill in this room. As it happens, I am in the mood for a good long walk of the walls. One should not sit in the same place for too long, lest they get cramp in their legs.”

“A sound piece of wisdom, Your Grace,” said Jonos Bracken.

“And King’s Landing fishwife would tell you the same,” said Stannis. “I doubt you would thank them in the same way, Lord Jonos.” He moved to the door and Davos followed. “Ser Godry, lead the way.”

The Giantslayer went first, followed by Davos and the king, with the three Riverlords following behind. Ser Malegorn of Redpool brought up the rear as they stepped out onto the wallwalk. Snowflakes had started to fall again, swirling down from the cloudy sky. Above the River Gate they stopped to peer over the walls, and found the eastern river shrouded in mist.

Jonos Bracken drew up beside the king. “Pardon me, Your Grace, but do you have any indication of when we might be leaving? My soldiers grow restless. We have been marching since the Lannisters had us lay siege to Riverrun, and many of my men have not seen Stone Hedge or their families in months. It is only a few miles; if Your Grace is not planning on marching until next week, then mayhaps—”

“I will not have my army scattering itself to the winds,” the king said. “We will march on the West when the time is ripe, Lord Jonos. Richard Horpe’s scouts are yet to bring word of the Lannister garrisons at the Tooth and Peckledon.”

“I have had a bird from Maester Marden at Raventree Hall,” Tytos Blackwood said. “Patrek Mallister met his lord father’s army at Sevenstreams on the Blue Fork after they razed the Twins; they should be headed through the Whispering Wood as we speak. My son Brynden has taken the Frey hostages in hand and is marching them down the river road. Rhaegar Frey’s sons, Steffon and Bryan—”

“Walton’s sons are Steffon and Bryan,” said Jonos Bracken. “Rhaegar’s are Robert and—”

“And you’d know that,” replied Blackwood, “seeing as you were in cahoots with the Lannisters and the Freys until last month—”

“Enough.” The command came not from the king but from Edmure Tully. “We have more important things to talk about than Freys.”

“They must be settled all the same,” King Stannis said. “The boys younger than ten will be sent to live with relatives in the Riverlands, or to be fostered by your loyal bannermen. Some may choose to remain in Riverrun. Your wife is a Frey, Lord Edmure.”
Edmure seemed to take that as an accusation. “That she is,” he said, colour rising to his cheeks. “But Roslin is a Tully too—”

“Good for her,” the king said. “The older boys will be given to your knights, to serve as their pages and squires. And there are a few heirs among the number, no?”

“Tywin Frey,” said Jonos Bracken. “Heir to Darry and Lady Genna’s eldest grandson. A boy of four-and-ten. He broke a leg during the feast; the maesters do not know if it will—”

“Ser Davos could do with a squire,” the king said.

“Your Grace?”

“Take the boy on as your squire and keep him here in Riverrun.” Stannis glared out over the battlements, then set off at a brisk walk back towards his tower. “What more of the war?” he asked Edmure Tully as they went.

“As Lord Tytos rightly said, Ser Patrek is on his way south with two thousand men.”

“Good,” the king said. “And what of the Northmen and the Valemen? Bronze Yohn and the Lords Declarant?”

“Lord Royce has been quite, ah, vocal in his concerns about the Harrenhal march, Your Grace.”

“I would ask you to offer something more in the way of explanation, Ser Edmure, but it seems I can ask Lord Royce myself.” For the lord of Runestone was striding purposefully down the wallwalk towards them, flanked by two guardsmen in sky-blue cloaks.

The king turned suddenly to his right, over towards the gatehouse tower. Blackwood and Bracken went ahead of him, followed by Edmure Tully and the guards, but when Davos made to follow the king blocked his path. “War is not your strength, Ser Davos, as we both know.”

“Well, Your Grace, I don’t have enough fingers to hold both a sword and a shield.”

The king smiled. “Do me a better service, then,” the king said. “Go and fetch my daughter and the Stark boy. I would have words with them.”

“Now, Your Grace?”

The king gave Davos a disdainful, almost disappointed look, then turned away and strode towards the tower without another word. Bronze Yohn Royce walked past Davos, calling for the king. As he went up the stairs, the onion knight went down.

Riverrun’s tourney square was blanketed in snow. Ser Ormund Wylde and Ser Clayton Suggs were fighting a brutal bout in one corner, and in the other Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain stood thwacking a straw dummy. Elsewhere Ser Robin Ryger, Riverrun’s master-at-arms, was taking a dozen boys through their steps.

Queen Selyse and her ladies watched from a raised platform above the square, seated beneath a black-and-gold awning that stank of mildew. Two overdressed guards blocked Davos’s way with their spears. “Halt,” one said, “Who goes there?”

Davos was tempted to give them a rebuke on behalf of the king, but that would hardly be worth the trouble. “Ser Davos Seaworth,” he said wearily, “the King’s Hand.”
They let him pass. The first thing Davos saw when he went up was Ser Axell Florent, the self-proclaimed Queen’s Hand, in heated conversation with his niece. The man’s brown moustache bristled up and down whenever he spoke, and he nodded his head fiercely whenever it was his turn to listen.

“‘The boy is a savage,” Selyse was saying quietly. “I shall have to talk to the king—”

Ser Axell nodded, then changed his mind and shook his head. “I doubt His Grace will budge, niece.”

The queen laughed bitterly. “He’ll budge for the sake of his daughter, Ser Axell. We both know that he will. I’ll tell him that—” Then she saw Davos out of the corner of her eye and her face went deathly pale as if she had seen a ghost. “Ser Davos,” she said, cold as ice. Selyse pursed her lips and put on a face of complete and utter hatred. “Did my husband send you?” she all but spat.

Davos smiled back at her. “He did, Your Grace. The—”

“Well, what did he want?” she snapped.


“I see…” Selyse’s smile was poisoned with spite. “And did the king not deign it necessary to come and collect his daughter himself?”

“I am but King Stannis’s messenger,” said Davos.

“Only his messenger…” Selyse pointed to the far end of the pavilion. “Shireen is down there, watching the boy hit the old man with a stick. Ser Benethon is watching her; I can have him bring her inside if you’d prefer—”

So you can interrogate her as well? Davos thought. “No. I’ll go to her, if it pleases Your Grace.”

From the look on her face it did not please her at all, but he went before she could make another remark. By the time he took two steps Selyse’s bickering had recommenced, something about upjumped smugglers who needed to learn how to treat their betters. Ser Axell agreed, of course.

There was a certain irony in that, Davos thought. The Lannisters had stripped the Florents of Brightwater Keep for supporting Renly and then Stannis in the early stages of the war, but the Seaworths still kept their small holdings on Cape Wrath, which were currently being looked after by Davos’s wife, Marya. So in a way, the Florents are lower than upjumped smugglers.

Shireen was indeed at the far end of the pavilion, a long way from the others, watching a boy hit an old man with a stick. Davos doubted that Brynden Blackfish would take too kindly to being called ‘old man’, though.

At first he thought the princess was sitting under a black blanket, but when it stirred he realised that it was in fact the direwolf, with fur as black as coal. Shaggy. Lord Rickon called him. When the wolf saw Davos, he turned and bared his teeth in a quiet snarl. Shireen turned and saw him. After a moment, she jumped up and hugged him. Shaggydog settled down on the platform and hissed at them. “Careful now,” Davos told the princess. “Soon you’ll be big enough to knock me over.”

“I doubt it,” said Shireen. “Mother says I’ve stopped growing.”

“Your mother is wrong.” About so many things.

Shireen seemed unfazed by his gloomy tone. “Come sit down with me, ser,” she said, tapping the
cover of the book in her arms. “We can read together.” But then she saw his face. “Is something wrong, ser? Does my father need me?”

“That he does, child. But we can stay a while longer. He needs Rickon as well.”

As if he had heard them, the boy suddenly emerged from behind a pillar, covered in mud and snow, his auburn hair a tangled mess, his leather tunic rumpled. Meanwhile, Ser Brynden Tully looked as though he had scarcely done any work at all.

“Well met, Ser Davos,” the Blackfish. Rickon ran to his direwolf; Shaggy leapt up into his arms and licked at his face fiercely. “That thing is savage,” the old knight said with a grin. “Aye, and so is his wolf.”

Shaggy growled, hackles rising as he snarled at Ser Brynden. “Oh, don’t give me that look, you great black bastard,” he said. “You won’t dare to come and attack me.”

“He will if I tell him too,” said Rickon.

“I don’t doubt that, but who will teach you to fight if Shaggydog eats me?”

“Ser Davos will,” the boy said, with all the upbeat enthusiasm of an eleven-year old. “Won’t you, ser?”

Davos laughed. “I would, my lord, but I seem to be lacking a few fingers. The sword is not my weapon.”

“Can you use a bow?” Rickon stood up, dusting down his tunic. “Bran was a cripple, but Maester Luwin said he could use a longbow from horseback. Ser Rodrik was going to teach him, before…” He bit his lip and looked down at his feet “…before they burned Winterfell.”

Shireen smiled, closing her book and going to kneel down beside the direwolf. “But Bran is alive, isn’t he?” she said, glancing up at Rickon.

“Yes,” the boy said solemnly, “but Winterfell isn’t.” He curled his fingers into fists and stood up straight. The direwolf growled, and his amber-eyed gaze turned to Davos, lips curling back to show yellowed teeth filed to knife points…

“Best you step away, kneeler,” came a voice from behind him, “that beast is like as not to rip your throat out if you make any sudden movements. Or if the little lord wants it to. He’s looking angry this morning.”

“I’m not a little lord,” Rickon protested.

“Course you are.” The wildling woman laughed, ruffled his hair and shooed the beast back behind its master. “You’re littler than me, and still a lord.” She turned to Davos and the Blackfish.

“Growing, though. He won’t be the little lord forever.”

“Let go, Osha.” Rickon pushed her away gently.

“Your kneeler king want something?” Osha asked Davos.

He had forgotten, truth be told, but Shireen remembered for him. “Father wants to see us, doesn’t he?”

“Aye. You and Lord Rickon. Er…” He bit his lip. “Perhaps best that the wolf does not come.”
Rickon opened his mouth to argue, but Ser Brynden was quicker. “He’s right, lad,” he said, “we southerners don’t have much of a stomach for violence. Just looking at the wolf gives me shivers.”

“I’ll keep him safe,” Osha said, dropping to a crouch beside the wolf. To Davos she said, “if your king does anything untoward, and Shaggy will rip his balls off. Aye, and yours too.”

Ser Brynden followed them up the tower, while Osha and the wolf stayed below. As they climbed Davos could hear arguing in the hall above. The higher they went, the surer he became that it was Bronze Yohn’s voice. “I implore you, let us travel from here, else Littlefinger will—”

“You will implore me nothing,” King Stannis replied. “You have your orders, Lord Royce. Fight for me – or turn your cloak if that is the sort of man you are—”

“Perhaps I will,” said the lord of Runestone.

“And besmirch the honour of House Royce? I think not. And if you did, who would you join? The Lannisters? Not bloody likely, considering what they have done to your house—”

Bronze Yohn sighed. “Your Grace, Lord Redfort and Lord Belmore are in agreement with me. We were three of the Lords Declarant who requested that Littlefinger return Robert Arryn to our custody, back when Lady Lysa died—”

“And what if Robert Arryn should be killed in the midst of all this?” That was Edmure Tully’s voice. “The boy is my nephew. I am not fond of this plan to march to Pinkmaiden either, but it seems to me that it would be folly to assault Harrenhal. The castle can withstand an assault fifty times the size of its garrison—”

“Only if it is properly manned,” Lord Royce said, “The garrison is scant seven thousand at the moment, most of them sellswords. Let me attack now, Your Grace, before Littlefinger buys more hired swine from across the Narrow Sea.”

Ser Wylis Manderly interrupted. “When Lady Waynwood and the lords Hunter and Corbray reach the castle, they will bring three thousand more.”

“Lady Waynwood is at Harrenhal, aye, but when the time comes she will not support Petyr Baelish.” Lord Royce turned to Stannis. “Your Grace, we will be wasting our time attacking the Gates of the Moon; My cousin Nestor is at Harrenhal, and the Gates are a worthless prize anyway.”

“The Vale lords may return to their homes when they hear that your men are attacking into the Vale,” the king said. “Assaulting Harrenhal will be easier if the Hunters and the Pryors and the Corbrays are spread across the Vale trying to retake their homes. I trust in your judgement, Lord Royce, and you may have free rein to besiege the castle when the time comes, but not until Pinkmaiden has fallen. Good day to you. Now, I have visitors.” He beckoned to Davos in the doorway.

Bronze Yohn went out in a huff, slamming the door behind him. Ser Wylis Manderly was more subdued as he departed, the lords Tully, Bracken and Blackwood following in his wake.

Stannis muttered something inaudible under his breath. “The Onion Knight and the Blackfish,” he said, glancing up.

“I fear that together we’d make a bad stew, Your Grace,” said Ser Brynden Tully.

“Yes.” Stannis’s lips twisted in a half-smile. “I fear you would. But at least you can be counted upon to listen to my orders.” To the Blackfish he said, “your nephew Edmure will remain here after I have
gone, but once I take Wayfarer’s Rest he will march due south and east towards Salt pans and Maidenpool, where Lord Mooton denies me still. Then across the Bay of Crabs to Longbow Hall and Heart’s Home. Only afterwards will they return to join Lord Royce’s siege of Harrenhal.

“As for what I would have of you, Ser Brynden, I will need someone to maintain a force in the Riverlands should the Lannisters get through the mountains somehow. That duty will fall to you, it seems.”

Ser Brynden nodded. “Your Grace.”

“You may leave, ser.”

The Blackfish glanced towards Rickon. “Your Grace—”

“I do not mean to harm the boy, Ser Brynden. And if I did, I am certain that his wolf would tear my throat out quickly enough.”

Ser Brynden saw no use in arguing, plainly. When he was gone the king turned to Rickon. “Lord Stark.”

The boy made a clumsy bow. “Your Grace.”

Stannis snorted with derision. “That was the worst bow I’ve ever seen, boy. We’ll have to get someone to teach you proper etiquette.”

Davos gave the boy a small smile. “Young Rickon has lived among wildlings, Your Grace. It is little surprise that his mannerisms are not as you might expect.”

“I’ll learn.” Rickon said brightly. “Ser Brynden says that I need to learn how to do lots of other things anyway, so—”

“Brynden Tully is a good knight, no man can deny that. Even a great knight, some might say, but he is still a soldier at heart. Whereas you must be the lord of Winterfell.”

“Bran should be lord of Winterfell,” said Rickon. “I’m just the heir. And—”

The king’s mouth set in a hard line. “Be silent. I have heard enough complaints about Winterfell from your bastard brother Jon Snow. I do not want to hear any more. Your brother Brandon is otherwise preoccupied at the minute, so you must be the lord of Winterfell.”

“Otherwise preoccupied,” Rickon repeated. “So I must be the lord of Winterfell.” His face quickly became solemn.

“How many years have you, Lord Stark?”

“Eleven, Your Grace. My nameday was—”

“That does not concern me,” said Stannis. “Shireen, would you say that Lord Stark is of a mature disposition?”

The princess glanced at her father, then at Rickon. He has put her on the spot, and she can hardly say ‘no’, Davos thought.

“I can be mature,” Rickon said.

King Stannis snorted. “The very fact that you are telling me that would suggest otherwise.”
“The boy is young, aye,” Davos interjected. “But he is a good lad, and—”

“Ser Davos speaks highly of you, Lord Stark, and Ser Davos is incorruptible, as we all know.” He turned to his daughter. “He speaks highly of your intelligence as well, Shireen. I suppose he found you reading a book?”

“The Dance of Dragons, Father.”

“The Dance of Dragons was a war,” said the king. “We are at war. I trust you know that sometimes we must perform our duties out of necessity during a war, rather than from desire?”

“Betrothal,” Princess Shireen said quietly.

The king nodded. “Indeed, you are to be betrothed. And how do you both feel about that?”

Neither of them dared answer; they only stared at one another with mildly befuddled expression. Davos smiled. “As surprised as all that?” he said, feigning surprise.

“Y-yes,” stammered Rickon. He smiled a little.

Shireen nodded. “I will make Lord Rickon a good wife, Father, and—”

“You will make a better queen.” Stannis regarded his daughter frostily. “Lord Rickon will not hold Winterfell forever. Once the wildling Mance Rayder has found his brother—”

“He won’t find him,” Rickon said. “Bran went someplace far away, to find the three-eyed crow. They won’t find him there.”

“Mance Rayder knows the lands beyond the Wall better than any other man. He will find your brother, I promise you that. In the meantime, the pair of you will remain here at Riverrun, with Ser Davos.”

That took the onion knight by surprise. “Your Grace?”

“You heard me, ser. As I said, you are plainly not made for war. So you will remain with the Tullys and their bannermen here in Riverrun, until the time comes for you to rejoin me in the West.”

“Your Grace?”

Stannis frowned. “You are Hand of the King, Ser Davos Seaworth, aren’t you?”

“Aye, Your Grace. I am.”

“That you are.” The king nodded to the children lingering in the doorway. “You may leave.”

When they were gone, Stannis glanced back up at his onion knight. “They are fond of you, ser, more than they are of me. I can say the same for Edmure Tully, and Yohn Royce, all of them. I would sooner have you here than marching with me into some pointless battle where you would be of no help.

“You are my most loyal man, Davos. Selyse would have me set you aside in favour of her uncle, but it was not Axell Florent who saved us on that night at Storm’s End, when I thought we would surely starve. That night, Renly was as thin as a twig. I could see the bones underneath his pale skin, and hear the rumbling in his tummy almost as loud as I heard the rumbling in my own. He was crying from the pain of the hunger – ‘make it stop,’ he said to me, ‘make it stop hurting.’ I couldn’t, but I remembered how he used to smile when we had singers at Storm’s End, and so I took him down into
the sept, because the septon had a book of hymns.

“We sang the Song of the Seven, to no avail. The sept was a strange place to me; I had not been there since my mother and father died. Yet I found myself kneeling before the Father’s altar, long after uncle Harbert had taken Renly up to bed. I prayed, Davos. I prayed harder than I ever had, so hard and for so long that I began to feel dizzy from spending too long in one place. Then the master-at-arms came to me, to say that a small ship had slipped through the Redwyne barricade and made its way up to the water gate. I ran to that gate as though I were running for my life. And there I found you, with your little boat and some onions and some salt beef.

“Why, Davos? Did you have a reason to risk your own life to sail into Storm’s End on that dark night, not knowing what fate awaited you even if you lived?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace.” Davos had asked himself that question many times over the years. “All I know is this: I have what I have because of you. I am what I am because of you. I am your man now, wholly, entirely.” From this day, until the end of my days.

Chapter End Notes

I had hoped to get this whole thing over and done with in 4000 words, but that proved to be impossible. Ah, well, TSK may end up being even longer than I had planned. Even with 6000 words, I still didn't manage to include any sort of meaningful interaction with Melisandre, so you'll have to wait until Davos's next POV for that. There are a lot of major characters in Riverrun - Stannis, Davos, Ser Brynden, Rickon, Shireen, Edmure etc. so there's a lot of conversations to be shared between them.

Davos is not following the Mannis into the West, but there will be at least one POV who will interact with the king during his invasion.

Thanks to everyone for reading; as always, reviews are appreciated!
Blood of the Conqueror

Chapter Summary

“Is this what it feels like to be home?”

Chapter Notes

A RECAP:
Daenerys Targaryen has landed on Dragonstone, backed by three dragons, an army of Dothraki warriors, and several sellsword companies, though she is yet to find allies in Westeros. Despite her military might, Dany is having trouble claiming her birthright of the Iron Throne, a seat currently occupied by her nephew Aegon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DAENERYS

The dawn came early to Dragonstone, accompanied by the rising of the yellow sun and the wailing of dragons. The queen was looking out to sea when the first fingers of orange and gold began to reach above the horizon, and the world came aglow with the light of morning. The other colours followed behind it, red and umber and crimson, and the sun glowed as it climbed higher and higher in the sky. The stars of night-time faded in its wake.

Daenerys Targaryen sat on the balcony ledge between the two stone merlons and watched it all happen. She was high up, but heights had never made her afraid – naturally, for a dragonrider. Sitting between the two dragon-shaped gargoyles here on Dragonstone’s walls, she felt more at home than she ever had in Pentos, Qarth, or Meereen. This is the place Viserys spoke of. My place. The dragon’s home. That could be seen in the Valyrian architecture, in the stone carvings of dragons that Stannis Baratheon had not managed to rid the castle of in the fifteen years during which he had held it, in the smoking pools of volcanic water that hissed and crackled, bringing their fire from someplace deep below the earth. A Targaryen place. A conqueror’s castle.

The knock sounded at her door just before breakfast. She half-expected Missandei’s arrival, announced by the girl’s merry tone, but she remembered then that the girl was gone, having disappeared into nothingness as though she had never existed in the first place. Instead, it was Daario Naharis who she found in the doorway, staring at her with his deep blue eyes, twirling dyed ringlets of his own hair among his fingers. He gave Dany such a look that she wanted to pull him inside the room at once with her, to force her to put her against the bed, to have her…

No. She pushed those thoughts aside. I must think like a queen, act like a queen, be a queen. Instead she raised her eyebrows at him. “Captain Naharis.”

But Daario knew her only too well. He brushed a slender finger across one of the naked figures that adorned his golden arakh, and Dany felt a sudden shiver go through her. It was not cold in her
chambers, but gooseprickles began to appear on her skin all the same. Daario looked unfazed by it. “Your Grace,” he said, dipping his head as though in salute.

He lowered his eyes to look into hers, and in the half-second wherein their gaze met she saw mischief and rashness, and a smirk of love and lost. Dare me, his eyes said. I dare you to dare me, Your Grace. “Your visit is unexpected,” Dany said at long last, having temporarily forgotten words.

Daario Naharis did not suffer from such an ailment. “Unexpected?” he asked. “I find that unexpected surprises are often the best surprises.” He swept across the threshold of her chamber without even being asked. “And I am a very unexpected man.”

Aye, she thought, Daario Naharis, a man to defy queens. She felt his eyes lingering on her as he made himself at home. He crossed the floor on tiptoe and jumped onto one of the cushions, brushing dyed blue hair out of his eyes. He said, “I suppose that all surprises are unexpected, though, by virtue of being surprises.”

Yes, Dany thought, they are. But she had to say something clever, something witty. “When did you become a philosopher?”

Daario Naharis smiled and turned to face her, speaking in the tone that he always did whenever they had lain with one another at night, in the darkness when they whispered their love for one another. “I became a philosopher...” he said, “when I realised that this world is a beautiful place for a man who travels. Even here, on this bleak, smoking rock, you can… taste the history in the air, and you can listen to the sounds of summer and autumn and winter all at once.”

“You would have made a good poet,” Dany said. She stood there, waited, listened. The waves lapped, danced, broke against the shoreline, filling her world with the boom of foaming spray, and the wind gusted quietly through the gaps in the castle’s stonework like the scream of some long-forgotten ghost. But Daario’s voice brought her back into the room. “I realise that I might not be the sort of person who looks like a philosopher,” he said. “But-

“Unexpected surprises,” Dany murmured, breaking into a laugh. She crossed the room and sat opposite him at the edge of her bed. It felt warmer over here, even though it was nearer the window. “So,” she said. The word ran off her lips like honey. “Why are you here? Or did you just come to seek the pleasure of my company?”

The pause before Daario Naharis spoke made her think that perhaps it was so. Then he threw his arms back and yawned, his long blue hair falling back over his eyes, brushing against his smooth skin. His fingers played with the figures at the hilt of his golden arakh, and Dany smiled despite herself. He plays well, this sellsword of mine. He smiled back at her. “Were it only that simple, sweet queen. No... out on the bay, on the other side of the island, Grey Worm has sighted a ship, flying the sails of the golden dragon.”

Now is the time for seriousness, Dany knew, but she could not shake her silly smile so easily. “Aegon,” she said. That was his name. Not Daario. Not Daario. “The sails of my nephew. Aegon.”

Daario smoothed the prongs of his beard between two fingers. “They were flying white flags, it seems,” he said. “I was of a mind to sink the ship to the bottom of the sea, and Strong Belwas agreed with me, but the red priest said that we must let the ship come ashore and listen to what its occupants have to say.”

Moqorro, Dany thought. It would have been easier to sink the ship and be done with it… but a queen must be a queen, and that was never an easy task. “Envoys from King’s Landing, I presume?”
“I do not know,” said Daario Naharis. “All I understand is this - most of your men are afraid of the red priest, and the Unsullied agreed with his command, so... the ship is coming ashore. At this very moment. I suggest that you dress in something...” He took a moment’s pause, smiling at her with one gold tooth. “Something queenly.”

And what is that supposed to mean? Dany wondered. She had been a queen in Meereen, when he had taken her a hundred nights. She had been a queen in Qarth once, but there the rich men of the city had thought of her as little more than a beggar. She had been a queen in Vaes Dothrak, but most men would have looked upon her and her people as savages. And now she was a queen here on Dragonstone, but Dany still did not entirely know what a queen was.

“Something queenly,” she murmured, a little bitterness creeping into her voice. She made a small nod at Daario Naharis. “I have no handmaidens. Not since Missandei disappeared.”

He only smirked at her. “And you want me to dress you, I suppose?” His laugh filled the room. “I am usually better at removing clothes from beautiful women than dressing them, but... I suppose there is no harm in trying.” He moved towards her, only playfully, but it was enough to make Dany blush.

She felt a colour coming to her cheeks and prayed that she did not look too foolish as she spoke. “No,” she said weakly. “It wouldn’t be proper.”

His eyes twinkled a little when he spoke. “Since when have you ever cared about what is proper?”

She did not have an answer for that. Her words seemed to stick in her throat, and it was an age before she could open her mouth properly. “Another time, mayhaps.”

“Mayhaps,” Daario Naharis said with a sly wink. “My queen is too vague, I fear.”

Dany smiled back at him. “I’m sure you’ll figure my meaning out in time, Daario Naharis.”

He went. It was Irri who returned to her. I had a handmaiden all along, Dany thought as the girl dressed her, I’ve had a handmaiden for years, ever since I met Drogo in the Dothraki Sea, and before that, in the palace of Magister Illyrio. So why had Daario Naharis made her forgetful of that?

“They say that there is a ship coming, Khaleesi,” the Dothraki girl said as she tied Dany’s hair back in a loose braid.

“Yes,” she murmured back. “From my nephew Aegon in King’s Landing, Daario says.” It felt strange to call Aegon her nephew – especially when she considered that he was indeed older than she. Dany had always known that she would have to meet with him sooner or later, and spent time wondering what he would be like. Will he be like Viserys, or will he be as they said Rhaegar was? Will he be misguided or brilliant? Or mayhaps both?

“Irri,” she said quietly. “Is this what it feels like to be home?”

Her Dothraki handmaiden stared at her for a long time, big eyes wide with curiosity. “For you, Khaleesi, it is home.”

“Do you ever want to go back there?” Dany found herself asking. “Back to the Dothraki Sea. To your family, to a time before Drogo’s khalasar… I mean, were you happy then?”

Irri gave that a moment’s pause. “So much has changed, khaleesi,” she said at last. “I am no longer, well… a slave… but I am proud to serve my queen.”
So you say, Dany thought. But what about me? Would I willingly go back to a time before Drogo’s khalasar? To Viserys and Magister Illyrio? She doubted that it would have really mattered. Viserys had known Westeros for several years of his young life, but the place was entirely foreign to Daenerys. Is this what home feels like? she wondered again, glancing round at the vaulted ceilings of the chamber, and finding no answers.

She dressed in a pale cream silk that covered her arms, and a purple sash from shoulder to waist. Around her throat she wore a necklace of heavy white pearls and round her waist a belt with a silver dragon clasp – not the colours of House Targaryen, but colours that were well suited for a queen.

Her advisors met her in Dragonstone’s Great Hall, beneath the dais. In Meereen, Dany had sat upon an ebony bench at the top of a great flight of steps, between the looming figurines of two carved stone dragons, so as not to intimidate her subjects more than she needed to but here was her place, and she must needs claim it entirely. There was no throne here on the island, but there were a few old chairs that had seemed ornate enough to serve as a queenly seat. This one was of red steel, and it glimmered by the light of the flickering fire. The arms of the chair were decorated with sculpted dragons, and it was stacked with cushions of red and purple.

“You Grace.” The red priest Moqorro was the first to stand and greet her. “I hope we find you well.”

“You do,” Dany told the assembled persons. Beside Moqorro were Brown Ben Plumm and the Tattered Prince, who had chosen to come with her all the way from Meereen, and Marwyn the Mage, but she did not see the commander of her Unsullied. “Where is Grey Worm?” she asked, “… and Daario?”

“They are outside welcoming the ships,” said Brown Ben Plumm.

Dany could rely upon Grey Worm, did not trust Daario Naharis in manners of conduct regarding esteemed visitors, and for good reason. “Lead me outside to the balcony,” she told her sellsword captains. “I would see these ships with mine own eyes.”

None of them argued. The Tattered Prince led the way, Brown Ben just behind him. Archmaester Marwyn and Moqorro flanked Dany, bringing up the rear. She had no guards, not here behind the closed doors of the palace. That had fazed Ser Barristan Selmy when he was with her, but not now. She had heard no word from Barristan yet, though she supposed it might well be too early for him to have reached Dorne, or perhaps some storm had befallen him. The seas had uneasy these past few days. Dany hoped that her white knight would have the good sense to seek shelter should the storm cause his ship to be thrown off course.

But no such storm would befall any ships today. Dany could see that as soon as she stepped out onto the balcony. King Aegon’s ship from King’s Landing was three-masted, with golden dragons on its white sails – the Targaryen sigil but in different colours. Viserys had made sure that Dany knew her Westerosi history, and she recalled what had happened the last time a Targaryen had taken a different sigil. “Blackfyre,” she murmured.

“The Dance of the Dragons would be a more apt comparison,” Marwyn the Mage told her, as though he could read her thoughts. “Aegon Targaryen’s sigil was a golden dragon, the same as his own mount Sunfyre.”

“And my ancestors destroyed one another,” Dany said quietly, “and all the dragons with them.” Viserys had always berated Rhaenys and Aegon as fools. He had never told Dany much of the story behind the Dance, but he would rave that they were fools who had brought and end to the great years of the Targaryen reign.
“They did not destroy all of the dragons,” said Marwyn. “Some of them lived into the sad reign of Aegon the Third, and—”

“Let us not talk of the death of dragons,” said Brown Ben Plumm, pointing to the horizon with one long finger. “Let us talk of their arrival.”

Dany nodded, truthfully gladdened by the change in conversation. “You are certain that they mean to head this way?” she asked her captains. “They have not been blown off course, or anything like that?”

“No,” said the Tattered Prince. “If it were so, they might lower their sails to hide themselves. They might not, aye, but they certainly would not be headed straight for this island. Your foes would not choose to dock here unless—”

“Aegon is not my foe,” said Dany. Rhaenyra and Aegon forgot that, and I would do well not to forget their fate.

Behind her, the red priest Moqorro shifted uneasily. His eyes were fixed upon the ship, out to sea. “And now they come,” he murmured softly.

Rhaenyra and Aegon, Dany thought again. “We must always remember our history,” Viserys had told her, as he read tales of the Dance with gruesome fascination. He never actually told her the history, but instead gave vivid descriptions of things such as how Rhaenyra’s flesh had melted like candlewax when Sunfyre had set her afire, and of how King Aegon had died drowning in his own poisoned blood. “Our history is what makes us what we are,” her brother had said, “and we would be fools not to understand.”

There was a certain irony in that Viserys had never learned the history himself, but Dany had decided that it was safest not to mention that. We would be fools not to understand our history.

And now I am making history, she thought. She wondered if tutors and maesters would teach children of her conquest someday, and wondered how she would be seen. As a ruler, or a conqueror, or a queen?

After a while, Grey Worm made his appearance. “Your Grace,” he said solemnly, bowing, “I have escorted the visitors to the small hall… to await your… your…” He could not find the word.

“I understand,” Dany said. “Pray, these visitors… what did they look like?”

“One was…” Grey Worm paused a moment. “One was fat, Your Grace, and the other was… ah… thin.”

Despite the vagueness of that description, Grey Worm did not lie, she saw upon her arrival. One of the men was indeed rather fat, dressed in a robe of lavender velvet with a bordering of silver samite. He was bald-headed and his face was pudgy and pale, like that of a baby. The other man dressed in a light tunic of orange velvet that clung to him loosely. He had a widow’s peak and tanned skin, one of his legs resting upon the table as though he had never been more at home. The pudgy man folded his arms secretively, revealing nothing. Their easiness made Dany feel uneasy in turn.

Both of the men stood up to greet her when she went inside, and the thin one crossed the room and knelt to kiss her hand. “You are every bit as beautiful as they said you were,” he said, in an accent she thought might be Dornish.

“Thank you, ser,” said Dany. “I have heard that you are envoys from my nephew Aegon. Have you come from King’s Landing?”
“That we have,” said the Dornishman. “By King Aegon’s own royal command.”

Dany glanced around her then, to the sellsword captains standing behind her. I must seem far more imposing than I feel. The pudgy one seemed afraid to even speak to her from the way he was shifting in his seat.

“Might I know your names?” Dany asked coolly.

The Dornishman smiled. “I thought you might ask,” he said. “I am Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell, brother to Prince Doran of Dorne, uncle to King Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of His Name, now titled master of laws for some reason I cannot discern.” He bowed his head. “Law, Your Grace, is not my speciality.”

Dany could see why. Prince Oberyn reminded her of Daario in a particular way; both had the same smirk when they spoke, and both had an easiness to their movements, one that made them seem almost fantastical. She turned to the other man. “And you, ser?”

“I fear I am no ser,” the pudgy one said, “I have the small honour to be Lord Varys, of no particular house, a loyal servant of King Aegon and the realm.”


“The Spider,” said Lord Varys. “Alas, we cannot all be blessed with such impressive monikers as ‘Mother of Dragons’. Perhaps you have heard of me before, though I fear that you will not have heard my name spoken of favourably.”

“You were master of whisperers to my father,” said Dany, “and to King Robert and his sons.”

“That I was,” Varys confirmed, nodding. “I may seem disloyal, but I have always intended to serve House Targaryen. I have a confidant whom you might know of. Magister Illyrio Mopatis.”

After a pause, Dany said, “Magister Illyrio was good to me. And to my brother. I did not mean to mistrust you, Lord Varys.” She did not trust him still, but perhaps she would do well to exude a certain air of naivety.

Varys nodded. “I tell you, Your Grace, that the good magister and I have only ever intended to work for the common good. The realm had fifty years of peace under King Jaehaerys, and twenty years of bountiful harvest under Daeron the Good. Your father might have made a great king too.”

“And Aegon?” Dany found herself asking.

Lord Varys and Prince Oberyn glanced at one another. “King Aegon has sent us here to propose to you the possibility of co-rule in King’s Landing. He believes that together, the two of you would be more able to provide effective rulership for the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Co-rule?” Dany raised an eyebrow. She was not really sure what she had been expecting, but it was not this. She had always envisioned herself taking King’s Landing as a conqueror, but to have it given to her, almost as if on a silver platter… it was strange, unnatural. She wondered what Ser Barristan would make of this.

Prince Oberyn said, “His Grace has some skill in the areas of battle and leading his armies, and his advisors in the Golden Company can aid him in this and several other regards, but my nephew is not so well-versed in ruling a realm, as you did in Slaver’s Bay… Your Grace.”

“I… see…” Dany said brokenly. “And what would this co-rule entail? Does my nephew – does he
want a marriage alliance, or-

“You are already kin,” said Oberyn. “He believes that such an alliance would be redundant. His Grace suggested that you take a bride from one of the Great Houses, just as he plans.”

“His Grace is to wed the Princess Arianne of Dorne,” Varys explained. “The name of Loras Tyrell comes to mind, along with-

“The Tyrells are allied with the Lannisters,” Dany said simply.

Varys rubbed his powdered hands together. “The alliance hangs by little more than a thread. And the Tyrells hold Lady Sansa Stark also; if Your Grace were to wed… ah… wisely… then the North could be brought into the fold, and both the pretenders Stannis and Tommen would be abandoned by their allies.”

“And my nephew King Aegon would grant my people sanctuary?” Dany asked.

“Yes,” said Lord Varys, “and unity. He wants a peaceful Westeros, just as you do, Your Grace. If I may, House Targaryen has always been strongest when-

“Aegon and Rhaenys and Visenya,” Dany said, “they conquered the Seven Kingdoms in a year.”

“With three dragons,” Prince Oberyn added. “Much as you have here on Dragonstone.”

“Rhaegal and Viserion are not with me at the moment,” Dany told the Dornishman. “I fear that I may disappoint you, ser, if you expected to see them.”

Oberyn shrugged, his eyes twinkling a little as he spoke. “If I see only one dragon in my lifetime I will consider myself very privileged indeed.” His eyes flitted behind Dany and fell across a different personage with a spark of recognition. “Daario Naharis.”

The captain of the Stormcrows shifted a little in place. “You know one another?” Dany asked.


“But who are you to talk about trust?” Prince Oberyn’s lips were upturned in amusement. And Dany felt suddenly out of place here, like a distant third among these two acquaintances. She wondered if Brown Ben and Daario had known one another before they came to her camp, and the same of the Tattered Prince. Perhaps this was all some sort of conspiracy… perhaps some arrangement that…

She shook her head and cleared those thoughts with a loud cough. “And what are the… terms… of your king’s proposal?”

“You and your present company would return to King’s Landing with Lord Varys,” Prince Oberyn said, nodding at the other man. “I fear that he does not make the most pleasant company, but I have other duties to attend to, and these take me away from the capital. Once our work here is done, I am to take a ship to Sunspear to attend to the court of my brother Prince Doran.”

Dany nodded. “I have… an arrangement… in Sunspear also,” she said. “A good friend and loyal counsellor of mine, Ser Barristan Selmy, was recently headed for your brother to seek his support.”

“My brother sought to support his own nephew,” Oberyn said, “but it is with House Targaryen as a whole that his loyalties lie. If Ser Barristan is at his court, I am sure he is being kept in suitable accommodations. And if he has somehow become lost on his way to Sunspear, then I will be sure to
inform my brother of the good knight’s expected presence.”

Dany felt certain that his words were not entirely true, yet she nodded, for the sake of preserving this arrangement if anything. It will not do well for me to make more enemies. She had received a recent missive from Skahaz Shavepate in Slaver’s Bay. The Meereeneese council had voted to re-open the fighting pits again, it seemed. But that was no longer in Dany’s interest. I have Seven Kingdoms to watch over now. She glanced out of the window, west towards King’s Landing and the mainland. I am homeward bound.

She turned to face her assembly of captains and advisors, standing behind her. “What say you, friends?” she asked. Normally she might have chosen to do this in private, but she supposed that willingness to work with Aegon’s established court would be a necessary part of the arrangement in King’s Landing.

The red priest Moqorro was the only one who looked uncertain, glancing down at his nails every now and again, but he did not say anything. He can hardly argue now. She had half a mind to leave him on Dragonstone, come to think of it; she would doubtless be better supported if she arrived in King’s Landing without his foreign religion.

“Your Grace,” said Brown Ben Plumm. “We are with you.” And for once, he sounded entirely sincere.

“King Aegon will be more than capable of hosting your court,” said Lord Varys. “The Red Keep is large enough for all of the high lords of the realm. If we leave today, doubtless we will return in time for the celebration.”

“Celebration?” Dany asked.

“His Grace means to hold a tourney,” Varys explained, “for all the knights and lords of the realm - to celebrate his coronation. And perhaps… I hope… he will celebrate yours as well.”

Yes, thought Dany. She turned to stare at the Dornishman and the master of whisperers, fixing them both with what she hoped was a piercing gaze. “Very well,” she said. “I accept your offer. I will hear your king’s words.”

Prince Oberyn nodded. “And I am certain His Grace will be gladdened to hear of it. Now, about those dragons…”

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who have read A Coat of Gold will be aware of my slightly distasteful feelings towards Dany, as I find her somewhat naive and irritating in many situations. That being said, I did enjoy her storyline in A Game of Thrones, and so I’ve tried to emulate her journey into a new world here in The Sunset Kingdoms.
Snakes In The Grass

Chapter Summary

“It is very important to recognise the difference between vengeance and justice.”

Chapter Notes

A RECAP:
Queen Daenerys Targaryen has sent her Hand and trusted advisor Ser Barristan Selmy to Sunspear, to find support among the Dornishmen who have expressed discontent with Lannister rule.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE QUEEN’S ENVOY

Vhagar’s cream sails stirred in the mounting wind as Ser Barristan Selmy stepped down from the gangway and made his cautious way out onto the pier. It was just passing noon in Sunspear, and the world was perilously hot. The knight had chosen not to don his Kingsguard armour for the negotiations and he was glad of it. Clad in plate and mail, he might well have been cooked alive.

The Unsullied, of course, remained on the boat; their uniforms would have drawn too much unwanted attention, same as a white cloak. A couple of plain-clothed soldiers followed them instead, carrying curved swords and spears at their belts. They will not need them, the knight tried to reassure himself. We have no enemies in Dorne.

But we have no friends here either.

“I don’t see any palaces,” said the black-haired boy at his elbow. He was sixteen or seventeen years of age, with a square jaw, bright blue eyes, and stubble gathering on his chin. Edric Storm was as unused to this heat as his master was. He had rolled the sleeves of his shirt back to his elbows and donned light, loose silks, but he was still sweating in the heat.

“You don’t see any palaces?” Barristan chuckled quietly to himself. “If I recall correctly... the Old Palace of Sunspear is not as... declarative of its own grandeur as other castles. Any observer could easily miss it.”

“But it’s a palace,” Edric complained, “Surely-

“Palaces come in many different shapes and sizes-”
Edric interrupted. “Like Dornishmen.”

“Like Dornishmen,” Barristan agreed, cracking a faint smile. He truly appreciated having a squire after so long without one. Robert Baratheon’s bastard son was not the best he had ever had, but far from the worst. He worked diligently and consistently, and on top of all that he seemed genuinely proud to serve.

“My father said that all Dornishmen were treacherous snakes,” Edric continued. “Sand vipers, he called them. Said they were slippery as... well, I don’t think it would be polite to repeat his words here, ser.”

“Aye. You would do well not to repeat your father’s sentiments about the Dornishmen in Dorne.” Robert Baratheon’s war had never reached descended south of the Prince’s Pass, but the southernmost kingdom in Westeros had taken its fair share of the casualties at the Trident fighting on the side of the Targaryens. Among the dead had been Prince Lewyn Martell, one of Barristan’s oldest friends in the Kingsguard, and he was later followed Prince Doran’s own sister, the princess Elia. They still want their vengeance here, Barristan knew. Vengeance, justice, fire and blood.

“Father was only half right,” the squire said. “According to Daeron the Young Dragon, there are three types of Dornishmen, not one.”

Barristan nodded. “Prince Lewyn used to say that there were seventeen types of Dornishmen and eighty types of Dornishwomen, but I fear that would take too long to explain…. but aye, most would agree there are three sorts, as Daeron the Young Dragon wrote…”

“First, you have the Salty Dornishmen, who live along the coasts and among the towns and cities of the Broken Arm... like here in Sunspear. Those are the fishermen and sailors, but also the lords and princes. The Martells are salty Dornishmen, descended from Prince Morgan Martell, who founded the house. They still have their dark hair and dark eyes…”

Around them, the air was still. Too still. Being watched was an unmistakeable feeling, and one that Barristan knew only too well. He stole a quick glance over his left shoulder, eyes flitting between merchants at their stalls, the Dornishmen purchasing the wares, a number of whores huddling in the street…

No pursuers. That worried him all the more.

Selmy continued, “then there are the sandy Dornishmen, who live... well, among the desert sands and in the river valleys, plying their boat trade along the Greenblood... some would say that the so-called orphans of the river are not Dornishmen at all, but-”

They were being watched. He was certain of it. Barristan took a sudden left into an alley where the houses grew sparsely, so close together that they were almost touching. The sounds of the main street faded and died.

Edric spoke cautiously. “Three types, ser?”

“What?”

“You said there were three types of Dornishmen. The salty, the sandy, and…”

“The stony Dornishmen, who have the blood of the Andals and the First Men as well as that of the Rhoynar. The houses of the Red Mountains... the Yronwoods and the Fowlers and the Daynes... there never was a finer swordsman than Ser Arthur Dayne.”
“The Sword of the Morning…”

He was more than that, Barristan thought, he was the shield of the evening and the defender of the afternoon, the champion of day and night. He was the greatest of us all… and yet he fell all the same…

They had fallen at the Tower of Joy, some place up in the Red Mountains of Dorne… to what end, though, Ser Barristan Selmy could not say.

For a moment, he thought he saw Ser Arthur’s form in the shadows, grinning at him. But when the shadow elongated and grew, it was another knight. A smiling knight, who wore the crest of House Allyrion over his heart.

“I applaud your knowledge of Dornishmen, ser,” the knight said. “I must say, that made for a rather interesting history lesson.”

Selmy reached for the hilt of his sword, then stopped himself. Other figures were emerging from the darkness around them, surrounding him, Edric and the men who followed them.

“Are you with Prince Doran, ser?” he called out.

“I serve House Martell and Dorne,” the Allyrion knight said, still flashing a slight smirk.

“He didn’t say that he served the prince,” Edric said quietly.

“No, he doesn’t…” Barristan replied, knowing somehow, in some way, that Doran Martell would not leave this sort of thing to the consideration of rash young men. “He serves the Martells, perhaps, but…”

They were outnumbered, and by a bigger margin, that Selmy dared to chance. This was not how he had intended to enter Sunspear’s Old Palace, but it was a way in nonetheless. He made a great show out of sheathing his longsword back in its scabbard. “We come as envoys,” he told Ser Allyrion.

“From whence, Ser Barristan?”

He knows me. Selmy was not all too surprised; his face was known throughout all of the Seven Kingdoms. Oddly, that had proved to be a hindrance more often than a help. “If you know who I am, then I daresay you know whose words I bring.”

Ser Allyrion nodded slightly. “I suppose I do, Ser Barristan. If you would be so good as to follow me?”

The Dornish guard fell in beside them with shield and spear, Barristan’s men trailing that group. They walked back out onto the sand-dusted main street and were waved through a postern gate on the southern side of the castle without a second glance from the guards.

“I would happily wager that you do not know me,” the knight said as he led them up the steps.

“I am familiar with your arms,” Selmy told him, “but not with your name, I am afraid.”

“Whereas I am immensely familiar with yours. When I was a boy – and still now, in truth – they tell stories and legend of Barristan the Bold, who slew Maelys the Monstrous on Bloodstone, and ended the Blackfyre Rebellions.”

That was long ago. So long ago, in fact, that he no longer remembered Maelys Blackfyre’s face. It
was his greatest victory, the only one that he could look back on in a favourable light. *Rescuing Aerys from Duskendale. Our successful sortie on the Trident, the one where we abandoned Rhaegar to his death. The siege of Meereen, where the dragons were let loose upon the city and the Green Grace alike. And the Tourney. The Tourney most of all.*

“I spy the sigil of House Allyrion on your shield, ser.”

“You do,” the knight said, “but the colours are counter-changed. A black hand against gold and red, rather than a golden hand against red and gold, like that of my father’s shield. A bastard of Dorne.” He smirked. “A Sand. Tell me, Ser Barristan, what say you of a bastard knight?”

“I say that if we are to view a man as a knight, and solely as a knight, we should judge him by his honour. And to his honour… we must look at him by the sword in his hand, not the hand on his shield, in your case. A knight should live and die by his honour, and if a bastard can swear by that, then he is as good as any man.”

Ser Sand nodded and said, “I daresay you have a lot experience with this from your time at court. Many of those folk are bastards, though, I confess, not in the same way as I.” Selmy could not help but agree. On his lips were the names of many who were bastards at heart. *Lord Littlefinger. The Spider. Robert Baratheon.*

They emerged onto a sunlit terrace. *He serves the princess, not the prince,* Selmy thought. One of the women sitting in this courtyard must be Prince Doran’s eldest daughter, Princess Arianne. If he had to make a guess, he would likely choose the one sitting furthest from him, the one clad in ocean blue silk who wore her hair long, in lazy black ringlets. She had olive skin, paler than her father’s, if Barristan remembered Prince Doran correctly. Short, but curvaceous and certainly very buxom, with the sort of womanly figure that would make any man’s heart beat faster.

And he was right. *You are doing well at guesswork today, old man.* Princess Arianne – for that was who she was – came to kiss Ser Sand on the cheek, then stood before Barristan, who knelt to press his lips to her fingers, and then to young Edric, who mirrored the knight.

“Ser Barristan Selmy,” she said, in a voice as smooth and soothing as honeyed milk and pastel colours. “It is an honour to finally meet you, good knight, after having heard so much of your deeds.” She smiled. “I remember my uncle – I was very young at this time, but I remember him telling me all the same, that ‘Barristan the Bold is a painter with his sword, and a true knight.’ My aunt Elia said much the same when we were in King’s Landing shortly before my seventh nameday – ‘Dayne is quickest of them all, the best to have by his fight, and the White Bull is a strong rock, reliable beyond reasonable bounds, but Ser Barristan Selmy is the most chivalrous of the white swords.’ Barristan the Bold.” She smiled. “I confess that I am unfamiliar with how you came across that name.”

“A childhood thing, my princess. I jousted as a boy of ten in the tourney of Blackhaven, and the Prince of Dragonflies mentioned the… well, the boldness of my deed, and often old nicknames stick.”

“Indeed.” Arianne Martell smiled through full red lips and small white teeth, then gestured behind her. “These cousins of mine are known to many as the Sand Snakes, which is not the most imaginative of names, but…”

*Prince Oberyn’s daughters, Selmy knew. If they are at all anything like their father… “It is an honour to meet you, my ladies.”*

Ser Sand smirked. “I did warn you that we bastards are abundant in Sunspear, ser.” He had not, but
Barristan understood his point. *Status and wealth means little here.* He ought to be thankful for that, but the unfamiliarity of it only made him feel more unsettled.

“You may go, Ser Daemon,” said Princess Arianne, then leaned in to whisper something to the Allyrion knight, who went off grinning. She turned back to Barristan, and then her eyes chanced upon Edric. “I fear I do not know you, ser,” she said.

“I am no knight, my lady,” the boy said, blushing almost purple, “just Ser Barristan’s humble squire. Edric Storm.”

“The son of Robert Baratheon,” said Arianne Martell. “His only remaining trueborn son, if the rumours of the murders in the capital were true.” She sounded almost sad. “I am most honoured to meet you, Edric.” Her hand brushed against his cheek in passing, and the boy went bright crimson. *That was no accident,* Selmy thought, *she knows how the damnable game is played.*

“Come sit with us,” Princess Arianne said, leading the way. “These are the Sand Snakes, as I told you. Lady Tyene –

Tyene Sand did not look Dornish, truth be told. With milk-pale skin and golden hair, she could have passed for a daughter of the Reach or the West, and looked as though a royal court would be the best place for her. “Ser Barristan.” She dipped into a curtsey.

“The Lady Nymeria, or Nym, as we call her,” said Arianne. The second Sand Snake seemed to be in her early twenties, olive-skinned, attired in a motley of Dornish leather – the sort you might wear when hunting – as well as a sun-shaped belt and a cloak of yellow silk that danced behind her in the light breeze.

“And Lady Obara, though she would have you believe that she is no lady.” Obara Sand was a guarded-looking woman of close to thirty, with short brown hair pulled back in a bun and callouses on her hands, Barristan noticed. *This one is the warrior of the three for sure,* he thought. Even now, in pleasant company, she wore a knife in a snakeskin sheath at her belt.

“Doubtless you are wondering where my father is,” said Princess Arianne as she positioned herself upon one of the settles, revealing a half-inch of leg that made Edric blush all over again. “I am afraid that Prince Doran is with the maester at present, on matters relating to his gout. In his place, he has arranged for me to hold court as his heir.”

*I would sooner wait for your father,* Selmy might have told her, but he was a guest here and it was not the polite thing to say.

“It is so much nicer out here than in the throne room,” the princess said, “you can see the birds and the sky and the moon, even in the daytime. Will you take refreshment?”

“No, thank you.”

“I promise not to poison you, Ser Barristan,” she teased. *Yes,* thought the old knight, *but your cousins have not promised the same.* Arianne poured herself a generous cup of Dornish red and brought it to her lips. “I am afraid we must move on to formalities, ser. Do you have business with the court – well, it is obvious that you do, else you would not be here – but what is it, pray?”

Selmy could feel the rolled-up parchment in his sleeve. *Best I give that to Prince Doran in person.* Arianne had done much to endear herself to their trust, but he was prepared to wager that at least some of it was an act. “I have brought terms from Queen Daenerys Targaryen,” he said, “and I am in Sunspear acting as her envoy, requesting the support of your princely father.”
Princess Arianne opened her mouth to speak, but Nymeria Sand got there first. “We had presumed as much,” she said, not unkindly. “I respect your coming here, ser, but I would wonder about your queen’s plans, and what she intends to offer the Dornish people who will fight and bleed in her war for the Iron Throne. If it is King’s Landing, then I fear that she has been beaten to the prize.”

Arianne nodded. “Daenerys’s nephew Aegon marched into King’s Landing but one week before your queen’s arrival on Dragonstone.”

That took him aback. “Prince Aegon has made his landing-

“King Aegon now,” said Nymeria Sand. “In the sight of gods and men. They say that they held a great parade in King’s Landing for the coming of the Targaryen king.”

That cannot be, Ser Barristan thought, Daenerys was so close… and yet… if we had not stopped in Volantis as I advised her, had not gone to Lys, had left Meereen sooner…

I have failed. Again. “I fear that circumstances have changed a lot while you have been sailing, ser,” Arianne Martell said.

“Aye,” the knight said hollowly. Perhaps the best course of action would be to return to Dragonstone, but he could not tell them that, not here. Prince Doran will be more accommodating of my needs. He would not be able to sail until the Vhagar had undergone repairs, though, and had restocked on the supplies, and it would be a nightmare to find the crew among the streets of the shadow city…

Princess Arianne nodded slightly, something akin to pity in her gaze. “Let us suppose that something terrible should befall Aegon.” A Dance of the Dragons, perhaps. His queen could be wilful. “What reason would we have to support your queen Daenerys over the kings in the north and the west?”

“My queen is just,” Selmy said, a little brokenly. “And fair.”

Obara Sand scoffed. “So say all rulers, before you put a crown upon their head. You are aware where Dorne will look to for justice, aren’t you, ser? The Lannisters of Casterly Rock, upon whose orders the murder of the Princess Elia and her daughter Rhaenys were carried out; to Cersei, whose command saw the death of our father’s beloved Ellaria, and Prince Doran’s own son.”

“My brother,” said Princess Arianne, lips turning into a sad smile, “He was a good boy, smart and kind and funny. And I loved him not only for that, but as a sister loves a brother, of course. Vengeance, or justice, would be a concern that springs immediately to mind for those whose families were murdered on the orders of the Lannisters.”

“I am not certain how Her Grace would go about this,” Ser Barristan said, “but rest assured, my ladies, that Tywin Lannister will no doubt be the first on Her Grace’s list to be called to answer for his actions-

“She can cross him off her list already,” said Nymeria Sand. “Lord Tywin is dead. Cut down by the Northmen at Riverrun. It has been years since Dorne and the North were wed in any way, but it seems they make a better case for our support than your Queen Daenerys.”

Obara Sand nodded in agreement. “Strange, though, that a man who claims to be the Queen’s Hand knows so little of his own queen’s plans. And stranger still that he seems to know nothing of the world.”

“The blame should not lie with Ser Barristan,” said Tyene. “He has a long ship journey and this is likely the first he has heard of Tywin’s demise; grant him the benefit of doubt on that, at the very
Obara did not yield. “Forgive me, Ser Barristan, but I cannot believe in the justice of any ruler who would allow a Baratheon to stand beside her court after the events of the Rebellion, and especially not after the killing of Rhaegar, Elia and their daughter.” Her eyes fell upon Edric.

The bastard boy’s eyes flashed, but mercifully held his tongue for long enough that Barristan was able to interrupt. “You can hold me responsible for that,” he said, “and me alone. I suggested that Her Grace spare Edric’s life in Lys, so that I might take him on as a squire.”

“Then we must question your loyalty,” Obara murmured.

“Ser Barristan is loyal,” Princess Arianne said firmly. “And I will not have that doubted. However… I must wonder if you are loyal to the wrong queen, ser. A son comes before a sister, even in Dorne. Aegon ought succeed Rhaegar, as Rhaegar should have succeeded Aerys. Or would you have gone against your prince and named his mother Rhaella as queen on Aerys’s death?

“You have a debt to repay to House Targaryen, do you not?” Arianne raised an eyebrow.

*I am the queen’s man,* Barristan Selmy thought. *And I will not lie.* But only then, as he opened his mouth to reaffirm his loyalty, did the interruption come.

“Hotah,” the princess said solemnly, closing her mouth in disappointment as she stared at a new arrival standing behind Barristan.

“Princess.” This Hotah was a big man, ebon-skinned with a bald pate, his face all stern, sharp lines, but with a slight friendliness to his features. Over one shoulder he wore a great curved longaxe, a Norvoshi weapon, by the looks of it. “I have come to take these guests to your father.”

Arianne stared at him. Very slowly, after much consideration, she nodded. “Go with Hotah, Ser Barristan,” she said. “I'm sure you’ll both have plenty to talk about.”

She must have been speaking in jest, for this stoic guardsman was not all too fond of conversation, it seemed. “You are lucky that the prince sighted you from his balcony,” he said.

“The prince is holding court?”

“No today,” said Hotah. “It is true that Arianne does host visitors from time to time, but I am certain that Prince Doran would want to greet important guests such as yourselves in person. And even if it were the case that Arianne were greeting you… she would not be accompanied by the Sand Snakes. They have been confined to Sunspear on the prince’s orders, for their safety and the safety of others.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Prince Doran was in his solar, a vast room with large windows that let in a lot of sunlight. He sat in his wheeled chair beside the balcony, glancing over his shoulder when Areo Hotah made his entrance with the knight and his squire. A patchwork quilt covered his gouty limbs.

The Prince of Dorne inclined his head. “Ser Barristan.”

“My prince,” the knight replied.

In his wheeled chair, the prince shifted, his face lined with amusement. “Is it *forty-one* years now, since our first meeting? That seems about right.”
“The War of the Ninepenny Kings. I remember.” And seventeen years since our second meeting, though Prince Doran did not seem disposed to speak of that.

“As do I. My first battle – I am sure every man remembers that, though I daresay I don’t have very many battles to remember. I was a squire then, a short, stocky boy of twelve or thereabouts, serving Lord Gargalen by day, and practising my decidedly average swordsmanship by night. His eldest son died on Bloodstone, and the castle passed to his daughter Elara upon his death.”

“But I remember you, Ser Barristan, from when they paraded you through the streets of Sunspear after you had slain Maelys the Monstrous. This was before you had taken the white cloak, mind. My mother pointed to you from the ramparts and said, ‘that young man will make a hero one day. He will stand among the likes of Aemon the Dragonknight and Ser Duncan the Tall as one of the greatest knights in Westeros. And here you stand.’

“Here I stand,” Barristan echoed. He was uncomfortable with the praise.

“It seems only proper to make an apology for the unconventional nature of your welcome, ser.”

“Worry not, my lord. Prince Oberyn’s daughters—”

“No, not on behalf of the Snakes. It is Arianne’s indiscretions I refer to. She is my heir, and the most headstrong and wilful of my children. No doubt she had good intentions, but she often fails to follow through on those.” He gazed out over the shadow city, sorrow in his eyes.

His children, Barristan thought, and then it came to him. “I offer my condolences for the death of your son, my prince.”

“Ah.” Prince Doran nodded slowly. “Trystane was always a good boy. Quick, and kind, and skilled with a sword as well, he might have followed in Oberyn’s footsteps one day. Alas, that was not to be.” He pursed his lips and smiled at Barristan. “Would your queen promise me vengeance on that matter?”

Selmy spoke carefully, forcing the hidden letter back up his sleeve in worry. “Queen Daenerys is not a vengeful ruler, my lord, but she believes in justice. I assure you; that will be done.”

“It is very important to recognise the difference between vengeance and justice, Ser Barristan. I would prefer some small justice, a repayment and some comfort for the deaths of my son and my brother’s paramour, but doubtless Dorne would sooner seek vengeance. That is why I have confined the Sand Snakes. A shame that they feel the need to… protest.”

Ser Barristan nodded his understanding before posing his next question. “If I may, my lord, where is Prince Oberyn?”

Prince Doran opened his mouth slightly, then closed it, chewed on his words. “He is in King’s Landing,” he said at last, “with my nephew King Aegon.”

That was when Ser Barristan realised the hopelessness of his cause. “I…” he began. “Queen Daenerys would like to know if you would swear your sword to her.” Behind him, he saw Aro Hotah shifting in place, and Edric looked uneasy.

Prince Doran let out a great sigh. “You know full well that I cannot support your queen, Ser Barristan. Not until she and my nephew come to some arrangement – I am sure that will not be long, but for now I must take every precaution.” He chewed his lip. “Daenerys has good intentions, I have no doubt of that, but Dorne cannot support a claim of hers independent of King Aegon’s. The memory of my sister is still fresh in the minds of the Dornishmen, men who died fighting for Prince
“Rhaegar at the Trident.”

“Daenerys is Rhaegar’s sister,” Barristan tried weakly. “She has ruled.”

“In Meereen, yes. And we are both in agreement that a Targaryen on the throne would be a good thing, but you understand that until the situation with the two claimant dragons resolves itself, Dorne must stand with King Aegon. He is truly Elia’s son, as well as Rhaegar’s, if what Oberyn reports is genuine. In Dorne, we protect our own. Daenerys is welcome to play a part, and she may even join with Aegon in time, but…”

“Ah,” said Ser Barristan Selmy. “I suppose you will be putting me in a cell, then.”

Prince Doran nodded, his face creased with honesty. “Yes. Hotah, find cells in the Spear Tower for Ser Barristan and his squire. Comfortable ones, mind, preferably with windows.”

Chapter End Notes

“‘I am not blind, nor deaf. I know that you all believe me weak, frightened, feeble. Your father knew me better. Oberyn was ever the viper. Deadly, dangerous, unpredictable. No man dared tread on him. I was the grass. Pleasant, complaisant, sweet-smelling, swaying with every breeze. Who fears to walk upon the grass? But it is the grass that hides the viper from his enemies and shelters him until he strikes.’”

Prince Doran Nymeros Martell, The Watcher, A Dance with Dragons

Yeah, this was pretty fun to write. The first Dornish chapter, and our first look at Arianne, Doran and the Sand Snakes, who - and I cannot stress this enough - represent their book counterparts, not the Sand Sneks from the show.

Of course, the chapter itself is called The Sand Snakes, referring not only to Obara and Nym and Tyene as the titular characters, but also to Doran and Arianne, who are snakes with their skill in intrigue. There are also a lot of literal bastards here: Edric and Ser Daemon among them, so it seemed as good a name as any.

I wanted more Aroo Hotah, but it didn't really fit here. When writing this I visualized Hotah as he was in the show, because I did like that portrayal of him, in terms of costuming and stuff, which GoT always does very well.

^ I don't think any of that made sense.
We Have To Go North

Chapter Summary

North and south of the Wall, they judge oathbreakers just the same.

Chapter Notes

A RECAP:
Despite not being able to locate Ramsay Bolton and avenge himself, Theon Greyjoy has recovered from his abuse at the hands of the Boltons. No longer a prisoner of Stannis Baratheon, he has been left to the care of Mance Rayder, the King-beyond-the-Wall, who is heading to Castle Black following his subjugation of the Dreadfort.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEON

Seven days from Winterfell, they came across the Umbers.

The Greatjon was somewhere in the Neck, being escorted north by an honour guard of his peers, so it was his uncles Mors and Hother who met them on the kingsroad, along with one of the his younger sons, a fierce but unblooded boy of three-and-ten who went by the name of Scrap, possibly because of the straggly nature of his dark beard.

The Umbers were not alone in the march. With them were Lady Alys Karstark and her wildling husband, who had come down from the Wall to escort the Northmen back to Castle Black. There were cavalrymen flying the banners of Forrester, Glenmore and Glover, a dozen armies of the mountain clansmen, among whom Theon recognised the Big Liddle and the Norrey. Then came Mance’s army of wildlings. They rode together, Northerners and southron knights alike, beneath Stannis Baratheon’s banner of a flaming heart, beneath Mance Rayder’s new sigil of a red axe on white, beneath the direwolf of Winterfell, most prominent of all.

They were six thousand altogether, moving through soft winter snows as the sun beat down relentlessly. If winter is coming, it is not making a hurry of it, Theon thought. The storm had cleared up quickly after Mance’s return from the Dreadfort, and they had been relatively unplagued by the weather on the kingsroad north.

Theon rode on a waggon in the baggage train, as horses could not be spared for turncloaks, near to his sister, Qarl the Maid, Tris Botley, and all the others. Asha had a horse, a black courser with a white slash on its nose, but sometimes she gave her steed to Eerl Harlaw so that she could sit beside
Theon as they made their slow meandering track up the kingsroad. Not today, mind, but he was fine with that.

In many ways, his place in the baggage train was a great comfort. He had made some rudimentary cushions out of grain sacks upon which to rest his weary back, and despite the occasional rut in the road, Theon opined that it was far easier and more comfortable to ride here under the covering of the wayn rather than to go ahorse, especially when it started to rain. And most of the Northmen did not seem to even know that he was here, so that was a bonus.

_Let them call me a craven and a coward, a traitor and a turncloak. It can hardly get any worse than it was._ For once, that thought came to him and did not leave an uneasy feeling to fester in his belly. _He’s gone, he’s gone, the Bastard is gone._ Yesterday, for the first time in months, even years, the nightmares had not plagued him.

He thought, _my name is Theon, Theon, it rhymes with aeon._ He did not know what ‘aeon’ meant, or how you spelled it, but Maester Luwin had said it once, so it seemed as good a word as any.

Asha reined up beside the waggon. “Mance Rayder and his greybeards want to see me in the longhall,” she announced loudly, “I’ll need men to carry my banners and to defend my poor woman’s honour.” She bit back a sarcastic smile. “Qarl, Lorren, with me.” And then she went, the two ‘champions’ following in her wake.

Theon spied Tris Botley staring at his sister’s retreating back. “I’ve known that woman for twenty years,” he muttered to himself, “and yet I do not really know her.”

_He wants her,_ Theon knew. Asha was pretty, in a rather understated ironborn fashion, and fierce and clever and cunning too, especially when it came to protecting her friends. “You need to act,” he told Botley, grinning through broken teeth. “Asha doesn’t like waiting.”

“All she likes is Qarl the Maid,” Botley whined, and went back to staring blankly into the middle distance.

Theon waited, staring at the sun as it climbed ever higher in the sky. Someone had thrown back the canvas roofing of the wayn so that he was exposed. He felt the cool air on his bruised cheek, against his broken lips, tousling his patchy white-and-brown hair, but he did not feel the chill. Maybe it was the fact that his broken bones and missing parts no longer had the ability to feel cold, or maybe this was what happiness felt like. Theon did not remember. He ate some of the cheese that Grimtongue had stolen and hidden under the sacks, and drank some water from his skin, then lay back against his makeshift pillows and stared up at the open sky until he was nearly dozing off. The clouds curled themselves into strange shapes, with a resemblance to ships, sailing on a stormy sea.

Asha returned shortly after noon, when a gathering of clouds began drifting slowly across the sun. “A lot of them are cunts,” she told Theon, without introduction. “One-eye Umber is alright, once he stops spitting in your face, and the Forresters aren’t too bad, but the Glover men hate us for what we did at Deepwood Motte—”

_I never did anything at Deepwood Motte,_ Theon remembered. That had been Asha’s work entirely

“And at Torrhen’s Square—”

_Benfred._ He remembered Ser Helman Tallhart’s eldest son as a friend, whom he had spent long hours drinking with in the tavern in the winter town. He remembered one time when they had taken their pick from a pair of brown-haired twins in the brothel, taking them on their laps in a back room of the inn. The girls hadn’t been much to look at, but their company had been fun, as always. _He_
spat on me, though. I never wanted to have to drown him, but he spat on me, laughed at me, and Damphair said I had to drown him. I had no choice. He wondered how Benfred had felt before dying. Did he feel fear? Did he pity the turncloak, or did he feel rage and hatred towards him?

He must have. That was why he spat on me.

Robb would have spat on him too, doubtless, and cursed Theon Greyjoy’s name. He was my best friend. Yet I put that dagger in his heart just as surely as Roose Bolton did.

“Theon?” His sister was looking at him queerly.

“Aye,” he said quickly. “I know.”

She knew that he was not listening, of course. “Really?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. There was a trace of a smirk on her face, a trace of the Asha he had once known, the one who would jape and smile and try to convince you that her name was not Asha, but Esgred…

No. Not that. He shook his head.

She did not waste any more time. “Mance Rayder wants to see you.”

“Me?”

Asha nodded. “You.”

“But… why?”

“I didn’t think to ask. Mance was amiable enough towards me, but his fat friend was giving me the side-eye, and I didn’t want to share too many words in the company of prying eyes.”

The wildlings hate me as well, Theon knew. North and south of the Wall, they judge oathbreakers just the same. He trembled through his cloak. “J-just Mance?”

“Just you and him. A private audience, he says…” Her voice softened a little. “Theon, you don’t have to, if you don’t want-

He suddenly became aware of other eyes around them; Tris, Qarl, Droopeye Dale, Black Lorren. There was pity in their eyes, and Theon had had more than enough pity for one lifetime. swallowed his shame. “No,” he said. “I will. I have to.”

Asha nodded, as if to say, I know.

No, you don’t, he wanted to tell her. She reached out to lead him like a dog, but Theon would not let the others see him like that. He pushed his way through the press of her men and set off alongside the baggage train alone.

The train comprised more than three hundred wayns and waggons, mayhaps nearer four. Their wheels rattled and the axles shuddered like Theon’s cold bones when they moved, but for now they were stationary. Pulley horses stood snickering, as wayn-drivers splashed them with cool water and fed them apples from buckets. The waggons themselves had been piled high with hay and fresh straw, packed salted hams and barrels of fish and pickled herring, cheese and apples. He saw bushels of barley and corn huddled under the makeshift tarps, and casks of something too, perhaps wine. Theon did not even remember what wine tasted like.

Those guarding the baggage train were mostly Northmen. Theon saw Aly Mormont, the She-Bear,
as they called her, clad in her silver chainmail, with a a thick bearskin around her broad shoulders, black as the beast on her sigil. Then there was Brandon Tallhart, a tall, gangling lad of nine-and-ten, tossing a spear from hand to hand in his boredom. Small Tormond Flint’s name was surely a jape, for Small Tormond was as wide and massive as an aurochs, with shoulders to match. A few wildlings rode shaggy garrons among them, and women and children huddled together in thick winter cloaks, bundled on the backs of the wayns. Boys and girls clad in roughspun and furs pelted each other with snowballs.

The column had stopped before iron gates of Blackgrove. The banners of House Branch, House Glover and House Stark flapped against the crumbling stone walls. The keep at the centre of the fort was stout and plain and grey, surrounded by a few ramshackle houses and a number of outbuildings. It was no Winterfell, but it had sufficed as a place to stop and regroup the army. A young sentry waved Theon and Asha through the postern gate, smiling at first, then sneering when he realised who the ragged man was.

Theon could smell broth cooking in a nearby kitchen. A castle sergeant was drilling a group of soldiers in mismatched armour. “They were farmers,” Asha told her, picking up her pace to walk in time with his. “But now the last harvest has come, and the best they can do to provide for their families is ride off to fight the lord’s wars.”

“Their lords are in the south,” Theon said. “Some of them, at least.” Lord Rodrik Forrester and Lord Waymar Locke had both ridden through Winterfell to fight in King Stannis’s army.

Asha acknowledged that, and continued, “But their war is in the north. At the Wall… if what Mance Rayder says is true.”

Theon was still not sure if he believed the stories told by the wildling king in the Great Hall at Winterfell, but once the northern clansmen Wull and Norrey – returned from the Wall and had attested to his story, many of the Northmen had become less sceptical of it. On the Iron Islands, stories of the Others would have been nothing more than old wives’ tales, but here in the grey and white lands above Moat Cailin, the north remembered.

They stamped their feet on the floorboards outside the hall as they came inside, knocking snow and dirt from their boots. “We’re here to see Mance Rayder,” Asha told a lanky spearwife.

The spearwife pointed with the end of her spear to a side door. “That way.” When neither of them moved she said, “Go, kneeler, I’m not leading you by the hand.”

Asha gave Theon an encouraging shove forwards. “He wanted to see you alone,” she said.

“I know,” he told her. I heard you last time. I’m not stupid. Just broken. And afraid.

The door led to a passage, a secret way close to the keep wall. The air smelled of mildew and spoilt wine. Perhaps these had been cellars once, but now the passage was so dark that Theon could not tell what they had been used for, if anything. There were chinks in the stone, and through them he could make out the snow and the sky beyond. As he walked, he began to hear voices, as though someone whispering in his ear, but when he turned to look, no one was there. The cold road is for broken men, an invisible ghost told him. Cold roads for broken men, cold roads for broken men.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. That’s no one you know, he reminded himself, it isn’t him. It isn’t. But he knew that it was, somehow.

Mance Rayder was sitting in a surprisingly large chamber at the other end of the passage, surrounded by a big stack of papers. “Never been fond of these,” he said, as Theon came inside. “Ledgers and
writings. I was a ranger on the Wall, not a steward; and a king beyond it, not a treasurer. But these sorts of things must be done by someone, and I don’t trust anyone else.”

Theon nodded nervously. “Aye.”

“Have a seat.” The King-beyond-the-Wall nodded towards the chair opposite. Theon moved to it. It was cold and hard, and rattled on an uneven leg.

“My lord-” he began.

“I’m no lord, Theon Greyjoy. Not here… and not anywhere else, in truth.”

“But Stannis named you lord of the Dreadfort.”

“Fuck Stannis.” He spat. “The only good being lord of the Dreadfort’s done me is that your kneelers aren’t so dismissive anymore. Once a man gets a title, he’s suddenly worthy of respect in their eyes, and not before. That’s everything that’s wrong with your folk. Tell me a story of a common hero, Greyjoy. Someone who wasn’t the knight or lord or king of someplace or other, but just a commoner. A man who plows the field for wheat and corn, whose only responsibilities are friends and family.”

His eyes twinkled with curiosity or perhaps knowing. “I have a question for you, Theon Greyjoy, and I have no time to waste. So tell me, why did you sack Winterfell?”

Theon stuttered, and shoved his fingers deeper into his pockets. “My – you…”

“Winterfell,” the king repeated. “Most of those northmen would have me strung up and hanged, but to defend the north we need every man there is, even those like you. That being said… I need a good reason not to have you justly killed. The old gods know that I would lose nothing from it. So…” He raised an eyebrow, and his mouth set in a hard line. “Why?”

Theon swallowed. “I did… I wanted to take… I don’t want to…” I wanted to please my father. I wanted to take the North. I wanted to prove myself. I never wanted to do it, I never wanted…

Mance held up a hand to stop him from gibbering. “Do you know why I think you did it?”

Nervously, Theon shook his head.

“You were a captive of the Starks for ten years,” the wildling king said, “they called you ward, but I knew the truth. There was a time when I came to Winterfell, Greyjoy, believe it or not. In a disguise.”

“Y-you did?”

“Aye. And I saw you sitting with the boy Robb Stark and his bastard brother, Jon Snow. You thought you could be one of them, didn’t you? At first you thought you denied the idea, but then you thought… perhaps you could be one of them. Could be like them. But after a while, when you’d grown old and drowned on sorrow, you realised that it wasn’t real.”

His voice was that of a man who had told the same story a thousand times before. “And you realised that you didn’t know where the lies they’d told you began and where they ended. But you knew one thing… a ironborn like you, a traitor’s son, you could never be a Stark. Even the bastard was higher among them than you.

“But I understand the truth of it, Theon Greyjoy. And I know why you took Winterfell – for the
same reason that I left the Night’s Watch. Because you wanted to be free. And this was the only
way, the only path you saw, where you weren’t living in the shadow of a Stark. You wanted to be
free of the burden of loyalty that Robb Stark had placed upon you. You didn’t want to be his right-
hand man forever. He sent you home to the Iron Islands to make his negotiations – as a messenger,
as a slave - but who knows where he might have sent you next?”

It was only then that Theon realised that his eyes were watering, and that his fingers and toes were
shivering. Because… because so much of what Mance had said was so true, so undeniably true, and
it had always been that way. This was always my fate.

“Free,” he said brokenly, “I tried to be free.”

“Aye. You wanted freedom, and so you turned your cloak.” His eyes bored into Theon’s. “Do you
deny it?”

“No,” the broken man said fitfully. He bit his lip till he could taste blood in his mouth. Theon, Theon,
it rhymes with aeon.

“North of the Wall we have no love for the Starks and the southerners,” Mance explained, “but we
respect their traditions. And in both of our cultures, a turncloak is a turncloak. None would dispute
my judgement if I wanted to hang you, not even your own sister, I think. Stannis Baratheon wanted
to do just that, did you know?”

Theon nodded, though he wasn’t sure if he had actually known. “Aye.”

“There are certain rules we have to abide by, lest we all become savages. And traitors and turncloaks
should be rightly punished for breaking those rules. Wouldn’t you agree?”

He had no choice but to nod again. He felt dumb to the world, dumb to feeling and dumb to sense.

“But do you know why Stannis chose to keep you alive? Why I chose to keep you alive?”

“N-no.”

“Because there is something that you know, something that is of great interest to all of us, not least to
the bannermen of House Stark.”

Your name, Theon thought, you have to know your name.

“If one Stark boy survived, then the other did too. You never found them, did you?”

A strange spurt of bravery came to him, then. “You already know that I didn’t,” he said.

Mance seemed oddly surprised by that. “Aye,” he replied. “I know you didn’t.”

Sudden realisation came to Theon then. “Is that why you brought me here?”

“You’re no fool, Theon Greyjoy,” said the wildling. “Certainly not the smartest, given how you
seem to have pissed off most of the north, but no fool either.”

I was, thought Theon, I was Ramsay’s fool. He remembered something he had told Maester Luwin
at Winterfell, back before his days at the Dreadfort: I will not spend the rest of my days mocked as a
eunuch and a fool by my own people. The irony at that was so bitter he began to giggle. Mance
glanced at him like he had gone insane. “Are you willing to share the jest, turncloak?”

“It’s no jest,” Theon said sadly. Would that it were. He cleared his throat croakily. “You want Bran
and Rickon?"

“We have Rickon. Or rather, Stannis has Rickon, but he does not seem to contented with that. What do you know of Brandon? As I understand, the boy is crippled, which would lead me to believe that he hasn’t gone far, but Stannis’s letter tells me that he has gone beyond the Wall.”

“That’s where we’re going, then?”

Mance nodded. “Aye. Not for Brandon Stark alone, though. Perchance by now you have heard of my wildling brothers marooned at Hardhome, on the Shivering Sea? Tormund Giantsbane was supposed to have returned to the Wall by now; alas… he may have run into some trouble with the Others.”

Theon did not understand. “The Others… are…” he said weakly. But he had no confidence in his own words.

“Just stories?” Mance shook his head slowly. “How do you think I convinced ten thousand Northmen to come north with me? How do you think I managed to rally all of the free folk to my banners? Beyond the Wall, we follow strength, aye, but we follow unity as well, and fifty thousand men together are more likely to survive the winter than a thousand groups of them. Winter is coming, turncloak; the Stark words said it all along.”

They did, Theon thought, but I never listened to them. “The Others… how are you going to defeat them?”

“With a bloody great Wall, I hope. But I’ll not abandon Tormund and twenty thousand wildlings up on Storrold’s Point, no. I haven’t told these Northmen that I mean to go out beyond the Wall, and when we get to Castle Black and announce my foolish ranging, perchance half of these men will turn tail and flee back to their keeps.

“But that will still leave me with a good ten thousand, kneelers and free folk alike, and maybe a few crows as well, aye. Jon Snow went out to lead the rescue; likely he is up at Hardhome as well – or dead.”

Theon swallowed his breath. “And what does this have to do… with Bran?”

“Little and less, but we can spare a few men to at least search for the boy. And taking a Stark into our custody will no doubt help to rally the kneelers if Ned Stark’s bastard and the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch is not enough for them.” His eyes narrowed. “But if you have any idea, turncloak-”

“The Reed children,” Theon remembered. “A boy and a girl, I don’t know my names.” But I know my own. Theon, Theon, it rhymes with aeon.

“I have heard of this Lord Reed,” Mance admitted, “of Greywater Watch, unless I am mistaken?”

Theon did not know, but he nodded anyway. “Aye. That it was.”

Mance murmured quietly under his breath, “Crannogmen,” he said, “but they went north, not south.”

“You know of the Reeds?” asked Theon, before he could stop himself.

“I know more of the south than you think,” said Mance Rayder, “perhaps I’ll tell you someday, Theon Turncloak.” He tapped impatiently on his desk. “You recall the names of these Reed children?”
He did not. I know my name, and that is the only name I know. I must not forget. I must not forget.

“No matter,” Mance said. He glanced up thoughtfully. “Shall I tell you a secret, Theon Greyjoy?” He did not wait for Theon’s answer. “Lord Snow asked me a question once, about what I was spending my time searching for beyond the Wall. It was an artefact of the old kings, something that would help my people in their victory. Something made to fight the Others.”

Theon suddenly felt very cold. “What?” he croaked.

“The Horn of Joramun,” said Mance Rayder.

A pregnant pause grew between them, and Theon furrowed his brow, trying to remember. “Old Nan’s stories,” he muttered at long last. “The horn of the giants-

“No quite. Joramun was a King Beyond-the-Wall,” Mance told him, “with a little giant’s blood, mayhap, but he was mostly human, at least. And?...” His eyes fell upon Theon, expectant.

“What does the Horn do?”

Mance Rayder smiled at him. “I pray we never find out.” He pointed to the door with a long finger. “Farewell, Theon Turncloak. Think on my words, if you would.”

Asha was waiting for him outside. They walked back to the baggage train in silence.

The air was quite still. The sun was coming out from behind the clouds. Winter was coming.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was originally meant to take place in Winterfell, but I decided against it because I wanted to get out and explore the North a bit more, and basically every Theon chapter has taken place in Winterfell, so I felt that it was time for new scenery.

The Sunset Kingdoms has gotten a little ridiculous in terms of length. I'm currently predicting 120 chapters, around 500K words, so... this will be fun, or possibly torturous. Hopefully a little bit of both.

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Beneath the Snow

Chapter Summary

It smelled old down here, of forgotten dreams and long-lost memories.

Chapter Notes

A RECAP:
Saved from the Others by the arrival of a mysterious rider named Coldhands, Jon Snow has reached the cave of the three-eyed crow alone, save for the company of his direwolf Ghost. Meanwhile, Bran Stark has spent half a year with the mysterious Lord Brynden, learning the secrets of the weirwood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JON

The day had dawned bright and cloudless and clear, almost unsettlingly so. A nagging feeling tugged at Jon’s heart as he stumbled up the steep snowbank, nearly tripping headlong in his haste. His black Night’s Watch cloak was spotted here and there with frost, and beads of water were melting off the fur.

Sunlight gleamed brightly against the surface of the snow, reflecting yellow-and-gold beams into Jon’s eyes. For a moment, he was half-blind. At the top of the hill, Meera Reed’s lithe figure was little more than a black silhouette against the endless white, a shadow with a bow slung over one shoulder and a crannog spear in her left hand. She offered Jon her hand to haul him the last few steps up the slope, and for a moment the two of them stood there atop the ridge, watching the world in silence.

Winter had left its mark here. The sentinel trees surrounding the clearing had lost their foliage, and all that remained were bare grey branches and a scattering of pine needles and dead leaves that crunched underfoot when you stepped on them.

“Look,” said Meera, pointing into the middle distance. Jon saw it, and he almost felt guilty. I didn’t come back for him. For what was left of him. He was half-surprised to see him still here, but he supposed that he could hardly have gone anywhere else. Had he been dead when Jon had found his companions at the top of the hill? He could not remember.

“He saved me,” Jon said quietly.


“Aye. He was the watcher on the walls. And now his watch is ended.”
Jon returned his gaze to the man’s black cloak. It was dancing fiercely in the breeze, as though it were fighting to escape from the grip of the tree branches which kept it in place.

“He was a Stark...” Meera told him suddenly... “at least, Bran said that he was a Stark.”

“How did he know?”

Meera only stared at him for the longest time, as though Jon were stupid and missing something obvious. Which was true, he supposed. He was seeing the truth, and still not really believing in its existence. *Green dreams and Children of the Forest and men with a thousand eyes. It seems too strange to be true.*

*You know nothing,* Jon Snow, the trees whispered.

“Three-eyed-” Meera began.

“Three-eyed crow,” said Jon, still not truly understanding. “Of course.” He would sooner not start another conversation about that.

He went a short way down the other side of the slope, towards the clearing, and nodded at Coldhands’s discarded cloak. “He deserves a burial befitting a man of the Night’s Watch. A burial befitting a Stark.”

“There’s nothing left to bury,” Meera said.

“There’s his cloak. A Night’s Watch cloak can tell a thousand stories. And we don’t bury the dead, we burn them.”

Meera’s voice came from somewhere close by this time. “Have you always done that? Or is it only since-”

She broke off, and presently all was silent, save for the quietest whispering of the newborn wind through the leafless trees. Around Jon’s feet, the snowflakes blew with the breeze and scattered themselves across the ground. He coughed. “I don’t know,” he said. “There’s a lichyard at Castle Black, but I think that’s only for the Lord Commanders.” He could not help but wonder if they had held a funeral for him. *An empty grave for the Bastard of Winterfell?* As far as his Night’s Watch brothers knew, Jon Snow was a dead man, taken by the Others in the middle of a winter storm.

He continued, “And the Starks are buried at Winterfell.”

“In the crypts,” Meera said quietly.

“You’ve been in the crypts?”

“We hid there. When we were escaping from Theon.” She looked surprised. “Didn’t Bran tell you?”

Bran had hardly told him anything, and he was down in the tunnels more often than he was up in the atrium with Jon and the rest of them.

*Theon.* Jon found himself balling his fists in anger even as he said the name. From his side, there came a quiet snarling, and he knew that Ghost was there. The direwolf’s hackles were rising, and his breath came out in slow, muted whispers. Against the white of the snow, he was almost invisible - *almost a ghost,* Jon though - save for the deep red of his eyes, of course.

Meera took another step down the snowdrift. “Jon... that wasn’t... it wasn’t Theon,” she said. “Not
truly. Bran spoke to him in a dream. He said that Theon wants to... that he wants to repent for what he’s done.”

“Repentance. Of course.” Jon said the words bitterly. *He can repent all he likes. He can repent all he likes when I shove a sword through his heart.*

“Sometimes we have to let go of our hatred,” Meera said softly. “Bran and Rickon are safe-

Jon knew that her words were true. But while Theon had not killed Jon’s brothers, he had still burned Winterfell. He had burned *Jon’s place*, his childhood, his memories. All the memories of Robb… they were now corrupted by Theon Greyjoy’s grinning face. “And all the rest of them?” he said bitterly. “The other people at Winterfell? He burned my home, Meera. Would you have me forgive Walder Frey as well, for-”

“Walder Frey will have his justice, Bran says. In this life and in the next.”

“Justice is hard to come by in the world.” He curled his lip scornfully, then relaxed a little, softening his glare. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “When I was Lord Commander I had to be hard on my friends as well… and all that time spent in the cave…”


From beside them came another snarling noise. Ghost’s eyes were fixed on a distant spot across the clearing.

“He’s smelled something,” Jon said matter-of-factly.

All at once, Ghost’s hackles rose, and then he was bounding down the slope, faster and faster with every step. Wearily, Jon followed him across the snow, running beneath the canopy of trees, ignoring the branches that stung at his face when they came close. Meera overtook him as he ran through the wood, and he followed her now, through a frozen stream and up onto the opposite bank. The path was narrow here, and the thorns thick overhead, so he had to drop to his knees and crawl through the undergrowth. His once-frozen muscles were burning now, and the blood was pumping faster and faster in his chest, turning his cheeks pink from the exertion. He was seeing the sights, smelling the smells… he felt half a wolf himself as he scrambled onwards, until…

“A deer,” Jon said breathlessly. They were up on another ridge, and below them the animal was wandering through the snow as though in a dream, completely oblivious to everything going on around it.

“Aye.” Meera Reed nodded, oddly calm and collected. She raised her bow and nocked an arrow to her chin. “I’ll aim for the eyes.”

“You need not worry.” Jon allowed himself a brief smile. “Ghost has him.” The direwolf was prowling slowly at first, but as he came closer to the deer he picked up speed, and soon he was little more than a white blur. Then there came a loud screech of pain, a loud death wail, and there was blood in the snow. Meera ran forwards and slid down the slope on her behind, throwing her bow over her shoulder in favour of the spear. Jon felt half-drunk as he followed sluggishly, soaking his breeches through with snow as he ran. When he reached the wolf, Meera was leaning over it with her weight on her spear, the point thrust deep into the deer’s carcass.

She ruffled Ghost’s fur. “You did well, boy.”

“Aye,” Jon said. He would have said more, but then he tripped on a root and pitched himself headfirst onto the ground. All at once, snow filled his mouth and nose, and chunks of ice became
tangled in his hair. He turned over onto his back and stretched up to scratch Ghost under the chin, chuckling at the absurdity of it. “Aye, you did.”

Meera reached down and offered him a hand up, smirking. She had already drawn her knife and was busy sawing at the leg of the deer, cutting away a large hunk of flesh, which she threw down to Ghost. With an angry snarl, the direwolf advanced upon his share of the meat, tearing at it with sharp teeth and claws. Jon went and knelt down beside him, ruffling Ghost’s fur as he ate. When he was done, the direwolf stared back into Jon’s eyes, looking almost sad. “You can go and hunt for more if you want,” Jon said.

Meera was busy filling a canvas sack with deer meat. “We won’t be needing all of it,” she said as she sawed at the carcass with her knife. “Come on.” And then she was setting off back up the hill, leaving Jon and Ghost to follow.


Meera stopped and turned round to look at them. She said, “Summer - he sometimes doesn’t want to - I don’t know why, but-”

“It’s okay,” Jon replied, “Like you said, the deer’s more than large enough for all of us.”

“You’re probably right. Especially with Jojen not having much of an appetite...” She sounded worried, but then again, she had a right to be. Her younger brother had been in a state of mild illness ever since Jon’s arrival at the cave, and no remedy seemed to improve his sullen demeanour or sickly pallor.

“He’ll be fine,” Jon said quietly. “I know he will.”

Meera nodded with an expression that suggested that she did not believe a word of what he said, then turned and began to trudge up the slope. Cautiously, Jon followed her.

“I worry about them,” Meera said when he caught up with her. “Bran and Jojen... do... do you-”

“Yes,” Jon admitted. “I know what you... what you mean. There’s...”

“There’s something... odd... about that place, isn’t there? As if you’re always being watched.”

“I’m certain that we are,” Jon said. She was right. The cave was an unsettling place, to say the least, a feeling that he could not describe. Sometimes, when he thought he was alone, he turned round to see big round eyes staring at him through the darkness. The Children were always watching, waiting, but for what, Jon could not say, and that only unsettled him all the more. Then there were the days when the Children disappeared under the earth, and they were alone in the tunnel, alone in the dark. Days and nights all merged into one long eerie silence, interspersed with the occasional whispering of those down below. Jon had not slept for more than a few hours straight since his arrival, and Meera looked no better than he felt. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her hair was a straggly, unkempt mess.

She was speaking again. “I mean... out here, it’s open and free, but... do you ever wonder why they all live in darkness, when they claim to be the saviours of mankind? Do you ever wonder why the Children would even be interested in the fate of man?”

“Aye,” replied Meera. “They did. But my father told me the stories of long ago, the tales passed down from his father and his father before him... never in the tales of the old gods did they mention ‘the last hero’ or ‘the prince of the green’.”

“Perhaps some of the stories are so old even our forefathers do not know of them,” Jon suggested.

Meera reached out and suddenly grabbed his arm, twisting him so that he was staring at her. “The cave,” she muttered darkly. She sounded almost too afraid to speak, “in the darkness. All of it. I don’t trust it, Jon. I tried telling Jojen the same thing, but he only spoke some nonsense about destiny, and fate. I said the same to Bran, but he spends half of his time down there with them, and he won’t listen to me. They both told me that I’m wrong; that we were supposed to... tell me that I’m not wrong here...”

Jon squeezed her hand a little. Her skin was cold as ice. “I know what you mean, Meera. But...”

“Jon,” she said firmly, her mouth an unwavering line. “I’ve been here for months now, and nothing feels right. You can see it everywhere, in everything; the darkness, those creatures... the words the others say... it’s like they’ve enslaved Bran and Jojen somehow. Even Hodor knows that something’s wrong, but... please... you - we have to do something.” Her eyes pleaded with him. “Anything.”

He gave a heavy sigh, knowing that she was right. “I’ll speak with them, then, and maybe together we can convince them of something. I’ll talk with Bran, and you can speak with Jojen. When we get back... and we’ll try and work something out.” What that something was, he did not know.

Meera gave the barest of nervous nods, and turned sharply to the right. There was a narrow gap between the roots that Jon had to sidle through, and then they were underground, robbed of light all at once. The path that led down under the hill was steep, and the ground was crumbly underfoot. Jon had thought that it was made of stones when he had first come here, but the sight of a skull sitting upturned on a ledge nearby had convinced him otherwise. A garden of bones. The walls were wet and slick with red weirwood sap that turned your fingers slippery if you touched it. There were a few leaves as well, yellow and red and gold, and vines climbing the walls of the tunnel like ancient ivy, ornamented by sickly-smelling flowers. And among the leaves he could hear a rustling, the sound of the unknown. It smelled old down here, of forgotten dreams and long-lost memories.

The cave came upon them suddenly, and Jon almost stumbled and fell, but Meera caught his arm just in time before he went crashing to earth.

It was not really light down here, just less dark. He could make out the form of Hodor, sprawled across some tree branches in the corner. The giant stableboy was glancing around at the walls inquisitively, his eyes betraying some impossible intelligence. “Hodor,” he muttered quietly, “Hodor.”

Jojen Reed sat upon a mangled tree stump, his skin grey and pale as wax. His hair was twisted and scraggly, and his arms thin as twigs, but his eyes still glowed a bright green in the bleak undergrowth of the cave. “Meera,” he managed to say weakly, sitting up.

Meera ran to her brother, twisting his hand into hers. “Are you alright?” she asked quietly.

“Yes...” Jojen said, “I’m fine... have you brought...”

Ghost had disappeared behind Jon, gone to find Summer, most like. They always came back, so it was all right, he supposed. Hodor was sitting up now, glancing round anxiously. Across the cave, Meera was busy taking off her furs and throwing them over a weakly protesting Jojen. “You don’t
look much better,” she murmured, “do you-

“Meera,” said Jojen. “Light a fire.”

She did not protest this time. Jon crossed the hall and offered to strike up the flames himself. It was strangely easy to find kindling down here, despite the damp and the dark. Jon took a stone for flint and scratched it against the bark, over and over. Very soon sparks were birthing a tiny fire among the broken wood. “Hodor,” said Hodor, staring into the flames, “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor.”

Meera cut a hunk of meat and impaled it on a piece of broken bracken, then handed it to Jon to put over the fire. She turned back to her brother. “Are you sure-

“Today is not the day I die,” Jojen Reed declared, with the wisdom of a thousand years.

Meera gripped her brother’s hand. “And... Jojen, you’re not going to... not here...”

The pause lasted a moment longer than it should have. “No,” said Jojen, squeezing his sister’s hand back. “No, I’m not.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor, staring at the meat as it browned over the flames. “Hodor. Hodor.”

“He’s hungry,” Jojen observed.

“Aren’t we all?” said Meera. Her voice had an almost homely tone to it, yet she was unable to keep the worry out of the words.

“Where’s Bran?” Jon asked suddenly. He had noticed, of course, but Bran was usually here at mealtimes – even if he was never seen outside of them.

Jojen explained. “He went down into... down there with the Children. Don’t worry, Jon, he was fine...”

“Hodor,” said Hodor. Jon took the meat from the fire and cut it roughly in half. The first hunk he gave to Meera, who passed it on to Jojen. The second hunk he handed to Hodor, who took it gratefully, rocking back and forth on his haunches, singing, “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor.”

“He doesn’t like it down here either,” said Meera, nodding at the giant.

Again, Jojen Reed sighed. “You may not be fond of this place, Meera...”

“I can hardly say that I love it here,” Meera said, managing a tiny sarcastic smile. “And... neither do you. Jojen...” Her voice reduced to a hiss, as though she were afraid of being heard. “Ever since we’ve come down here, you’ve only got worse.”

“I know,” said her brother. “I know. But this is the place where we must be. Where we are destined to be.”

“Destiny,” Jon said. It was a long moment before he realised that he had spoken. “Someone talked to me about destiny once,” he continued, turning the second piece of meat over the fire. “She said that it was rooted in ourselves from our very first breath, but she also said that we can make our own choices.”

“Do you mistrust this place as well, then?” asked Jojen.

Not as much as I mistrust Melisandre, Jon thought. Through the silence, the fire kept on crackling. “The ranger brought me here, of all places,” he said. “I don’t know why... but I think all of us are
supposed to learn something here - I don’t know what. Or maybe it’s only Bran. They call him prince of the Green, after all—"

“The prince of the green is more than just that,” Jojen replied. “He is a king, of sorts. A king among the greenseers. And he plays a role in the Song.”

“The Song?”

Meera and Jojen shared only the briefest of looks, but Jon caught it all the same. Do we tell him or not? their eyes said. Then, after what seemed like an age, Jojen gave a slow nod.

“It is among the oldest of the prophecies that the crannogmen tell,” Meera explained. She pointed at her brother. “Jojen… he told our father that the song must be sung again. He saw it in a green dream, when he was about nine.”

“I’m perfectly capable of telling the story myself,” Jojen said, with a hint of annoyance in his thin voice. “I don’t know what it means, or what it was. I still don’t know, but I do know that the prince will play a part.”

“Do you know the words of House Reed, Jon?” asked Meera.

Honed and Ready? No, those are House Cerwyn. A Promise was Made? No, that’s the Manderlys. He shook his head, almost ashamed. I should know. I ought to know.

Jojen smiled at a secret that only he seemed to know. “Very few people do,” he said. “Sometimes there are lords of our own house who go their whole lives without knowing the house words, strange as it seems… and outside House Reed, our words are scarcely known. But…”

Meera said, “When we found out that Jojen could… that he was a greenseer, he said that we had to learn our words for good.”

“And their meaning,” added her brother.

“Your father,” Jon interrupted. “Lord Howland - is he a-”

“A greenseer?” Jojen smiled, if only faintly. “No. Not anymore. In his youth he had the green dreams… but sometimes they fade. We have the blood of the greenseers, born thousands of years ago in a time forgotten, but it does not show itself in every Reed. Some, like Meera, do not have the gift. But like me, some are greenseers through and through.”

“Our father was somewhere between them both,” his sister explained. “He had the dreams, but he could rarely interpret them. He only understood the meaning of one such dream plainly, when-”

Jojen gave a loud, hacking cough. Meera glanced at him with worry for a second. “Anyway…” he managed to say, “the words of our house…”

They spoke together now, brother and sister. “The Song Must Be Sung.”

“The song of ice and fire,” Jon breathed.

Jojen raised his eyebrows suddenly. His eyes glowed with surprise. “You know of it?”

“From a dream… I don’t know if it meant anything.”

“Dreams often mean everything. Especially here. When did you-
Jon took a tired breath. “It was at Castle Black... I saw my father’s face, and there... there was a red priest. And... and...”

“Melisandre.” Jon looked round to see who had spoken, but the others seemed just as surprised as he did. For one mad moment, he thought it might have been Hodor.

“How long have you been there?” Meera asked.

From his seat among the tangled tree branches, Bran gave a quiet laugh. “Ages,” he said. “Jojen saw me.”

Jojen gave a small smile. Meera hit him, but only softly.

Jon turned to face his brother. Bran had grown a lot since Winterfell, taller and lankier, and his auburn hair came down to his shoulders. He dressed in gathered furs, grey and white and brown, and he wore leaves and twigs in his cloak. Yet this was still the brother Jon had always known. “I’m afraid we started without you,” he said.

Bran smiled. “Not to worry. I didn’t really expect you to wait for me.” He waved his hand in Hodor’s direction. At once, the giant stood and wandered over towards him, stooping his back so Bran could climb on. Hodor walked back across the cave floor and set his charge down lightly among the branches and leaves. Jon tore a piece off the meat from over the fire and passed it to Bran, a second part for Meera, and he kept the rest for himself. The deer meat was good despite the hastiness of the meal. The taste of blood and meat juices filled Jon’s mouth, it was chewy but somehow tough as well.

“Where are the rest of them?” Bran asked suddenly.

“Who?” asked Jon.

Bran glanced around the cavern expectantly, a brief flicker of confusion crossing his features. “Leaf, Ash, Snowylocks,” he murmured. “They came up here with me.” He shrugged. “Well, I thought they did, at least.”

“You don’t normally go down at this time of the day,” said Jon.

“Lord Brynden said that it was important, so...”

An uneasy silence filled the cavern at the mention of the man’s name. “Hodor,” Hodor said gloomily.

Jojen started. “Lord Brynden is-

“He told me what’s coming,” said Bran. “But I think you all know already.”

“The Others,” Jon said. A cold wind blows, he knew, and winter is coming.

“Aye,” his brother confirmed. “The Others. They’re marching south, but only slowly. I don’t know why. There’s a place where we need to go, but I don’t know where it is.”

Meera straightened up suddenly. “Well, it’s not here,” she said.

“No... I don’t think so...” Bran turned to Meera sitting beside him and gave her a brief but genuine smile. “I know you don’t like it here,” he said softly, “but this is where I was destined to be - for now, at least.”
“Destiny,” muttered Meera. Her voice echoed off the cave roof; _destiny, destiny, destiny_... And for the briefest moment Jon Snow found himself wondering whether or not _he_ had a destiny.

“Bran is right, Meera.” Jojen Reed’s eyes seemed to glow a little from the sunken pits of his face. “We have to stay here until he knows. And only then... maybe...” His voice sounded more than a little wishful.

“I wish we could go back above,” Bran said, “Truly, I do. To see the sun again up above. To feel the wind on my face and to taste the snowmelt. But this is my place, here. For now.”

“And what about ours?” Meera Reed muttered. “This isn’t _our_ place.”

Jojen stared at his sister, his mouth half-open to object, but he did not speak. _This isn’t my place either, Jon knew._ _I said the vows. I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls._ Had his brothers reached Hardhome in the end? Had they found the wildlings? Had the ships taken them all back south? Perhaps Bran could see that in his green dreams, but he could not.

As if in answer, Bran said, “I see _some_ things... wings, a shadow, a horn... but I don’t know where, how...” His voice broke to a whisper, and he reached across and took Meera’s hand in his own, letting a smile play across his face for a moment. Jon felt something tug at his heart, and his eyes met Jojen’s briefly, and then Hodor’s. _I suppose this is another family, then. Home, for now at least._

Meera was smiling as well now. “Okay,” she said, “but we have to... sometime...”

“We’ll be fine,” replied Bran. “I know we will. And I’ll find where we need to go.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s worth noting that the events of this chapter are taking place some two months after a lot of the other stuff in this story, because Jon, Bran and friends have been under the tree a good long while.
“You're a knight of the sworn brotherhood now, Ser Jaime. And you need to do what needs to be done.”

JAIME

“Look,” Watty the Miller said as they were crossing the Millwater river. “Black clouds, like ash. That means a real big storm’s coming soon.”

“The rain’s only pissing for now,” said Lem Lemoncloak. “We’ll ride as far as we can while it’s still light, and then find a place to set up camp for the night.”

“There’s a nice inn up near Stoney Sept,” Beardless Dick said. “With good wine and good women.”

Stoney Sept was three days’ back the way they’d come, so Lem shook his head and kept riding. And Edric Dayne said, “The Peach isn’t an inn, you fool, it’s a brothel,” before he followed.

Jaime was among the last to get going.

At Riverrun, Peck and Little Lew Piper had called his horses Honor and Glory, but Jaime did not need either of those, since he was riding to his death, so his mount remained nameless, as lost as he. As they approached the storm, he could not help but see his father’s face among the clouds, the words he’d said as he’d shoved his longsword into Lord Tywin’s heart. *You are no son of mine. Kingslayer. Kinslayer.*

A gale was blowing, and the spray flew into their faces as the rain started to come down faster and faster. Very soon the men were soaked to the skin, as were the horses, whinnying in their impatience to be gone from the rain. Jaime could see scarce ten feet past his nose; everything else was a dense blur of runny colour. And still the rain kept falling.

In some ways, rain was even worse than snow. At least you knew to expect snow in winter, and you could prepare yourself for it. But rain could come at any time, starting and stopping as quickly as the wind, and a lack of rain was just as bad too much.

It was an hour or two before Lem and the other leaders came to their senses. The column took a sharp right onto a small track through a yellow wood. It was still raining, but the canopy overhead took the brunt of it. Lem said, “If it keeps on like this, the Blackwater’s going to burst its banks and leave us all stranded in the Riverlands with broken men and outlaws and Seven knows what else.
There aren’t enough of us to fight them off.”

“We can fight them,” somebody’s stupid squire said, a boy of twelve or thirteen. “All of us, together.”

“Only if you’re as dumb as an aurochs,” said Lem. “And twice as strong. Else the first man you see is like to murder you.” He shrugged. “We’re going south. If we ride back up into the Riverlands we’ll get killed by outlaws or taken hostage by Stannis Baratheon.” He jerked a finger in Jaime’s direction. “If that happens, we’ll never get the Kingslayer here to the capital.”

No one seemed too bothered by that, least of all Jaime himself.

“We’re going to have to ride south before we drown in all this mud,” Lem continued. “Down into the Reach.” He sighed. “I know an inn near Tumbledown Rill, a half-day’s ride away from here. I guess we won’t be sleeping under the stars after all. The rain ain’t gonna get any better, but it ain’t gonna get much worse than this.”

“You’ve probably cursed us all now, Lem,” said Jon o’ Nutten. There was a scattering of nervous laughter, but most men seemed relieved to be headed to a warm place to spend the night.

But for once the gods above smiled on them. As they turned due south the rain began to slow a little, even if they were still soaked through. It was mostly downhill too, so they rode quickly, quicker than any day before. Jaime reckoned it was about thirty miles, or mayhaps nearer forty, but his sense of distance was as warped as his sense of time.

It had been noon when they left the wood. The stars were coming out by the time they reached the inn.

The place was an old watermill, three storeys tall, big enough for all of them, thankfully. In Stoney Sept Jaime had been forced to sleep with the pigs. Swampy Meg and Beardless Dick had gotten a good laugh out of that.

The innkeep looked mortified when the outlaws came inside, clamouring around the benches like rowdy drunks. But when Lem went up to the bar and asked for rooms for them all, his eyes lit up with pleasure, and when a bag of silver was passed from man to man, the innkeep looked as though he might expire then and there from the shock. There was still suspicion in his gaze, though. Outlaws, his eyes said, braggarts. Scoundrels.

And they were, Jaime supposed. Despite their self-professed beliefs in justice and the law, the Brotherhood without Banners were really little more than a brotherhood of organised thieves. But even thieves have their honour. And Kingslayers do not.

Some of the others went three or four to a room, and the boys would bed down in a large dormitory, but Jaime had a chamber of his own, on the second floor of the inn overlooking the water wheel. There was a straw-stuffed mattress for him to sleep on, a table and chairs beside the window, and a small basin with a ewer of water beside it.

Jaime washed his face and hair. He was shocked by how much dirt and grime came out of his skin; when he was done the water was black as pitch. His hair was as brittle as straw, but at least it had now taken on some semblance of the golden Lannister colouring. That reminded Jaime of the golden hand Lem Lemoncloak had stolen from him as some sort of trophy. I hope you get more use out of it than I ever did, Yellowcloak.

There was a dusty mirror on the table. “I am Jaime Lannister,” he told his reflection. No, the man in
the mirror replied, *You are Kingslayer, oathbreaker, man without honour.*

They had left a roughspun grey shirt for him on the bed. It was too large for him, and the sleeves were too baggy, but it was a considerable improvement on the rags he’d worn for the best part of a month. He hoped the innkeep would not mind him leaving his stinking clothes here in its place.

A sane man might have flopped onto the bunk and slept, but the only thought that came to him was that if clothes could be coaxed out of the innkeep, then surely a meal or at least a mug of ale would not be impossible either.

The outlaws were seated at the long trestle tables in the inn’s main hall. They were the only guests tonight, it seemed. Swampy Meg, the Mad Huntsman and Twopenny were playing cards, betting with copper stars and pennies. Puddingfoot was talking with the twins Arron and Rory, about something that involved a lot of waving his arms. And Pello of Tyrosh was wooing the innkeep’s wife, which looked to displease the innkeep.

Jaime went up to the bar and ordered a mug of ale for himself. “I fear that this is going to be a long night for you,” he told the innkeep. “These lot won’t be gone till morning comes.”

The innkeep only smiled at him. “If it comes to that, I can rely on Wenda to clear them all out. Not that I’d be bothered; this is the first good business I’ve had in weeks. These are hard times.”

“I’ll bet they are.” Jaime raised his tankard in salute. “You’re a good man, I’m sure.” _Better than me._

“That don’t change a thing.” The innkeep shrugged. “With winter just around the corner, we’ve thought long and hard about packing up till spring, but I don’t see the point of that. Running the inn’s all that’s keeping me going at the moment.” He went and poured another tankard for himself. “That and the damned ale. I had three sons, sent them all to fight the war.”

“For whose army?” Jaime asked.

“Some lord’s,” said the innkeep. “First one died under Stannis’s banner, cut down cruelly at the Blackwater. My youngest lad – he was naught more than a boy, only four-and-ten – I should’ve told him to stay, but he went along with his brothers much too young and with me leg there was no chance of me walking to some battlefield t’ get him back.”

“Battle?” Jaime asked.

“The wasting sickness,” said the other man. “He got captured, my Will, an’ they left him to starve. The Lannisters hanged me middle son for rape, but Symon would never do something like that.”

Jaime turned away. _The things I do for love_, he thought bitterly. _How much of this would have been avoided if I hadn’t pushed the damned Stark boy out of the window?_

But if the boy _had_ told Ned Stark… then Cersei would have lost her head, and Jaime too. And Joffrey and Myrcella and Tommen. _Better them than us_, his father had always said.

_Better you than us, Father._ That had been his reasoning, when he’d shoved his blade through Lord Tywin’s chest, felt the old man shudder, seen the look in his eyes, equal parts rage and disappointment. Then the light in his green eyes had gone out entirely. _The things I do for love._

The rain was still coming down outside, _thwacking_ off the roof beams. Thunder roared in the distance. Jaime’s steps took him to Lem Lemoncloak, over by the fire. The innkeep’s wife was coming round with a big bowl of rabbit stew.
“You want something, Kingslayer?” Lem asked.

*I want a great many things, Yellowcloak, but most of them are impossible.* “Where are we?”

“About thirty or forty leagues west of the roseroad, by my reckoning. North of Tumbleton. We’ll ride east in the morning, and then—”

“And then you’ll give me to Aegon Targaryen—”

“You killed a king.”

*And saved another,* Jaime thought. But that was another story, and one he’d probably never get to tell. Lem drifted away to sit at the next table, and Jaime was left alone by the fire. He sat down on a stool and watched the flames. He found himself remembering memories he’d long since forgotten, things that had seemed insignificant at the time but now seemed as important as his own name. The way a farmer’s daughter had smiled and waved at him on the road to the Harrenhal tourney. The colour of the madness in King Aerys’s eyes on the day he had burned Rickard Stark in his armour. *Burn them all.* The sound of his father’s voice that night beneath the stars when Jaime had thrust a longsword through his chest. *You are no son of mine.*

*I am your son,* Jaime had wanted to tell him. *I have always been your son.*

The sound of a stool scraping beside him brought him out of his reverie. Ned Dayne had been out stabling the horses, if his thoroughly rain-sodden cloak was any indication. His white-blond hair was plastered to his forehead with rain, and his dark blue jerkin and breeches were torn and muddied with age. He hung his cloak up on a rail above the fireplace and took a seat.

“Strange that you should come and sit down beside *me,*” Jaime muttered.

“I can talk to that lot anytime,” Edric said, nodding at the men around them. “Whereas you… I mean —”

“I’m going to be put to death soon, like as not,” Jaime said. “Best you get whatever you can out of me before King Aegon decides to spike my head over a gate somewhere.”

The boy blushed with embarrassment. “Not… well… not only that, ser. It’s just that I’ve never met a knight of the Kingsguard before you.”

Jaime laughed bitterly. *My heroes were Barristan the Bold and Aemon the Dragonknight, boy. Yours are Meryn Trant and the Kingslayer.*

“You’re the last of them, aren’t you? The last of King Aerys’s Kingsguard?”

“Aye,” he replied. “So I am. Well, Barristan Selmy might still be out there somewhere, but… I don’t know.”

“You said that you’d talk about them. Back up at Acorn Hall. About my uncle and all the rest.”

Jaime leaned back in his chair. *I don’t deserve to say their names. I don’t deserve to count myself among their number.* “They all died in the Rebellion,” he said, “in service to their king and their prince, as the Kingsguard ought. Ser Jonothor Darry was unwavering in his duty, the staunchest supporter of Aerys to have ever lived. He was the last one of them I ever saw, save for Ser Barristan. I wanted to ride with him to the Trident, in service to my king and the realm, but Aerys sent him away alone. I remember… when he left, he came to me in the White Sword Tower… and he said a few parting words. *You’re a knight of the sworn brotherhood now, Ser Jaime. And you need to do*
Jaime stared at the boy for the longest time. “Why?” Then he began to laugh, at first a bubbling sensation in his throat, then giggling, then full-blown laughter. Why? *He asks me why? Of everyone to ask, a boy, Arthur Dayne’s own nephew.* His sister, his brother, Brienne of Tarth, they’d never asked why; he’d just told them, whether they wanted to listen or not.

“How old are you, Edric?” he asked.

“I’ll be sixteen on my next nameday,” the boy replied. “After that, I have to go back to Starfall, marry some lord’s daughter, and learn how to rule properly. My aunt Allyria can’t rule our lands forever, but she said that she’d wait while I rode to the King’s Landing tourney with Lord Beric. She said that I should have the chance to see the world, as my father would have wanted.”

“So you’re fifteen,” Jaime said. “I was fifteen when I donned the white cloak. Humour me, Edric Dayne. What have you seen of the world?”

The boy turned to him, purple eyes flashing. For a moment he looked quite like Rhaegar Targaryen. “I’ve seen some things I’ve always wanted to see and some things I never want to see again,” he said. “I’ve seen heroes and villains, good men turned to bad and bad men turned to good—”

“And which am I?” Jaime growled. He nodded to the men drinking at the benches. “They call me Kingslayer, oathbreaker, man without honour. But what do you call me?”

“You are Ser Jaime Lannister,” Edric said. “A knight of the Kingsguard, and so I name you.”

“I was, once. I rode with Prince Lewyn Martell of Dorne, who fought with spear and shield and lance as well as any man. He was not as long-lived in the Kingsguard as you might think - the second-newest to wear the white cloak, after me. He came to Casterly Rock when I was a boy, with his sister the Princess of Dorne and her children Elia and Oberyn. He was in the yard one day out of three, if that. When I asked him why he didn’t practise as much as I’d expected, he told me, *Swords and spears and shields don’t matter, young Jaime. Death doesn’t matter. All that matters is life.*” He died on the Trident as well.

“Then there was the White Bull, Ser Gerold Hightower. He was a gruff man, aye, but good and unfalteringly loyal to the men under his command. I barely knew him, but I trusted him. He was one of those men that you could always rely on to have your back in a fight, but he was like a father to all of us as well, in a way.

“Next there was Ser Barristan Selmy. *Barristan the Bold.* Gods, I loved that man. When he came back after Robert’s Rebellion with his wounds and swore his oath to the new king you could see the disappointment in his eyes… but he served loyally, and he served well, and he never made one complaint no matter how desperately he must have wanted to do so. I’m sure you’ve found that there are few true knights of the sort from the stories, Edric. Perhaps you’ve lost faith in knighthood altogether, as some men do. Go and find Barristan Selmy, boy, if he’s still alive, and tell me that you don’t believe in heroes.”

The Dayne boy sat listening to his words with rapt attention. He scarcely looked up even when the
innkeep’s wife came over and ladled rabbit stew into their trenchers. There was carrot and onion in
there as well, and despite its meagre contents it was the best thing he had tasted in days. He wolfed it
down without a second thought.

Edric sipped his own more slowly. “Ser Oswell Whent,” Jaime continued. “The White Bat of
Harrenhal. You could be having a laugh and a drink with one minute, and fighting a battle beside
him the next, and his demeanour would never change. Truly, I tell you, the Kingsguard has gone to
shit now.” He glanced at the stump of his right arm. “Cripples, bastards and broken things. Oswell
Whent could split Meryn Trant from balls to brains with a wooden sword.” He smiled bitterly. “I
suppose your King Aegon has gotten himself a new Kingsguard now, but they will not hold a
of course—”

“—Ser Arthur.”

“Ser Arthur,” Jaime said. “The other five could have stood fast and held against an army if they had
to, but Arthur Dayne could have cut through the five of them like… well, like the greatest knight in
the world.”

“But Dawn failed him in the end,” Edric said. A strange, confused look had come onto his face.
“You may not know the story, ser. Dawn was forged from a falling star that landed at the base of a
hill near Starfall, back in the Age of Heroes or mayhaps even earlier. When the star was recovered
by my ancestor Lord Ulrick, he used the crystal at its heart to forge a sword such that had never
before seen in Westeros. Ten times as sharp as Valyrian steel, a blade that glowed in the darkness
and helped save the world during its greatest peril.

“It is not given to the best fighter, though, nor to the greatest knight. House Dayne has produced
many of those, but precious few Swords of the Morning. My father said that it was to be given to
paragons of virtue and beacons of chivalry, and it would never fail them. None who wielded Dawn
have fallen in battle… save for Ser Arthur. Everyone agrees that Ser Arthur was a true knight… yet
the blade failed him in the end, didn’t it?”

If Dawn only worked for true knights, then it would have slipped from my hands and cut my throat
when I touched the hilt, Jaime thought. “Ser Arthur was a great knight,” he said bluntly. “No man
can deny that. When all the stars have fallen from the skies, and every peasant has a magic sword,
they will still sing songs of the Sword of the Morning.”

They’ll sing songs of me as well, he thought, just not the same songs.

“Do you know how he died?” Edric asked suddenly.

What little Jaime knew of the tale came from the garbled accounts of Dornish tradesmen. “In Dorne,”
he said at last.

“Aye,” said Ned. “At the Tower of Joy - it’s not far from Starfall, about two days’ ride. My aunt said
that…”

“Ned Stark,” Jaime said suddenly. He had heard this story, or part of it. The realisation dawned upon
him. “You’re named for Ned Stark.” It seemed so obvious now.

“He brought Dawn back to Starfall with him, after they fought,” Edric said. “He didn’t have to do
that, and afterwards, my father owed him a debt.” His face creased with a sad smile. “I wish I could
have met him.”
“He was a good man,” Jaime muttered under his breath. “A blundering idiot without a drop of subtlety in his veins, but a good man all the same.”

Edric continued with his story. “They were at the Tower of Joy - my uncle, Ser Oswell and Ser Gerold - when Lord Stark came to the place with his Northmen. Only two of them made it away from the battle alive: Lord Eddard and one of his companions.” He sipped his stew and looked into the fire, eyes glazed. “Lord Stark came south afterward, to Starfall. My aunt told me that he brought Dawn back and said something about Ser Arthur being noble to the end. But my father said that if he was doing noble deeds, Dawn would have prevailed.”

Ned kicked his feet against the floor. “Perhaps it’s just a myth, but I think it was true. They were doing something there. Wylla was at the Tower too, or nearby, I suppose. She can’t have been at the Tower, because she was pregnant, I think, and she can’t have given birth during the fight.” He raised his eyes to Jaime’s gaze. “Pregnant with Jon Snow, I mean.”

Jaime blinked twice. “Jon Snow?” he said, feeling that he had missed something obvious. “Ned Stark’s bastard?”

“Wylla was my wetnurse when I was a babe,” Ned explained. “Jon Snow is my milk brother, then, because she was his blood mother. Everyone thinks that it was Aunt Ashara, and that’s why she jumped off the tower, because Lord Stark took him away. But it wasn’t, no, his mother was Wylla.”

The noble Eddard Stark fathering a child upon a Dornish wetnurse? It didn’t make much sense, but Jaime had no better ideas. And what do you say to that, Lady Stoneheart?

The stomping of heavy hob-nailed boots made him turn his head as someone sat down in the chair beside Ned. Black-haired, tall and broad-shouldered, Jaime knew him as Robert Baratheon’s bastard son. Ser Gendry. He turned to Jaime and stared right at him with piercing blue eyes. “You said you’d talk about my father.”

Am I a Kingslayer or a storyteller? “I’ve said many things.” Jaime shrugged. “What do you want to know?”

“He had more bastards, didn’t he?” Gendry said. “My brothers and sisters. They were looking for me on the kingsroad when we left King’s Landing, so they were probably looking for them as well.”

“Who?”

“The gold cloaks. On your sister’s orders.”

“Forgive me, but I tend not to concern myself in my sister’s affairs.”

Gendry laughed bitterly. “That doesn’t fit with the rumours.”

“When did you leave the capital?” he asked wearily.

“After the Hand’s execution.”

“You may not know this, boy, but I was imprisoned in the dungeons of Riverrun when Eddard Stark lost his head. Likely that is where I belonged, but I was still there.”

Edric Dayne shifted on his stool. “Why do you have such a low opinion of yourself?” he asked.

“I broke a solemn vow,” Jaime said. I’ve broken my fair share of solemn vows. Don’t fuck your sister. Don’t kill your father. Don’t murder the king. He turned to Gendry. “I killed King Aerys so
your father could sit on his chair of swords, you know. And nothing good ever came of that.”

Gendry paused, biting his lip anxiously. “What was he like?” He leaned forwards a little. “Back then?”

“Strong, handsome, fierce.” Jaime shrugged. “I suppose you could say he was everything you could want from a king, except he wasn’t much good at actually ruling. We prospered under Robert, aye, but that was not because of him. Better men than he or I kept the kingdom afloat in those times.”

“Lord Arryn and Lord Stark,” Edric said.

Gendry nodded. “I know. They came to see me.” He turned to glare at Jaime. “They knew about what you did, and they had to die for it, didn’t they?”

Jaime sighed again. “I played no part in any of that.”

“You attacked Lord Stark in the street. Everyone in King’s Landing was talking about that.”

Jaime was fed up with the lad already. “Do you want to know about your father or not?”

Edric Dayne looked uneasy. “My father met King Robert once,” he said helpfully. “He said that he was a good man—”

“I want to hear it from his mouth,” Gendry said, jabbing a finger in Jaime’s direction. “From those who tore my family apart. From him.”

Jaime almost felt like laughing at the absurdity of everything. *The Kingslayer, the Lord of Starfall, and Robert Baratheon’s bastard. What a queer meeting of strangers.* “Your family,” he said, smiling. “Robert never cared for his trueborn - for Cersei’s children - nor for Cersei herself. I don’t suppose it would have been much different with regards to his bastards. Robert’s love for anyone other than himself died with Lyanna Stark.” *Though if Ned Stark had offered to fuck him, he might well have accepted.*

He continued, “You might be a Baratheon by name, boy, but if you want the truth of it, you’re a better man than Robert ever was. The man who ought to have been king died on the Trident. Stannis, Renly, Robert Baratheon - none of them would have made half as good a king as Rhaegar Targaryen. Perhaps he was mad, starting the whole bloody war. But if you were Rhaegar’s bastard son, you might have known your father sometime. Despite his exterior, Robert was a weak-willed drunk and a cheat, almost as bad as I am. The only difference between me and him was that Robert wore a crown.”

He looked up at Gendry then, half-expecting the Baratheon anger to come out in a flood, but he only sat there, gripping the arms of the chair with white knuckles. “Robert would have knocked my teeth out for saying that. I’m glad to see you have some restraint. Baratheon blood doesn’t make you a Baratheon. That’s not what family is.”

*My father was never truly part of my family,* Jaime realised. *I never loved him and he never loved me.*

*Tyrion and Cersei,* they’re family. *Mother and Uncle Kevan and Aunt Genna and all my other uncles are family,* and *Tommen and Myrcella, Addam Marbrand and Lyle Strongboar and old Lord Sumner, blessed be his memory. Even Brienne of Tarth, Seven save the bloody wench.* “Family isn’t who you’re born with,” he said. “It’s who you’d die for.”

He could see Gendry’s eyes flickering round, looking at the rest of the Brotherhood, coming to the
same realisation. His eyes rested on Lem Lemoncloak and Jon o’Nutten and Swampy Meg and Edric Dayne, and then his mouth was open, to breathe a silent word that Jaime barely caught. “Arya.”

The Stark girl? Jaime’s head was starting to hurt.

Gendry stood up and frowned at him. “I still don’t like you,” he said, then strode off to join the rest of the group.

Jaime gave a cordial nod to young Edric, then went up to bed.

He dreamed of Cersei and Tyrion and his children, but he couldn’t see their faces, only their shadows, wrought in gold. His father loomed over them like a bleak black cloud with specks of jade for eyes. You are no son of mine, he said, his voice howling through the chilly air.

Go away, Jaime thought, waving at him, go, go, go away. And then they joined hands with him in a line, all of them, and waved Lord Tywin’s vast black shadow away, scattering it to the four winds.

The next morning, they broke their fast on porridge, blood sausage and boiled eggs, and left the inn as the sun was rising in the southeast. Outside, the world was grey with fog. It was still raining, but it was little more than a drizzle now. Golden-yellow sunlight peeked through gaps in the clouds.

About an hour from the inn, they came across a train of carts stuck at the side of the road, horses stomping feebly in the mud. “Trouble, friend?” Lem asked one of the men at the roadside.

One of the travellers emerged from under a tarp, dressed in a suit of fine red velvet. Jaime could see all manner of instruments under the covering, and other things as well; green motley, harps and lutes and violins. Mummers and musicians, he realised. “Our axles got caught in all the mud,” the lead mummer said.

“Need a hand?” Lem asked. “We can get you out of this.”

The Brotherhood mobilised themselves around the carts, lifting and heaving. In ten minutes all of the wagons were back on the road.

“My thanks,” said the lead mummer.

“Helping is what we do,” Lem said. “Where are you headed, if I might ask?”

“South, to Highgarden. We got caught up in all this rain, though, so I don’t know if we’ll make it in time for the wedding. Four hundred miles, or thereabouts… maybe… I mean…”

“The wedding?” asked Jon o’ Nutten.

“The lord’s heir,” the mummer explained. “Willas Tyrell. He’s marrying some girl from the North.”

Jaime straightened up in his saddle. Some girl from the North, he thought. Suppose that Sansa Stark had come across Brienne of Tarth eventually, somewhere in the Vale or the Riverlands. Suppose… he didn’t know why she’d go to Highgarden, but it was worth a shot, at least. “Sansa Stark?” he asked loudly.

The mummer stared in his general direction. “Might have been something like that.”

“Stark?” Another one of the mummers appeared from behind the wagon. “That’s what Ser Raymund said back at Smithyton, wasn’t it? Lady Sarya Stark or something like that.”

Lem smiled at the mummers. “What a strange coincidence,” he said, after a moment’s pause. “We
Chapter End Notes

This one has been my favourite chapter to write so far. We'll be seeing quite a lot of Jaime in TSK, more than in A Coat of Gold. I suppose you could call this whole chapter a string of lucky coincidences, but I think Jaime is owed some luck for the first time in a while.

FOOTNOTES:

a) I think Jaime would react differently to killing his father as opposed to Tyrion, because he doesn't carry around as many regrets as Tyrion did in ADWD. It's still a pretty big thing, of course, but Jaime is moving past that somewhat, and he'll continue to improve as the story progresses.

b) These interactions between Jaime and Edric are some of my favourite character dialogue to write, by the way. I think the dynamic - almost like master and squire - is kind of a reflection of the Brienne/Pod thing, where two people who have different views and circumstances get along surprisingly well with one another.

c) They were at the Tower of Joy - my uncle, Ser Oswell and Ser Gerold - when Lord Stark came to the place with his Northmen. - Edric Dayne
I always found it plausible that Ned Dayne would be somewhat knowledgable about the events that may have transpired at the ToJ, so it's interesting to hear his retelling of the story. Obviously, he's not entirely correct, if we assume R+L=J, and even less so if we assume N+A=J. I'll be making it clear pretty soon which theory I support.

d) Everyone agrees that Ser Arthur was a true knight... yet the blade failed him in the end, didn’t it? - Edric Dayne
I believe this is a theory I found on reddit, or at least something vaguely related to it. Dawn will likely appear at some point within The Changing of Seasons, though I won't say when or how. But it would be a waste not to explain both the significance and the power of the magic sword, and the reasons why - if Ned's legend is true - it failed Ser Arthur at the end.

e) Tyrion and Cersei, they're family. - thoughts of Jaime Lannister
It's important to note that as a result of Tyrion being freed from captivity and the lack of the ‘she's been fucking Lancel, Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know’ mantra in Jaime's head, he is still enamoured with Cersei, so he hasn't yet gotten to the stage of character development in AFFC where he's starting to move away from her.
White Wings, Winter Tidings

Chapter Summary

“White wings bring winter tidings.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WILLAS

The ravens descended from the sky together, as twins.

One of the sights was familiar to Willas Tyrell’s eyes, the other less so. The second raven opened its huge white wings and cawed loudly as it alighted upon the windowsill. It gave an impatient flutter of its snow-coloured feathers, demanding the attention of all in the vicinity. It was white in its entirety, save for the scarlet flap at the back of its throat and the beady jet-black eyes set above its shiny beak.

Maester Lomys reached out with shaking hands, lightly caressing the bird’s talons as he untied the message from around its ankle. At once, the bird took flight with a flapping of pale wings, ascended, and disappeared into the clouds above the green slate roofs and crenels of Highgarden, cawing in its departure.

The maester spoke gravely. “White wings bring winter tidings,” he said, turning to Willas with a dark look in his eyes. In his hands, he held a letter, with green ink scrawled on pale white parchment. But Willas did not even have to look at the words to know what it said. Winter has come.

“The bird is not alone,” he noted.

“No…” Maester Lomys jerked his hands about awkwardly. “In the olden days, the Citadel did not send any other birds in the succeeding half-moon of the white raven’s flight, for reasons of ceremony. Of course, that proved rather impractical in matters of emergency... and especially in troubling and tumultuous times like these...”

Willas sighed. “There’s another bird, maester,” he repeated, somewhat exasperated. As a boy, he had enjoyed the maester’s lengthy and pointless anecdotes, but now they had a tendency to irritate him.

“Oh,” Maester Lomys said, turning to address the issue in question, which awaited on the sill, cawing impatiently with every passing second. “Yes.” He untied the letter from the raven’s leg. “Dark wings, dark words, they say, yet the white raven brings winter, and winter rarely brings glad tidings either. The crops die slow deaths, the harvests never come. The sun hides behind clouds and the wind batters the trees and the roads.”

“Wonderful,” said Willas, snatching the letter from the old man’s hands. The seal affixed to the letter was that of the Oldtown maesters, and the spidery handwriting was unfamiliar to him. He glanced down at the words. “Perestan,” he said thoughtfully.
Maester Lomys hopped impatiently from one foot to the other. “My lord?”

“They have made Perestan the seneschal,” said Willas, passing him the paper. “I suppose this letter is something that interests you more than it does me?”

“Oh...” said the maester, seeming somewhat lost, “the new seneschal... to replace Theobald.”

“Perestan owes his loyalties almost entirely to the Citadel if I recall correctly,” said Willas. “Not to the Lannisters, nor to the Targaryens... but not to us either. Still, we have Gormon in King’s Landing.” Lord Mace’s uncle had been named the Grand Maester by the conclave, to replace Pycelle.

Lomys shrugged. “The Grand Maester serves the Iron Throne... traditionally. I daresay that traditions have become somewhat... neglected... in recent years...”

“If he’s travelling from Oldtown to King’s Landing, he’ll most likely be taking the roseroad.” Willas gave a cursory glance at Maester Lomys.

For a moment, the old man looked confused, and then the realisation came to him. “I’ll send ravens to the other castles, my lord. I-I’ll get them to tell us when the Grand Maester starts towards Highgarden. B-but, my lord, surely you do not mean to...”

“To kidnap the Grand Maester?” This time, Willas could not hold back his laughter at the look on Lomys’s face. “I fear that your wits have become addled, old man. No, my great-uncle will doubtless visit his family anyway. For the wedding.” And that is another matter entirely.

The maester bit his lip uncertainly. “Oh... my lord,” he muttered. “Well... I’ll... I’ll go and ring the bells.” Then he was going down the steps.

Wallas waited a moment longer, surveying the skies for signs of another bird, then followed down the spiral stair in Maester Lomys’s footsteps. Birdsong followed him, a different tune to the song of summer. Now there were robins, finches contributing to the cacophony, but gone were the sounds of the hummingbirds and the larks. Things have truly changed, Willas thought, just as I have. He still walked with a cane, but the pain in his leg had lessened considerably since the Oldtown battle. He had not used his wheelchair for nearly a month now. Maester Lomys had called his recovery a miracle, but the words felt bitter - especially when Garlan remained confined to his bed with his injuries from the same battle. Injuries that were Willas’s responsibility, after all.

It should have been me, he had told himself a hundred times over. Garlan only came back for me. Yet the gods had played their cruel hand, and it was the second Tyrell brother who had come out worst. Garlan was not alone... Baelor Hightower and his brother Gunthor had both perished in the fighting, alongside their father, Lord Leyton Hightower, the Old Man of Oldtown. Great men rose and fell in that war... and yet by mere coincidence I remain. The crippled heir. The broken lord of Highgarden.

His chambers were in the Old Keep, two turns of the staircase below his father’s apartments, across the courtyard from Margaery’s, with views over the overgrown shrubbery that Lady Olenna could not be bothered to maintain and the Lord Mace did not dare to cut down. He found two men leaning against the corridor wall outside his solar, beneath the tapestry of Harlen Tyrell, the house’s first lord. One man was Ser Garrett Flowers, a bastard son of Garth the Gross, the captain of Willas’s personal guard. The second was broad of shoulder and barrel-chested, with sandy brown hair and blue eyes. On his surcoat were blazoned the arms of House Roxton, two crossed golden chains against a blue field, linked in the centre by a golden ring.
“Ser Myles,” said Willas, addressing the latter knight. “I did not expect to see you here this morn.” He pointed to the door of his chamber. “I suppose my sister is within?”

“Aye,” replied Ser Myles Roxton, sworn sword to the queen. “Her Grace wishes to talk to you about - well, I think she’d prefer to talk to you in person, my lord.”

Willas pushed his way through the outer door into his chambers. The place was dismally untidy, littered with couches and furs and trophies in a seemingly random arrangement. Oak shelves overstuffed with fat books and sundry trinkets dominated one wall. Sunlight streamed in through a high bay window that stretched from wall to floor on the southern side, almost blinding him entirely. He could only just barely make out the two figures seated beside one another upon the chaise.

His sister’s voice reached across to him. “I’m sure you’ll make a good lord in time,” Margaery was saying as she placed her wine-cup down.

The other figure reached out and picked up the flagon of Arbor gold. As he bent over to pour the wine, Willas could out his silhouette against the glare of the light, but it was the forlorn sound of his voice that gave it away. “But won’t I need to go back to Oldtown soon?” Erron Hightower asked. At barely turned fourteen, he was the youngest lord of Oldtown in a century, and the responsibilities of his lordship weighed on him heavily. Already his curly brown hair was beginning to turn to grey in places - a most unusual thing, the maesters all agreed, but not unheard of.

Willas listened to his sister’s words from the archway. “Mayhaps so, cousin,” she said. “Mayhaps... but for now I think that it is best that you stay here, no?” She reached up and ruffled their cousin’s hair. “Here you have all your aunts and uncles and all of us to help guide you. My father is lord of Highgarden and Warden of the South; I can think of no-one better to teach you the principles of lordship.”

That was a lie, but Willas saw no reason to dispute it. He stepped forward from the eaves of the room and out into the light. “I did not expect your visit so early, sister.”

His sister shrugged. Today she had opted for a long green gown with wide sleeves. Her hair was down, chestnut brown curls coming down almost to her chest, and her cheeks were coloured rosy with happiness, something that Willas had not seen in a long while. “Of course you didn’t expect it,” she said, with a hint of a smirk. “I never told you that I was coming, so I didn’t expect you to expect me... if that makes sense.”

Willas glanced between her and Erron, who was sitting quietly on the chaise. He sighed. “Erron, would you give us-”

Margaery leaned across and pressed a gentle kiss to their cousin’s forehead. “Run along now. I’m sure you have lots of important duties to attend to as lord of Oldtown.”

Erron staggered to his feet, blushing bright red in the face. “My lord,” he said, uncertainly. “Your Grace.” Then he turned awkwardly and half-ran out of the room.

Willas stared at his sister, smiling faintly. “Gods, Margie, what did you do to the boy?” he asked.

She smiled, if only briefly. “The same thing that I did last time. Speaking of which, my pampered little shit of a husband-”

“Are we talking about the same husband here?”

Margaery punched his arm lightly, then chuckled loudly. “By ‘pampered little shit’, yes, I do mean King Tommen of the House Lannister, First of His Name, King of the-"
Willas held up a hand to quieten her. “Lannister?”

His sister withdrew a letter from the sleeve of her gown. One edge was smeared with crimson wax, the colours of Casterly Rock. “By the king’s royal command,” she said dryly. “Father received another one that was somewhat more… blunt. It seems that the ‘Baratheon’ siblings have finally acknowledged themselves as true Lannisters. Of course, Tommen probably only agreed to it because Cersei told him to.” She sighed a little. “And he only ever does what his bitch of a mother tells him to do.”

“I thought your love for the ‘pampered little shit’ was undying, the love that holds the Seven Kingdoms together?”

For a moment, Margaery glanced out of the window, staring out over the fields of corn and wheat that ringed Highgarden. “Believe me, Willas; I have no affection for a fourteen-year-old boy who has barely spoken to me in half a year.” She gave a bitter little laugh. “To his credit, though, he did manage to write some rather passable poetry: ‘never have I been happier, than from when the garden I chose, for me and for me alone, the finest golden rose.’” She shrugged. “It’s like the poetry Renly wrote, only shittier.”

Willas raised an eyebrow. “Renly wrote poetry for you?”

“For Loras.”

Margaery took a long sip from her chalice. Would that I had a cup as well, Willas thought, looking around for another goblet. I have plenty of sorrows to drown. He coughed and cleared his throat. “How is Garlan? Is he with Loras, I mean?”

Margaery did not say anything at first. She choked back a cough and spoke. “Loras… rarely leaves Garlan’s bedside, no matter how often Garlan and Mother both implore him to leave.”

“Those should have been my wounds to bear,” Willas said quietly. The words tasted funny in his mouth.

Margaery took his hand in hers and rubbed it softly. “You’ve got to stop telling yourself that, Willas.” She squeezed his fingers, and he squeezed hers back. “Garlan will live,” she continued, “and he’ll be… alright… mostly… the maesters all agree on that.”

Aye, Garlan will live, but he will never be the same. He did not want to talk about that anymore. “Is… is there another reason you are here, Margie?”

She did not waste any time. “Grandmother wants to see you.”

“When?”

“Now.”

Willas blinked, and then blinked again. “What?”

“Have you had breakfast?”

“No.”

Margaery gave a tired little laugh. “Well, neither has she.” She grabbed Willas suddenly by the arm and hauled him to his feet so quickly that he nearly fell over. “And neither have I,” she added, pulling him through the room and out of the door.
Margaery smiled. “I think your white raven might be wrong, Willas. This still looks like summer to me.”

She was not wrong. The sun beat down from overhead and arced through the archways, soaking the courtyard in a bright white glare. Willas felt overdressed and overly warm in his wool cloak, so he pulled it off and handed it to Ser Garrett as they went. The breeze was mercifully cool against his face, and the morning air smelled of sweetness.

They ventured out into the garden, passing beneath the shadow of beech trees and redwoods, between hedgerows where green candle buds bloomed and through the rose garden with its flowering shrubs, past bushes dotted with specks of pink and gold and baby blue.

By the Mirror Pool, cool fountains made sparkling jets of water leap into the air from between the lips of carved stone fishes. Maidens, servants, and young children alike bathed in the waters, splashing and shouting. “What does Father’s... missive... say?” Willas asked.

“The queen - well, me - is requested to return to Casterly Rock, the new capital of the realm, to reaffirm her house’s loyalty to the Crown.”

“I trust that you’re not planning on going?”

Margaery snorted a little. “To become Cersei’s hostage?” Then she began to laugh. “Do you know what’s ironic about the whole thing? In the king’s private letter to me, he says that he will end our marriage on the terms that I did not consummate it. As if I will take the blame for his indifference to the matter of... ahem... well, you know.” She squeezed Willas’s hand. “I say, let him end it. The Lannisters need us far more than we need the Lannisters.”

He tapped the ground impatiently with his cane as he walked. “You’re right, of course. Father is still sending a goodly amount of grain and barley over to Casterly Rock, and then there’s the fruit and vegetable harvest as well. If we cut off the supply route, they’ll all starve to death in the Westerlands.”

“And Cersei might jump from a tower if we stop sending her Arbor gold.” Margaery stopped to pick a red rose from one of the hedgerows, then turned, held Willas still and pinned the flower to the front of his doublet. “There,” she said. “Now you look a proper gentleman.”

Willas looked at her strangely. “You don’t seem too... bothered by all this?”

She smiled at him and then burst out into inexplicable laughter once again. “That’s because I’m not bothered, dear brother. I haven’t felt like a queen since Renly died.” She sounded somewhere between sad and happy, and lost too, as though she were entirely unsure how to feel. “Let them take away my crown. I’ll still be a lady of Highgarden... just like your future wife.”

“Ah,” said Willas, “that’s what the flower is for.” He felt a grin come to his face but disguised it as a grimace. “Sansa?”

“I believe that is her name, dear brother,” Margaery said, sweeping ahead of him and moving over to
share courtesies with Lady Graceford in the shadow of some cherry trees. Willas watched her all the
while. It was certainly curious what his sister had said about being a queen. Most curious indeed,
especially when one considered that Margaery had all but forced him into supporting the idea in the
first place. She had come to his chambers begging that he convince their father of the benefits her
marriage to Renly would bring, knowing that Willas was capable of making even the stupidest
nonsense sound like it had some semblance of wisdom in it.

*Most curious indeed.*

Lady Olenna’s pavilion was an odd little thing, surrounded on three sides by sheer white curtains and
decorated with cherubs and roses. They climbed the steps together, the guardsmen Left and Right
parting in their path.

His grandmother sat in front of a breakfast spread that was far too much for her to eat alone - liver
sausage, baked ham, a tall yellowish cheese, a loaf fresh-baked bread with blackberry jam and other
fruit preserves on the side, some smelly smoked fish pickled in brine, and no less than three flagons
of Arbor wine.

“Ah, my two favourite grandchildren,” she began. “And don’t go giving me that look, Willas;
everyone has favourites and you both know it.”

“Do you remember when I used to lean down to give you both those horrible sloppy kisses?” his
grandmother asked. “I would do the same now, but my hips won’t allow for it, so...” She made a
vague gesture in the direction of the table, “come and sit down, you grandchildren of mine. And
Margaery, close the drapes behind you to shut out the awful muttering of the idiots. I want a nice,
intellectual conversation.”

Willas had not intended to start drinking wine so early in the morning, but his grandmother was
already pouring it and it seemed rude to refuse it now.

“Father’s letter,” Margaery began. “He-

Lady Olenna snorted. “I ask for intellectual conversation and you start by talking about your father?”
She picked up her wine-goblet and shrugged. “He’s not stupid - he’s just an idiot. Have you heard
about his ridiculous plans for war? Well, of course, you haven’t, he only told them to me this
morning.”

“War?” Willas sat up in his seat.

“Mace means to ride to war...” his grandmother began, “against the Dornishmen, for some reason.
Doran Martell has declared for Aegon, it would seem, and I suspect that his daughter Arianne - you
remember her, don’t you? - is to be Aegon’s queen.”

Willas certainly did remember Arianne Martell. She had come to Highgarden when they were both
fourteen, to talk of betrothals, accompanied by her uncle Prince Oberyn. Obviously, no plans had
ever been made, and if any had been formulated in secret, Willas’s crippling had put an end to those
talks forever.

He sipped his wine and spoke carefully. “There’s no need to fight them. We’re playing no part in this
war, as I recall.”

“That’s exactly what I was about to say before you interrupted me, Willas.” His grandmother cut a
thumb-sized piece from the cheese and ate it in one bite. “I’m old - I need time to get my thoughts in
the proper order before they all come spilling out of my mouth like a lemon in a sea of... in a sea of...
limes. Yes, a lemon in a sea of limes. And don’t tell me that lemons and limes are similar, Willas Tyrell. A wolf and a lion both have claws, but they’re definitely not the same thing. Which brings me nicely on to my next point.”

“Rickon Stark,” Willas said quietly. That had been yesterday’s raven.

“Rickon Stark.” Lady Olenna echoed his words. “And his new betrothal to Stannis Baratheon’s daughter, for that matter. Of course, you know why we planned your marriage to Lady Sansa, don’t you?”

Pragmatism, ruthlessness and a complete lack of empathy. There were times when he wished that he’d stayed in Oldtown. “She was the heir to the North, or so we thought.”

“Yes.” Lady Olenna rubbed her wrists. “Women get shunted to the sidelines only too often. Sansa Stark is far better qualified to rule the North than her brother, but the men who rule the North don’t care about that. The fact of the matter is that we needed the heir to Winterfell, and we’ve been cheated of our prize.” She picked up her fork and took two large slices of ham, then heaped them onto Willas’s plate along with three sausages and half a loaf of bread. He stared down at them blankly, then up at his grandmother, and sighing, he started to eat.

“So what are we going to do?” Margaery inquired.

“I’m getting to that, dear girl.” She rubbed her wrists again. “I do hope that Lomys has some sort of poultice for these. Ah… anyway… we could just kill the boy… but unlike my dear departed friend Tywin Lannister, I’ve never advocated the murder of children.” She twiddled her thumbs a little and took a sip of wine. “As it turns out, we don’t need an heir to House Stark, so to speak. We just need a Stark whom we can control. Margaery, how would you feel about marrying the boy?”

Willas raised an eyebrow. That was nothing compared to his sister, who nearly choked on her own words. “I will not-

Lady Olenna smiled through her wrinkled lips. “Relax, dear. I was joking. I do not mean for you to stay married to that Lannister boy either, but we’ll get to that in a moment. For now, I intend to do nothing. Your father can have his silly little campaign in the Dornish Marches to convince everyone of his greatness, but for the most part, House Tyrell will maintain its neutrality until all the other houses exhaust their armies in this pointless war for the Iron Throne.

“We’ll reap the last harvest before winter comes and hold one of Mace’s stupid winter fairs to satisfy the smallfolk. The only forces we deploy will be those who hold our borders. And then, when the war is over and done, we’ll move on Casterly Rock so quickly that the Lannisters never see us coming. The Lannisters are reviled by everyone; no one will rush to their defence. We’ll take their castles and their gold mines, and by the time winter is done-”

Willas felt a smile breaking onto his face. This was worth a cup of wine, at the very least. “We’ll own most of the gold and half of the grain in Westeros. House Tyrell will be more powerful than the Iron Throne, and more powerful than all of the other Great Houses combined. We’ll be kingmakers in our own right, and the king will be whomever we choose.”

Lady Olenna smirked. “Growing strong, indeed.”

“You still haven’t said what we’re going to do about my marriage.” Margaery was looking strangely irritated.

“The Lannisters have sorted that out for us, dear. If we don’t send you to Casterly Rock, they’ll have
no choice but to marry their boring boy-king off to some westerlord’s daughter. If the Lannisters want something from us, they’ll have to come here and get it for themselves. Either way, the situation is very inconvenient for them and very convenient for us.”

She set her cup down on her plate with a loud clatter. “Your father and I don’t agree on many things. But we do agree on some small matters. Such as the fact that your marriage to Lady Sansa should stand. Your mother is rather keen on that as well, as it gives her an opportunity to show off her impressive event-organising abilities. An unusual skill, that, but I will say that Alerie does know how to hold a feast. She’s sent for some players from Volantis, those minstrels that Lord Costayne brought for Garlan’s wedding, and that dreadful Alaric of Eysen fellow, for some reason. Oh, and there’s to be a tourney. Loras will win it. He’s always been good at that sort of thing.”

Margaery interjected, “Should we not talk about Lady Sansa herself here, rather than the wedding preparations?”

“Quite right,” said Lady Olenna. “So… how have you found the girl?”

“Um…” Willas swallowed his anxiety. “We haven’t really… uh…”

“Talked? Gods help you, Willas Tyrell. It is a rather big step from talking to someone to climbing in bed with them.”

“I’m sure that I’ll manage,” Willas said quietly, blushing.

Olenna raised an eyebrow. “Yes,” she said. “I’m sure you will. But just one piece of advice… go and speak with Lady Sansa. You are to marry her in two weeks, after all.”

He moved for the basket of bread, but Lady Olenna caught his hand. “Bread is bread,” the old woman said, shrugging. “I’m sure you can get it somewhere else. Good morrow to you.” She pointed to the gap in the curtains.

Willas had no choice but to leave, though in truth he was not really too bothered by that. “Well,” his grandmother was saying, “now that we’re alone - yes, Margaery; that was quite rude, I agree. I tried being polite once, though, and I daresay that it was rather boring…”

Their voices faded away as he crossed the courtyard and went among the rose bushes. Ser Garrett followed him like a grey shadow. Go and talk to Lady Sansa, his grandmother had said. Her words were not wrong, of course, and if Willas had an ounce of sense in him he’d be only too quick to obey. But the truth of the matter was that nerves seemed like as not to consume him; his hands were shaking with just the thought of talking to his future wife. Is this what marriage feels like?

“Willas.” His brother Loras’s voice came from the thicket somewhere behind him. His brother stood by the path, surrounded by golden-yellow blooms. “You were with Margaery?”

“I was.”

“Garlan was asking after you.”

Willas’s cheeks coloured with a tinge of shame. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“You’ve done nothing wrong.” Loras’s words did not match his expression, though. “Shall we go up to see him together?”

“I… I suppose so.” A wave of nervousness came over him again as he walked across to Loras’s side, and he felt oddly sick.
They walked in silence up the stairs. The walk to the infirmary had never felt so long before, and each step was torture. Loras’s anger was usually rather brazen, but today he seemed content to simmer, and that was even worse. Willas at least had the wisdom to not give his brother a cause to rage against him, so he stayed quiet until they pushed open the door.

Garlan sat propped up on his pillows in a bright room, surrounded by bits and pieces of equipment, his leg swathed in a white bandage. There were two jugs on the side table, one of strongwine and another of milk of the poppy. Loras went and stood by their brother’s bed, but Garlan waved him away. “No, I’m fine, Loras,” he said, a little stiffly. “Go on. I need to talk with Willas.”

Loras nodded, turned and went downstairs angrily.

“You’ll be kicking yourself about this, I know that,” Garlan said once he was gone. He winked out of his bruised eye. “Have you said your prayers for me, dear brother?”

“Aye. I have… and Garlan… I’m sorry…”

“This was no fault of yours, Willas. We’re brothers, and we’re supposed to look after one another.” He cracked a smile. “I suppose you could say that I’ve done my job rather well.”

That made Willas laugh as well. “I suppose you have.”

“You carry a weight on your shoulders much bigger than any I have ever borne, Willas. But I know that you can live up to it.” He nodded towards the window. “Highgarden, I mean. One day all of this will be yours.”

Willas let out a heavy sigh. “Aye… but let us hope that it is not for a good long while yet.”

“You have other concerns, though. I can see that…” He smirked, “and you needn’t bother lying about it. Even up here in this stupid stuffy room, I hear things from around the castle. My little friends bring me whispers.”

“I wouldn’t have taken you for a spymaster.”

Garlan grinned. “If I was a good spy, I wouldn’t have told you about my informers, now would I?”

“Tell me then, Garlan,” said Willas, a smile playing across his lips. “What is the root of all my problems, then?” The gods know I need some sort of guidance.

“I think you know her name.”

Chapter End Notes

On this chapter, entitled White Wings, Winter Tidings. This, of course, refers to the arrival of the white raven, but also to the other sorts of news received by the characters in this chapter.

I think this one is very much about family, and to quote Jaime Lannister, 'the things we do for love'. It’s also about finding good in a bad situation, such as the beauty that Willas sees in the rose garden, and also in the way that both Willas and Margaery are able to
get a good laugh out of a difficult problem. You may have noticed that Sansa did not feature in this chapter, but here I wanted to focus on the familial bonds between the Tyrells, a house whom I did antagonise somewhat in A Coat of Gold, just to prove that they are as fickle and human as the rest of us.

Apologies if the Loras and Garlan thing felt like it was just shoved on the end; truthfully, it was.

ENDNOTES:

a) *Pragmatism, ruthlessness and a complete lack of empathy.* - thoughts of Willas Tyrell, regarding some of House Tyrell's decisions
This would seem to contradict with my earlier point of the Tyrells being a proper family and not just 'trash with new money', to quote reviewer Tommyginger, but I think this says more about Willas than it does about his house. He realises that sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind, but I think he regrets this.

b) *The gods know I need some sort of guidance.* - thoughts of Willas Tyrell
I think Willas is somewhat lost in terms of who he is during this chapter. He's in a situation where he isn't the crippled heir of Highgarden, but the one who is (somewhat) able and capable of doing what needs to be done, while Garlan remains abed with an injury.
Valar Morghulis

Chapter Summary

_Are you truly no one at all, or just a girl who wants for something she cannot have?_

Chapter Notes

_A RECAP:_
Having gained information about Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons by wearing the guise of the scribe Missandei, Arya Stark is returning to Braavos and the House of Black and White in the company of Jaqen H'ghar, who has recently finished an assignment in Oldtown.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THE GIRL WITH NO PAST

The city appeared from the mist as the sun was rising.

She saw the Titan first, his broken sword pointing towards the west, ready to march and conquer as Aegon and his sisters had done three hundred years ago. Seaweed and limpets flapped against his mail-shirt. From the guarded shadow of a great stone helm, seastone eyes passed silent judgement upon the boat as it passed slowly between his legs, oars lapping against the waves.

And then Braavos was there, just like that, an archipelago of low-lying islands sitting at the edge of the great turquoise gulf. The girl who had been Arya Stark remembered the first time that she had come here. It had been Ternesio Terys who had brought her here, his younger son Denyo who had taught her everything there was to know about the many gods worshipped in Braavos of the Hundred Isles, and his elder son Yorco who had rowed her past the customs house and ashore to the steps of the House of Black and White. I told them that I would remember their names, Arya thought.

She had kept that promise, for what was a vow worth if you never honoured it?

Denyo had been wrong about the gods, though, she mused. “There is only one God. And his name is Death.”

_And what do we say to Death?_ asked a voice that only she heard. “Not today.” The wind carried her whisper away.

The waves were choppy today, and their crossing swifter because of it. Arya leaned out over the edge of the boat to get a good look at Jaqen’s oars skimming through the water ahead of her. He
barely had to row, for the wind carried them most of the way to the steps of the House. When they were there, she climbed from the boat and tied it to the quay with a knot that she had learned from the ironmen in Slaver's Bay, taking a large grey rock from a tall pile to weigh the rope down. From within the cairn of stones she could see a faint glimmer of steel. *Needle,* she knew. *Arya Stark's sword.* When Jaqen was not looking, she replaced the rocks to hide it again - knowing that she ought not to, but doing so all the same.

They walked to the doors together, not sharing even a glance between them. Jaqen raised his hand and rapped upon the weirwood knocker once, twice, thrice, then stood back on the steps and waited in silence.

“Does a girl have the letters?” he asked.

Arya produced them from within the folds of her acolyte’s robe. “A girl does indeed,” she said. “Letters and ledgers and notes.”

Jaqen placed a finger on his lips and smiled. “A queen will never know.”

She’ll know, Arya Stark thought, she’ll know that Missandei is gone. And maybe she’ll know that Missandei never was. She had taken the face from another Faceless Woman in Meereen - the face of a Naathi girl killed on the shores of her island when her home was taken by slavers. *There never was a Missandei. And if there was, there is one no longer.*

The doors opened. “Valar morghulis,” the kindly man said, stepping out onto the threshold.

“Valar dohaeris,” Jaqen H’ghar and Arya replied as one. The kindly man stood to one side to let them enter.

Inside, it was brighter than she remembered. The place was quieter than it had been in her recollections, and larger too. The ceilings were higher and the pool in the centre of the hall was deeper. The statues of the gods were made of white stone instead of black. “You see it differently, don’t you?” the kindly man asked. It was a long time before Arya realised that he was talking to her. She nodded.

“The seasons change and change back,” he said. “The moon waxes and wanes. Our faces come and go. And so to does the House of Black and White. Yesterday it was black, and today it is white. We must move with the times. For winter is coming.” Arya felt something stiffen inside her when he said those words, and her heart beat a little faster, but she did not let it show. The kindly man smiled. He had noticed, then. The kindly man always noticed everything, she was certain.

He led them to an antechamber off the main hall that could only be described as sparse. There was a bare table and a single wooden chair behind it. The kindly man took the seat so Jaqen and Arya had to stand.

“You have your dragon egg, I trust?” the kindly man asked Jaqen.

*Dragon egg?* Arya nearly blurted out. If Jaqen had a dragon egg… well, he was keeping it very well hidden indeed. She barely remembered to hide her excitement. *Rhaenys and Visenya rode their dragons, Vhagar and Meraxes,* and-

“What do you think, girl?” the kindly man asked suddenly.

Arya stared blankly at him for a moment too long. Jaqen H’ghar reached out and struck her suddenly and swiftly around the face with the back of his hand. The blow was so sudden that she could taste blood in her mouth, and she was collapsed against the wall. Jaqen reached down to help her up, with
a look of almost pity on his face, but she pushed his hand aside and stood on her own two feet. “I didn’t-” she began.

The kindly man was looking at her with a look of such disappointment that it silenced her immediately. She wanted to say sorry, but found that she could not. “You have still not learned your lessons fully,” he said sadly.

*But I did,* Arya thought, *I passed your tests.* But she dared not move.

“Leave your letters here,” the kindly man said. His voice sounded quite sad. He pointed towards a little wooden door that Arya had somehow not seen when she had entered the room. She set the papers down softly on the table as she went, only just barely resisting the urge to throw them all on the ground. *You’re not angry,* she told herself, *you’re not angry, because you’re not anything. You’re no one, and nothing more than that.*

“The due will be paid,” Jaqen was saying as she reached the door, “just as the kraken king promised.” Arya did not hear the rest of their exchange. No sooner had she touched the wooden door than it was swinging open, so suddenly that she fell through it and crashed to the ground.

It had been strangely bright in the rest of the House, but in here it was impossibly dark. And despite the fact that she had just fallen inside the room, she was standing in the middle of the floor.

Something slammed shut behind her. When she turned Arya saw another familiar face, one that hardly filled her with pleasure, but she did her best to hide that as well.

The Waif saw through her guise, though. She always did.

“You seem displeased to see me,” the Waif said, circling the room. She stood a head shorter than Arya, but the darkness seemed to make her taller. “You shouldn’t be displeased.”

“I don’t-” Arya began.

“You *do,*” the Waif said, circling closer. “You are displeased. I can see it on your face.” She pulled her lips back into a crooked smile. “Who are you?”

“No one,” said Arya.

The Waif produced a stick from nowhere and hit her sharply round the head with it. “Who are you?” she asked again.

“No one,” Arya said again.

The Waif hit her again. “Who are you?”

“No one.” This time the hit made Arya fall to the floor. The floor was strangely shiny, and she could see the waif’s shadow reflected in its glossy surface, and her own bruised face. *No one,* she thought, *but who is she?*

“Who are you?” the Waif asked a third time.

“I suppose you get some sort of pleasure out of this, don’t you?” Arya replied, clambering to her feet. She stared at the Waif so hard that her eyes began to hurt. “Don’t you?”

The thinnest flicker of a smile crossed the Waif’s face. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Are you going to hit me again? Do you *like* hitting me? You shouldn’t like hitting me-
The Waif’s stick darted towards her. This time Arya spun on the spot and grabbed the stick by the end, pivoted around it and launched herself into the air, landing lightly on the stone cobbles. The Waif went onwards, carried by her own momentum, into the dark.

“Who are you?” the mocking voice came from nowhere. It was pitch black in the room, and Arya could not see anything. Just like the time when she had been blind. Just like-

The Waif did not have a smell, and Arya could not hear her, not even a whisper. But she could feel something, something insignificant, but still something.

She opened her eyes, ducked, and grabbed the Waif’s stick, wrenching it suddenly from her hands. She closed her eyes and listened for her retreating footsteps, waited for the feeling once more-

“Who are you?” the Waif asked mockingly, close by her neck.

When Arya opened her eyes again the room was gone, replaced by another, and when she turned around the Waif was sitting on a stone bench in the corner. Much as she wanted to hit her, she knew that she must not. *No one. No one. No one.*

“Who are you?” the Waif asked for what seemed to be the thousandth time.

“No one,” she replied, keeping a face of stone.

“Not you. Your face.”

She took a careful breath. “Arya. Arya Stark of Winterfell.”

“I know that face,” the Waif said, “she came to the House not long ago. A girl from across the Narrow Sea. Born into a noble family from the northern wasteland. Not nobles, really - little more than upjumped stewards, I suppose.” *That’s not true,* Arya wanted to say. “Her father tried to kill the king,” the waif continued. “He was executed - a just execution, all agree. The girl’s mother and brother rose in revolt. They were rightfully killed…” A smile came onto her face. “No? Your face seems to doubt that.” She rose from the bench. “You’re a good liar… only not good enough.” She went through another door, out into the dark.

Wearily, Arya followed.

She knew these chambers well. The walls were all cold stone, with no windows and only one small door. A candle flickered orange by the side of the straw mattress, and a meager meal of fish, bread and cheese was laid out on a table with one lonely chair, as well as a glass of milk, warm to the touch. Arya was more than a little wary of the milk. The last time she had drank something that had been left for her here it had made her blind, so she left that until last.

*They will not try the same trick twice,* she thought. *I know that, at least. Better now than never. Fear cuts deeper than swords.* She took the glass and drink the milk all in one. It tasted curiously bitter, not quite like milk, more like-

*Blood.*

She could taste blood in her mouth, metallic and rich and fulfilling. When she had drank her fill, she turned her head to the sky and howled for all the world to hear. *Aaawhooooo,* she howled; *aaawhoooooo,* the pack howled in return. And then they were running. The wet brown leaves beneath her feet *squelched* as she ran, until the leaves were becoming speckled with frost and *crunched* underfoot instead of squelching, and she could see snow climbing the brown trunks of the trees. A crow was calling out to do from high above in the canopy. *Corn, corn, corn,* it screamed,
and then, Bran, bran, bran. She kept running, her pack howling behind her, running towards the moon.

She went down to the water first, with the rest of them trailing behind. A few birds took flight and scattered before her, beating their dark wings as they took to the night. She snapped angrily at them with her jaws, but could not bring any of them down.

Five towers awaited them on the northern shore of the lake, twisted and evil, black against a blacker night. She knew this place. She had been here before. It was a dark place, but it was a place of the old gods. The island floated out in the middle of the lake, a little over a mile away, she reckoned. The shoreline was half-shrouded in mist, but she could see through it. It would be a long swim, and now was not the time to make it, but maybe… soon…

The water at the shoreline was so murky that it was almost black, and she could scarce see her reflection in it. She opened her mouth and growled angrily, a low guttural sound. The water dared her to enter, and so she did, soaking her paw, testing it for the rest of the pack. It was icy cold, and made her shiver through her skin.

Arya’s eyes flashed open all at once. The wolf dreams again, she realised immediately. No One does not dream of wolves. No one dreams of nothing at all. But even here in Braavos, far, far away from anything, she could hear the calling.

The door of her sleeping cell was ajar, she noted. Strange. Usually the rooms were all locked at night. When she climbed down from her bed to close it, the floor was warm against her bare feet. That was strange too, but it was not her place to think anything of it. Valar dohaeris, she thought. All men must serve.

But I am no man. No woman either. Just No One at all. Perhaps she ought to go and say a prayer to the Many-Faced God. She was not sure why, but she knew that she should. She had never been forbidden from praying at night, and she had prayed at night before, so surely there would be no problem with that.

All the same, she must be quiet. Quiet as a shadow. Swift as a snake. Fear cuts deeper than swords.

Who told you that, girl? a voice in her head asked.

No one, she thought, no one told me that. I just knew. She moved to the stairs, walking on tiptoe towards the sanctum of the House, where the great statues of all the gods were kept. A single prayer to the Stranger should suffice for tonight. His statue was close to the stairs, so she could hide easily if she absolutely needed to.

Halfway up, she began to hear voices coming from the room above. Some were familiar, others completely foreign. Jaqen’s was among them. “A girl has forgotten some lessons, yet she has remembered others. A girl has lost some memories, yet she still knows her own name.”

“We all know our names,” said a voice that sounded like the kindly man. “We just choose not to remember them. No one can truly ever forget the past. But the girl-

“She has the gift,” the Waif said. “In the darkness, I became sure of it. She is the one we need.”

“The seer,” said the voice of the one that Arya only knew as the handsome man. “The eyeless girl who knows a thousand things.”

Eyeless? she was confused, and a pang of uncertainty ran through her. Me?
“She is ready, then?” asked the one she called plague face.

The handsome man laughed, loud and clear. “She will never be ready. The girl is not much acclimatised to learning, as such, and she is aware of it. But she is as ready as she ever will be.”

“And what if she should run?” the Waif questioned.

“A girl will not run,” said Jaqen H’ghar. “This a man knows.”

There was silence for the longest time, save for the sound of feet walking across the cold floor. Arya pressed herself tight against the stone pillar. Quiet as a shadow. She slowed her breathing. Calm as still water.

“You’ll take her with you, then?” asked the kindly man.

“A man will do so,” replied Jaqen H’ghar. “To the Sealord’s Palace a man and a girl will go.”

“I’ll go to the Moonsingers,” said the Waif. “Meryo Brevolis has had more than enough time to make his decision.”

The kindly man tutted. “You’ll go to the theatre, and find Roggo Varalis.”

“And give him the gift?” the Waif asked.

The kindly man nodded, then spoke to someone else. “You know how to talk to them. And one of you will need to find Bellegere Otherys, the Black Pearl. If we have her, then we have everything we need-”

“And the horn,” added plague face.

“The horn is being taken care of as we speak,” the kindly man replied. “Concern yourself with the courtesan first. When the time comes, we’ll see what the girl can do with the horn and the egg.”

“A man knows Bellegere Otherys,” said Jaqen H’ghar. “He will find her, after the Sealord has been given the gift.”

The handsome man said, “I will prepare the faces. Once the Sealord is gone, which of us shall it be?”

There was silence in the room. “We will decide another time,” said the kindly man. To Jaqen he said, “the girl must be the one to kill the Sealord. Not you, but her. She must.”

They want me to kill the Sealord of Braavos, Arya mused. She bit her lip thoughtfully. She didn’t know much about the Sealord, but he was old, and there were others waiting to take his place. Surely it would be expensive to hire an assassin to kill the Sealord of Braavos. For a moment, Arya wondered how much the House was being paid, but her thoughts were interrupted by the kindly man and the others moving out of the hall towards an antechamber in the back. None of my business.

I should go back to bed, she thought and moved to leave.

But when she turned, Jaqen H’ghar was standing behind her, a finger on his lips. “A girl only saw what she was supposed to see,” he said, a wry smile on his thin face. “A girl only heard what she was supposed to hear. A girl only knows what she was supposed to know.” He raised the corners of his mouth into a knowing smirk.

Arya stood there, motionless. She was suddenly aware of how exposed she was, barefoot and unprotected, without even a knife to defend herself. Fear cuts deeper than swords, though. She
straightened her back and stood tall. “Why?”

“Is a girl asking questions?” Jaqen H’ghar asked. Something twinkled in his eye. “No One does not ask questions, or has a girl forgotten?”

She did not speak, or move. If she spoke, he would know her words for a lie; the kindly man always knew, and it seemed only reasonable that Jaqen would too. “Oh?” He raised a slender eyebrow. “I thought not. You should go back to bed and dream the night away.”

“No One does not dream,” Arya said.

Jaqen H’ghar looked at her down his nose. “A girl is too smart for her own good, does she know?”

Then it was Arya’s turn to smile.

On the morrow, she and the kindly man were alone at breakfast. She did not see the Waif, nor Jaqen H’ghar, nor any of the others. The kindly man tapped the top of a boiled egg with his spoon, then offered it to Arya. “Are you fond of eggs, girl?”

“A girl is no one,” she answered, as he had expected her to. “A girl has no likes, no dislikes, no name.”

“We all have names, girl,” the kindly man said, “the faces have names, and you are wearing a face in this very moment. It just happens to be the one that you were born with.”

Arya dipped her bread in honey and chewed on it thoughtfully. “And what about your face? Is that the one you were born with?”

“That would spoil the surprise, girl. Do you remember when you first came to this house. The way in which I presented myself before you at the twin doors, and how you plucked the worm from my eye and ate it? Were you truly hungry?”

Not for food. “No. But I knew that your face couldn’t just be a skull. No people are just skulls, and none of the faces are either.”

“The Faceless Men were founded thousands of years ago, now, and it can be damp in the Hall of Faces. Doubtless, some of the oldest faces have rotted away, with blackened lips, yellowed teeth, and all the colouration of dead men.” He paused. “Nonetheless, you are right. The way in which I presented myself was no mere trick of switching faces, but something more. And yet you saw right through it.”

“How?” Arya asked, though she felt that she herself would have a better chance of knowing than the kindly man did.

“Ah.” The kindly man took the flagon, poured a cup of water and pushed it across the table. “Tell me what you see, child.” He smiled. “There is no trick answer here.”

“It’s… just… water.” Because that was true. “And I see my reflection.”

“As you would expect.”

Arya nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“Perchance you saw the pool when you first visited this house, in the sanctum? When a man takes a cup and brings it up to his lips, he receives the gift as a result of it.” He smiled. “Or does he?”
Arya had seen men drinking from the water and watched them collapse, passing away painlessly on the cold stone floor of the House. She had even helped the little girl to drink the water from the pool. *A gift of mercy, the kindly man said.* And if this question was as straightforward as those that preceded it, then she knew the answer. “When a man drinks the water from the pool, he is given the gift.”

“And what is the gift, child?”

“Death.”

The kindly man shook his head. “That is not so, child. The gift is *peace.* Oftentimes it manifests itself as the instrument of the Many-Faced God, but you must remember that life and death are not so different, in the end. You have been Cat of the Canals, and Blind Beth the beggar girl, and Mercy the mummer, and Missandei the Naathi scribe. A girl has many different names on her lips, and many different faces she has worn, but today she must be Arya Stark of Winterfell.”

She paused a moment. *Do I still know how to be Arya Stark of Winterfell?* was her first thought. *Yes,* was her second, not long after. As long as she remembered her brothers and sisters and her parents, she would know how; for as long as she remembered Jon Snow on the Wall and Sansa in the south, and Syrio Forel and Gendry and Yoren and all the others she had met in the long journey to this place, she could be Arya Stark. *It will be only too easy.* “And what will Arya Stark of Winterfell do?” she asked.

“She had best start speaking like Arya Stark, for a start.”

“What will I do?”

“You will go out into the city of Braavos, wearing the face that the gods gave you at your birth. You have learned how the gift is given in its simplest form, but you must learn what it means to give it. This is the House of Black and White, child, but things are more often embellished with a few goodly shades of grey here and there. As you will doubtless soon learn.”

“What must I do?”

“Give the gift, as I have requested.”

“To whom?”

“To those who need it most. Give peace to man, woman or child who desires it, in whatever way you see fit. And then we shall ask questions later.”

*Ser Ilyn,* she thought, *Ser Meryn. Dunsen. Queen Cersei. The Mountain.* All of those could be dead by now for all she knew, but it was an important part of the act if she were to continue wearing Arya Stark’s face. “Valar morghulis,” she told the kindly man.

He touched a finger to his forehead. “Valar dohaeris, child.”

They had broken their fast early, so the day was only just dawning by the time Arya left the House of Black and White, crossing the bridge to the mainland. The Ragman’s Harbour was full of people any time of day, so it seemed as good a place to fulfil the kindly man’s assignment as any. She was still not quite sure what he wanted her to do, but if the gift was to be given to those who needed it, then she had best find those in need. Beggars, the wounded, the afflicted, that sort. Mother Megga had an infirmary tucked away in a stout brick building on the far side of the Crumbly Bridge, but when she looked a big guard was standing outside the door, pissing in the street. She could have slipped past him, but she wasn’t sure if she’d be fast enough - and besides, an infirmary was a place
where you went to get better, not to receive the gift.

The infirmary seemed a fool’s errand, then. Arya tried the taverns next, still not sure what she was looking for. When she had been Blind Beth, Pynto had always been kind to her - perhaps out of pity for the blind girl’s blindness - but here he only glared at her with suspicion and gave her a look that suggested he wanted her gone.

She tried the Inn of the Green Eel next, sitting on a bench in the corner of the musty room and listening to the talk of sailors. “Ferrego’s shipment,” one of the men was saying, “old soul’s always had a fondness for the wine of the Arbor. Pity he won’t be getting it anymore.”

“You talk like you know the old man,” his companion said.

The other one shrugged. “I have friends in high places, you know. Not the Sealord himself, mind. No, it’s a friend of his friend that we share as a… mutual acquaintance. Might be he’ll be getting us into the Sealord’s ball.”

“I don’t suppose you’re bothered.”

“Oh.” The first man slurped his ale noisily. *He would be as out of place as I at the Sealord’s party,* Arya thought. “They don’t like my sort of dancing.”

At lunchtime, she wandered out onto the promenade, and bought a few rolls of black bread and some soft cheese, using money that she did not realise that she had. It was there that she found the red priestess. She had come out of her temple on the Lord of Light’s Isle, and was drawing quite a sizable crowd. “There is our saviour,” she proclaimed, pointing out towards the west. “Daenerys Targaryen is Azor Ahai reborn, we know that now. Ashai has proclaimed it, Qarth has proclaimed it, Volantis and all the other Free Cities have proclaimed it. She is the saviour of Braavos and all of the world, the breaker of thousands upon thousands of chains, the victor of a hundred battles small and great, the conqueror of east and west, the Mother of Dragons!”

That brought a cheer from some of the more pious members of the crowd, while others only looked on confused. Arya was not sure what to think. Daenerys Targaryen had seen a good person in herself, with all the fierceness of one of Aegon the Conqueror’s sister-queens, the heart of Visenya and the gentleness of Rhaenys. *She would be a fierce foe and a faithful friend,* Arya thought, but she did not know if that would make her this Azor Ahai figure. *Surely a prophet would be even more grand than her.* And she thought that it would be a man. The heroes from the old stories were always men, knights and warriors and monster-slayers. It was rare to find such a story about women. That would have made the old Arya angry, but now it just made her sad.

*They tell no stories of the Faceless Men either, in spite of all that they have done.* Perhaps Azor Ahai was just a face, like Mercy or Blind Beth. Perhaps anyone could wear that guise.

Plainly, the red priestess did not consider that. “Daenerys is the rightful queen of the West and the East, the Empress of New Valyria.” That brought a few shouts from the crowd; Braavos had fought against the Valyrian Empire long ago, for freedom from slavery, and the issue was still deep-rooted in the hearts of many. “You need not fear New Valyria,” the red priestess told them, “Queen Daenerys supports an empire where no man, woman, or child, need fear being bought or sold.”

She left the priestess alone and walked down the pier into the square. There were a few Braavosi petitioning that they should be the next Sealord. Ferrego Antaryon was dying, that was well known, and the ball he was preparing would likely be his last. He might even be dead before it came about. Arya watched a few of the contenders on their stages. A poor-looking man in grey cloth repeated something about choosing a people’s champion, while people waved signs to get his attention. There
was a woman as well, which Arya thought was good, though she wasn’t sure whether to believe her promises.

Across the square, a man dressed in rich red and purple velvets was shouting loudly, disturbing the seagulls from their perches as he shouted about making Braavos great again. “Forget Tormo Fregar and Moreno Prestayn! I will be the next Sealord! I have the best words, all the people agree. Everyone likes me… I love the people from Volantis… but they’re laughing at us, we need to make Braavos great again—” The echoes of his raving followed Arya away from the square and into a narrow alley.

It was dark here, and the place smelled of filth, but it least gave her a space to collect her thoughts again. *The gift is peace*, the kindly man’s voice reminded her. She could hear him lecturing her as well, about how she didn’t understand it, even though she did. But she must do as the kindly man wanted her to, if she were to progress through the ranks of the House. She wondered how he would feel if he knew that she had been listening to the secret meeting the other night. Perhaps Jaqen H’ghar had told him. She would not lie about that; they were talking about her, anyway. *To the Sealord’s Palace a man and a girl will go*, Jaqen had said. Arya did not know why, but-

“You!” came a shout from somewhere down the other end of the alley. For a moment Arya thought he was talking to her, but then she saw the old man, struggling through the square. She might have shouted a warning, might have done something, but she never had the time. All she could do was watch as the three thugs fell upon him, hissing something about payment and laying into his with their clubs. When they had gone, she went out into the alley and went to the old man.

“Mercy,” he said, as she came close, scrambling on all fours. “Mercy.”

“I won’t hurt you,” Arya told him, holding up her hands. “You’re hurt.”

He nodded, then sniffed a little. Blood was dripping from his nose, and he wiped it away with a handkerchief. “You needn’t help me. They’ll come back on the morrow, and I still don’t have the money. I’ll… just… set my affairs in order.”

“Why don’t you have the money?” asked Arya.

The old man stared at her. “Why should you care?”

“I could help you.” *I could kill those men. I could.*

“You can’t, girl. A peaceful death is all I could hope for now.” He lifted himself up, waving off Arya’s arm when she tried to help him.

“Then you should at least tell me what they wanted.”

He looked back, “the same as they always want. I have the money… but… I need it to pay for my granddaughter’s medicine. All I can do is… I do not have the coin for both, girl. I have lived too long.”

“What will your granddaughter do without you?”

He smiled sadly. “I do not know. All I can hope for now is her… and the mercy of a hasty end for me. If I were to die, then perhaps they would not…”

Arya shook her head. “They would only go after your granddaughter.”

The old man sighed. “That they would, child.” Then he was hobbling off down the alley, and he did
not look back.

Arya did not call after him. She could have, but she did not. **What good would the gift do for him?** she wondered, and could not find an answer. **Whatever good it might do for him, it would be bad for everyone else. His granddaughter, me, even the thugs...**

She picked herself up and began to walk back towards the House of Black and White. No one paid her a second glance, and why should they? The Sailor’s Wife and Brusco might have known Cat of the Canals, but she did not recognise Arya Stark. She had no true friends in Braavos, save for perhaps Ternesio Terys and his sons, and she doubted that they even remembered her. **I am a ghost here.** She was good at that.

It had grown late by the time she arrived. The kindly man met her in the sanctum of the House, beneath one of many statues. There were a few novices sweeping the floors, and some acolytes were removing the body of a tall woman with a warty face from the room. “Good evening, child,” the kindly man said. “Have you given the gift today?”

“No,” Arya replied. “Because there was no one in need of it.”

The kindly man threatened to smile. “Quite right, child. Men rarely go out into the streets to obtain the gift of peace. If they truly want for it, they come here to the House of Black and White. But what have you learned?”

It took a few moments before she could find the words. “Everyone has something worth living for... someone who... needs them.” **Like a sister or a half-brother or a direwolf.** “And when you give the gift... you are taking that away, I think.”

“And?”

“So... you should not give the gift lightly, without consideration... because... things like that cannot be changed.”

“Close enough, child.” The kindly man bowed his head to her. “Come.” He led her to the pool in the centre of the room, and scooped up a bowl of the water, then passed it to Arya, who sat down on the rim of the pool, holding the bowl with careful fingers.

“Everyone has someone who needs them... and everyone needs someone,” the kindly man said, “but No One is no one, and needs for no one else. So, tell me girl, are you ready to put Arya Stark of Winterfell at peace? Are you truly no one at all, or just a girl who wants for something she cannot have?” He smiled at her. “The choice, child, is entirely yours.”

Arya raised the bowl to her lips slowly. She remembered something about a horn... and a dragon egg. Something about fear cutting deeper than swords. Something about a fat boy and an armourer’s apprentice, in a castle with five towers. **Ser Ilyn, she thought, Ser Meryn. Dunsen. Queen Cersei. The Mountain. Do you know what wolves do to dogs?**

Then, **Jon, Sansa, Robb, Bran, Rickon, Mother, Father.** The worst thing was that she could not remember their faces. And in a place far away from here, across the Narrow Sea or even further than that, sure as sunrise, a wolf was howling. Arya glanced around the House of Black and White, at the kindly man, whom she both knew and did not know, at the stone effigies of the Many-Faced God. **Who are you, girl?** the faces asked her.

**No One,** she thought, and hoped that it was true. The water was black, and she could not see her shadow reflected in its surface. It tasted cool against her lips, and salty as a tear.
I'm of the opinion that the Game of Thrones episode 6x08, entitled 'No One', is the worst episode in six seasons of the show, purely because of its largely nonsensical writing and the way that it mitigated the point of buildup episodes 6x06 and 6x07.

*shrugs* Battle of the Bastards more than made up for it, though. Hard-earned kudos to everybody involved with that.

I will freely admit that my Arya plot in A Coat of Gold was possibly the weakest storyline of the bunch, in that it basically led up to an arguably unnecessary twist. However, the journey and everything was what mattered, in my opinion. Either way, sorry if it left you dissatisfied.

ENDNOTES:

a) One thing I've noticed in GRRM's writing of the Stark characters is that he uses very simplistic language on occasion to represent their youth. As such, I've attempted to emulate this somewhat, though I do prefer a more detailed style in my writing and it seems likely that I will stick to that.

b) "The gift is peace." - the kindly man
I think the idea of the 'gift' has much more to it than just death, and nor do I believe that the only purpose of the Faceless Man is creating some sort of balance in the world by dealing out death. However, the idea of balance may have some roots in Eastern cultures, and I think that the Faceless Men are representative of ideas of yin and yang to some extent. (I butchered the explanation there, but I don't know how else to put it).

c) It tasted cool against her lips, and salty as a tear.
You may recognise this line as an alteration of Bran’s line from his final chapter in A Storm of Swords. Arya, like her younger brother, is on a journey of sorts, passing from one familiar world to another one that is more foreign.
TOMMEN

The tallow candle was a long time dying.

The night was fading by the time the flickering flame finally began to wane. Tommen waited, and waited, watching the flame die its slow, slow death, terrified of what might happen when it did. Because then he would be in darkness, and in darkness the nightmares would come again.

He needed another candle.

He gripped the sheets even tighter at that realisation, his cold, clammy skin pale grey by the dwindling flame. He licked his dry lips, and said three broken words to the darkness. “Can’t… hurt… me.”

*I can hurt you anywhere*, the dark said.

“No… You can’t… can’t hurt me.” He threw back the covers and forced himself to stand, gripping the bedpost for support.

*Come try me, little brother*, the dark said. *The king can do as he likes.*

Tommen clenched his fingers and stared into the shadows. “You can’t hurt me, Joffrey,” he whispered.

*What sort of king are you? the dark asked, what sort of fool? I can always hurt you.*”

Tommen took a new candle from his dresser, his fingers shaking, and lit it, quickly, desperately. Then the chill was gone, and he collapsed back into the pillows, almost sobbing. A shiver racked through him from head to toe.

It was morning when he finally dared to leave his bedchamber. He made his way across to his solar, rubbing sleep from his eyes. It was only once he was pouring a cup of hippocras at his breakfast table that he realised he’d made it there without the help of the stupid cane. *I can walk.* Well, that was a victory, however small.

In his chambers he dressed in black breeches and a leather tunic with red sleeves. Across the room Lawbringer sat abandoned in its scabbard, collecting dust. *Valyrian steel,* Tommen thought disdainfully, *for all the good that you did me.*
He was walking back to his solar to read his letters when the knock came.

Ser Kevan, no doubt. His great-uncle did not normally come by so early. It was inconvenient; Tommen had hoped to eat breakfast and to read a little bit of the Lives of Four Kings. Lord Tywin had always said that he ought to work on his reading, and Lord Tywin, irrespective of whatever else he was, had a tendency to be right.

The knock came again. “Come in,” the king called hoarsely.

This girl was not Ser Kevan, that much was clear. Tommen looked at her for a long moment. She was pretty, but not beautiful, slender, dark-haired with pale brown eyes that betrayed a slight flicker of nervousness. She straightened her shoulders, curtsied, and said, “Your Grace. I have a message from Princess Myrcella. Well, a request, really.” She curtsied again. “I humbly beg your pardon.”

“What message?”

“Princess Myrcella invites you to dine with her this morn for breakfast. There are to be sardines and currant bread, bacon steaks and blood sausage. And boiled eggs. She said you liked those. Your Grace. Though I don’t know why she told me to tell you that.”

“My sister knows perfectly well that I am indisposed today,” Tommen said, “I am very busy.” The girl looked crestfallen, even embarrassed. It is not her fault. “I’m sorry if I made you feel… uh…” Now he was the one who felt uncomfortable. “I did not catch your name, my lady.”

She curtsied a third time and said, “I am Lady Eleyna Westerling, if it please Your Grace.”

Oh, Tommen thought. So that’s why she’s here.” As it happens, my appointment with Ser Kevan can be delayed,” he said. “I do happen to be the king, after all. Lead the way, Lady Eleyna.” Then he remembered what a king must do, and linked his arm through hers as they went. Ser Arys Oakheart and Ser Balon Swann followed.

Casterly Rock had been home to men since before the Age of Heroes. The walls were sculpted by nature’s hand, hewn from red stone. The passage that led from Tommen’s chambers to Myrcella’s was about two hundred yards long, and on their left it overlooked the hollow mine shaft at the centre of the Rock, where makeshift pulley-lifts could take you down to the bowels of the castle.

“This is a very beautiful part of the castle, Your Grace,” Eleyna said. “Our chambers are over in the Whistling Tower, beside the water. You can jump out of the window one minute and be swimming in the sea the next.”

“Wonderful.”

“Beg pardon, Your Grace, but I noticed that you aren’t using your cane anymore…”

Tommen gave her half a smile. “Well, when I woke this morning it did not really bother me. All wounds heal in time, my lady.”

“So you say, Your Grace.”

Tyg Sarsfield was guarding Myrcella’s door. “Your Grace,” he said. “Princess Myrcella and Lord Westerling are within.”

“Lord Westerling?” Eleyna frowned as they went inside. “What does he…? Oh. Rollam, what are you doing here?”
Rollam Westerling was of an age with Tommen, a thin-faced and usually quiet lad of with an untidy shock of dark brown hair. He had a tendency to float around the edges of the training square looking for someone equally timid to spar with. His eyes betrayed a strange sort of fear. *Is he scared of me?* Tommen wondered.

*Better to be feared than loved,* a voice told him.

Myrcella, resplendent as ever in plum samite, walked over and took Lady Eleyna by the hands. “We need not bother with those courtesies here,” she said, “call me Myrcella.”

“And call me Tommen,” the king added weakly. He did not think she heard him.

The ladies took their seats opposite one another at the table. Tommen and Rollam followed, each seating themselves beside their sisters. Myrcella picked up a flagon of wine and four cups. “Only the best Arbor gold for our friends of House Westerling.”

“We are very honoured,” Rollam said.

“And so are we,” Myrcella said. “My brother and I are always happy to offer rewards to friends of our cause.” She smiled a little. “And this reward is bigger than most.” She turned to Tommen and raised her eyebrow.

He knew what he had to say. *Margaery’s time has run out, then… and mine.* He cleared his throat. “As a result of… unfortunate circumstances, my marriage with Queen Margaery has been annulled.”

Eleyna Westerling gazed down into her glass. “I am very sorry to hear of that, Your Grace,” she said. Her lips trembled a little when she spoke. “I beg your pardon, but I don’t know why this should concern us.”

“Well, Lady Eleyna,” Tommen said. “The secret is… I have come to admire… you… and your… uh…” He cleared his throat. “I would be honoured if you would accept my offer of a betrothal between the pair of us.”

*She knows that I am lying,* Tommen thought. *How can I have admired her when I did not even know her name until this morning?* The girl blinked once, twice, three times. “Your Grace?” she said weakly. “I fear that I… did not… hear you correctly.”

“I assure you that you did, my lady,” said Myrcella. “I must admit that the betrothal was in some part due to my own recommendation.”

“It is only a temporary arrangement,” Tommen blurted, feeling strangely sick.

“Westerlings have been queens before,” Myrcella said, “Queen Jeyne married Maegor the Cruel.” She turned to Eleyna. “And your own sister Jeyne… she was married to the Young Wolf before her disappearance, of course.”

Eleyna and Rollam shared a fleeting look.

“Ah,” Myrcella said, “I believe that is another subject of interest.”

“Do… do you want to know where Jeyne is?” Rollam asked, quivering a little.

Their eyes fell upon Tommen once again. He coughed and said, “Yes. I swear to you… I swear that no harm will come to your sister if we should find her. I swear that—”
“Mother switched our places,” Eleyna said hurriedly. “At Riverrun. She told Ser Jaime that I was at the Crag, but really it was me who he… Jeyne and the Blackfish… B-Brynden Tully, that is… I don’t know where they went… but she’s in the…” Eleyna was on the verge of sobbing. “She’s in the Riverlands.” She picked up her wine goblet by the stem and drained the whole thing in one long gulp. “It was always Jeyne as well. She was F-Father’s favourite. W-when Robb she asked if-if…and he…”

“I presume Jeyne was very much taken with him,” Myrcella murmured. “Not that I blame her. The Young Wolf was indeed a very handsome—”

“Rebel,” Eleyna said. “A very h-handsome rebel. Mother always called him that.” Her hands quivered on the table.

She is betraying her own secrets, Tommen realised. And I forced her to do this.

“Robb Stark was a friend to us, at Winterfell,” he said. “I don’t blame you for any of this. Your secret is safe with us.”

“The Riverlands,” Eleyna said. “That’s where she is now. Probably. Please, Your Grace…” Her resolve hardened suddenly. “If… I won’t be like her. I’ll be good, I swear it.”

She sounded like Sansa Stark, begging on her knees before Joffrey. The king can do as he likes.

It is a temporary betrothal, Tommen thought. Under the table, he saw Eleyna and Rollam linking hands. Temporary.

“Your Grace,” said Lord Westerling, “you must understand… this is something we ought to discuss with our mother.”

Tommens nodded. “You are excused, Lord Westerling,” he said. “Stay strong, my lady,” he told Eleyna, “and we will talk again soon.”

They went.

Myrcella stayed sitting, her wine cup halfway to her mouth. “Breakfast?” she asked.

Tommens shook his head. “Damn you, Cella,” he said. “Damn you.”

Myrcella sat down behind her desk. “Damn me, indeed,” she said coolly, “I just ended your marriage to that wicked little bitch of Highgarden, and betrothed you to someone far less poisonous.”

He took a breath. “What’s she like? I mean… if we are to be… betrothed… then I should have some idea…”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out, little brother.” Myrcella’s smirked as she refilled two cups of wine. “I think you’ll like her. Else I wouldn’t have chosen her. The two of you are alike in more ways than you might not realise.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

She smiled. “I know you better than you know yourself, Tommen. As I’ve told you many times. You had a nightmare last night, didn’t you?”

“…Yes.”

“About him?”
Myrcella knew, somehow. There was no point in lying, much as he would like to. “Yes. It was… nevermind. It doesn’t matter.”

“Very well,” she said. “But I don’t think that’s the only thing that’s bothering you.”

“‘You’re right.”

“I have that tendency.”

“I just… it doesn’t feel right…” Tommen wrung his hands. “She looked happy to hear it in the end, I suppose… I can’t imagine why, but… she spilled all of her secrets, Cella. You could see it in her eyes, how much telling us hurt her.”

“I’m sure you could.” She brushed back his hair with her hand. “I preferred it when you weren’t so solemn, little brother.”

“It’s just… I don’t know if I’ll be able to take all that away from her… she looked sad, and then… I want to make her happy, really, I do… I want to make everyone happy. You, Mother, Ser Kevan, even the Tyrells and—”

“I know.”

No, you don’t.

“You won’t.”

“What?”

“You won’t have to tell her, because you’re not marrying somebody else. Forgive me if it seems as though I just picked the first pretty girl in the realm, and forgive me for keeping this from you, but this has been my plan from the very beginning.

“Mother thinks that this betrothal is just a temporary arrangement, to keep Ser Kevan from marrying you off to Alysanne Lefford or some such other, but it’s more than that. She and Ser Kevan have half of the Westerlords in their pocket, and very soon they’re going to start exercising powers they don’t deserve. Look at your small council, Tommen: Ser Ormund Payne, knighted by Kevan Lannister. Ser Harys Swyft may be stupid, but he’s still Ser Kevan’s goodfather. Addam Marbrand is a Lannister man through and through, but he was Kevan’s second-in-command all throughout the Westerlands campaign. We’re newcomers from King’s Landing, and outcasts here at the Rock.

“Eleyna Westerling is a very clever girl, and she is good, gentle and kind too. She isn’t the fairest girl in the Seven Kingdoms, but she’s better than most. I promise you that, else I would never force such a betrothal upon you if you didn’t want it.”

Perhaps I don’t want a betrothal at all.

Myrcella continued, “But more than that, she is a key to the West. You spoke to me of starting the King’s Company—”


“Fine. The King’s Companions. To be honest with you, little brother, you have never had a better idea.” She sounded almost proud. “Rollam Westerling is of an age with us, and so are Casper Myatt and Ryam Yarwyck. The heirs to House Peckledon and House Marbrand and House Lydden are all squires, none older than seventeen. Lord Crakehall will be dead in a year or two, and if that cough
takes Ser Maynard then House Plumm passes to his great-nephew Garrett. In five or ten years, half of the Westerlords will be your closest companions and your most trusted friends. We’ll—"

“Mycella. The Companions aren’t meant to be conquerors… they still serve their lieges, and—”

“But they serve you above all. And when you lead them into battle, to those few you’ll seem as impressive as the Young Wolf.”

“Don’t be stupid, Cella,” he said bluntly. “We aren’t the Starks.”

“Did those years in Winterfell mean nothing to you?”

Maester Luwin taught us sums and Ser Rodrik drilled me and Bran together, but we were never Starks, just their guests. Even more so than Theon Greyjoy. And yet… he did love the Starks, in some strange, backward way. If only we could back, if only we’d been at the broken tower when Bran fell, if only we’d told Father not to go hunting in the kingswood, if only, if only…

“If we were Starks, that would make me Sansa,” said Myrcella. “And she is shrewder than you know, Tommen. That’s something that you would do well to remember. We’re all shrewder than you know.”

“Aye.” He raised the wine-cup to his lips. “Shrewd…”

Myrcella clapped her hands. “I wish I could stay all morning, but there’s to be a meeting of the small council later, and you need to meet with our dearest uncle Kevan beforehand.” She ushered him towards the door. “Be sure to tell the Lord Regent about your plans for this betrothal before he decides to interfere with them. The girl’s name is Eleyna, in case you forget, and her rooms are over in the Whistling Tower.”

She shut the door in his face.

*Her rooms are over in the Whistling Tower. You can jump out of the window one minute and be swimming in the sea the next.*

The Whistling Tower could not be more than five minutes’ walk away. It would take him twice that to reach Ser Kevan.

No, Tommen thought. *The king must do his duty. The best thing I can do for Eleyna sake is to confirm that betrothal.*

The walk to the Lord Regent’s chambers took them across the gallery that extended over the Great Hall, where Casterly Rock’s household were breaking their fast. The Rock had a garrison of two thousand, though it could raise four or five times that in times of need. Not that it needed it. The walls of the castle were not mortared stone but rock, all but impossible to break through. *If Stannis Baratheon marches on Casterly Rock, he will have a hard time here… but he will not get that far. The mountains still lie between him and us.*

The Lord Regent’s solar was bigger than the king’s, with high stone ceilings and a huge window of leaded glass dominating one wall. Ser Kevan Lannister sat behind his desk, clutching a quill between his gloved hands. He was a big man, broad of shoulder and thick of waist. He wore a wine-coloured doublet, woollen grey hose and a grey shadowskin cloak lined with quilted crimson velvet. A chain of golden hands glittered round his throat.

“I apologise for the chill, Your Grace,” Ser Kevan said, without looking up. “These rooms are not the best-maintained in the castle, but I mean to have the stonemasons in later to have a look. Please,
“Take a seat.”

“I could help you with all those warrants, you know,” Tommen said. “I need to learn how to act justly and—”

Ser Kevan shook his head. “There were eight murders in Lannisport last night. Eight! The playwrights Benyoff and Wysse, cut down by a mob, would you believe it? We cannot attribute the crime to anyone in particular, so Ser Addam brought eight of the instigators in. Hopefully, someone will be able to make them confess.”

“But they didn’t do anything. Not all of them, at least.”

“Most of them probably didn’t. But there’s no reason for you to involve yourself in all that. A king’s seal is not needed to ratify warrants for common criminals.”

“Forgive me, uncle, but isn’t this supposed to be the job of the small council?”

“It should be… but for politeness’s sake we let Mace Tyrell keep his title of justiciar. For now. Since he seems to reject those responsibilities so fervently, it falls to the King’s Hand to keep the law in these turbulent times.” He set the parchment aside. “I was master of laws for your brother awhile, Your Grace. It is nothing I have not done a hundred times before.”

“All the same, you should not—”

Kevan ignored him and walked to the map table across the room. “Come and look, Your Grace.”

The Westerlands and the Riverlands were laid before them, drawn out in a maester’s hand on a sheet of pale canvas. The roads were outlined in red, the rivers in blue, the towns and cities small coloured squares. To the east, a dozen stag figurines clustered together around a single point on the river road. Mine, Tommen thought for a moment. No, theirs. I am a lion, of House Lannister.

“Stannis is on the march,” he said.

“Only his scouts, thus far. So Lord Karyl Vance reports.”

Tommen scanned the map. “Where are all our men?”

“Ser Flement Brax has raised a host at Hornvale and means to garrison the Golden Tooth, while the Lyddens and the Paynes hold Deep Den in the southeast. Our numbers are mostly concentrated in the force we brought back from Riverrun, though. The green boys and the old men, and those who were wounded in battle. True, we have the Strongboar, and Ser Flement, and Ser Addam’s men of the City Watch, but all of the Freys and most of our allies in the Riverlands died with Tywin.”

Tommen knew that. He had lost friends at the Tumblestone himself. I should have been there. If I hadn’t been wounded, I would have been there… and Myrcella might now reign as queen in my place. He noticed a small stack of Lannister men to the east, gathered at the top of the God’s Eye.

“Lord Baelish still holds Harrenhal,” he remembered.

“It would be unwise to rely on Littlefinger for anything,” said Ser Kevan. “If Baelish and Lord Arryn were to head west, by way of the Blackwater and the goldroad, we might be able to bring them to the Rock unchallenged, but I doubt they will abandon the Vale so easily…”

“How many men does he have?”

Ser Kevan stared at the map. “Six thousand now. He was recently joined by Lady Waynwood and the Hunters.”
“We can’t abandon *six thousand* men.”

“Stannis Baratheon will have already fallen upon Harrenhal by the time our men reach the castle.” Ser Kevan cracked his knuckles. “We can send a raven to Lord Baelish, if it please Your Grace, to request that he march west.”

Tommen nodded. “And offer to make him master of coin.”

“That would be unwise, Your Grace. Ser Harys Swyft is master of coin, by Your Grace’s own admission—”

“Make Ser Ormund the master of laws, then. Littlefinger is good with money. And we don’t need Mace Tyrell as our justiciar, not anymore.”

Ser Kevan stared at him. “You heard about the letter, then? From Myrcella?”

“Yes. Will you have the marriage annulled?”

It was a long time before the Lord Regent gave a slow nod. “I will speak to the High Septon and get him to formalize the arrangements. I’m sorry, Your Grace. I know that this isn’t what you wanted. Lady Margaery—”

“It’s not too bad, ser. At least now I am free to heed my heart.”

“Your Grace?”

“I wish…” His words caught in his throat. “I wish for a betrothal to Lady Eleyna Westerling.”

Ser Kevan frowned. “These are Myrcella’s words, not yours.”

“Myrcella said that you want to marry me to Lady Lefford.”

“Lady Lefford is the lady of the Golden Tooth, Your Grace. She can raise three times as many levies as the Westerlings, and if you marry her House Lannister will inherit. And she is beautiful and astute, by all accounts.”

“I married an older woman who was beautiful and astute by all accounts. That did not go all too well.” Tommen stared into Ser Kevan’s eyes. “You cannot make me marry Lady Lefford. Give her to your son.”

“She will not accept my son, and I will not accept her.”

“Then why should I?”

Ser Kevan frowned. “You can be as stubborn as your mother sometimes, Your Grace.”

_A strange compliment, if it was a compliment at all._ “Ser,” he said, swallowing down a hiccup. “I value your counsel greatly, but it is Lady Westerling I wish to marry. Ever since I came to Casterly Rock…” Then Tommen remembered. “Jeyne,” he said quietly. “I have discovered that Jeyne Westerling is at Riverrun. It was Lady Sybell who—”

“Of course she is. Where else would she be? And I’ve suspected Sybell Spicer’s loyalty – or lack thereof – for years.” He cocked his head to one side. “Evidence for it, though… that is something new.”

Tommen cleared his throat. “Do you agree to my proposal?”
“No.”

“It is only temporary—”

“Yes, and when the time comes Myrcella can make it permanent if she so wishes. Isn’t that right, Your Grace?”

Tommen felt his face redden. *You’re a terrible liar, little brother,* his sister’s voice admonished him. Strangely, he felt much better for it.

“You are a king, must I remind you?” Ser Kevan sounded a hundred years old, resigned and tired. “And the needs of the many outweigh your own.” He paused a moment. “But you have the right to make your own choices, so I will leave the matter of Eleyna Westerling to your discretion – this is only *temporary,* I remind you, and should it last any longer than that I will have it ended personally. The High Septon is loyal to me, Your Grace, and annulment has recently become far more common in recent days...

“But I will give you the same choice I had when I met Dorna. I was betrothed to a Marbrand girl, you know, a cousin on my mother’s side. She was lovely enough, aye, and sweet, and strategically a far better choice for marriage than some Swyft girl who was here at Casterly Rock as our hostage. But it was Dorna I chose, all the same.”

“And what about Lord Tywin? He married his cousin. That didn’t make any alliances.”

“Seven hells,” Ser Kevan said to himself, and to Tommen, “the Westerling girl shall have her betrothal, then. And you shall have yours. Tywin is shaking his head at me from some high heaven, I know it, but…”

“There is another thing,” Tommen said. “Worry not, ser, this will cause you considerably less grief. I wish to start a sworn brotherhood of squires and pages, sworn to the king, to promote harmony and friendship between the sons of noble houses, and to unify the Westerlands for the future.”

“And to give you the ear of a dozen of your most powerful lords and their heirs,” Ser Kevan said, smirking. “Nonetheless, I can see the wisdom in that. You wish to command this brotherhood yourself, I presume.”

“The King’s Companions will be my knights, I suppose, though none of them are actually knights.” He shrugged.

“They are your knights, as you say. I will leave that to you, then.” He smiled a little. “Princess Myrcella has been very shrewd in her plotting recently, Your Grace.”

*Shrewder than you know.* “Yes,” Tommen said, frowning. “She said exactly the same thing.”

“Aye,” said Ser Kevan. “She’s clever, that sister of yours, and you should be lucky to have her as your closest confidant. She reminds me of Genna in many ways. But she isn’t as clever as she thinks she is.”

“Ser?”

Ser Kevan Lannister smiled and picked up one of the lions from the map table, pushing it east, over the mountains in the direction of the Riverlands. “Let us hope that Eleyna Westerling makes a willing bride for you when the time comes,” he said, allowing the wooden figurine to rest over the small square that marked the castle of Harrenhal. “Aye, and let us hope that Princess Myrcella goes to her own wedding with the same goodly grace.”
A few reviewers on Myrcella's first chapter mentioned that it's nice how she acts in Tommen's interests, but I think this chapter draws that theory into doubt.

And on that note, Tommen is manipulated at least twice in this chapter alone, which becomes even more apparent when you re-read it. We're really looking at the game of thrones from the POV of one of the 'pieces' here, and I think it's very frustrating to write.

ENDNOTES:

a) “You could see it in [Eleyna's] eyes, how much telling us hurt her.” - Tommen Lannister
“'I'm sure you could.’” - Myrcella Lannister

This is really more about Myrcella's shortcomings when it comes to empathising with others rather than to Tommen's strengths. We can see that these two complement each other in their abilities, and you could make a good case for either of them having a counterbalance of strengths. As we'll see later in The Sunset Kingdoms, Tommen and Myrcella, much like Jaime and Cersei, are just as different as they are similar, something that was never really explored as much in A Coat of Gold.
The Lion and the Dragon

Chapter Summary

The Iron Throne was not meant to be shared.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TYRION

The day was warm, and the windows were all flung open, but to no avail. Tyrion Lannister sat sweating in a doublet of green wool, squinting to read the inky smudges on the account book. Damn you, Gorys Edoryen, he thought for the thousandth time, throwing the pen down in disgust. The Volantene was the harshest taskmaster Tyrion had ever known, save for perhaps his father. He stood at an unseemly height, often leering down over him with those hooded dark eyes. Pale white skin and a long mane of dark red hair that made him look like some sort of bloodthirsty ghost. Despite his position of master of coin, Edoryen was out of place in King’s Landing with its courtly intrigue, incapable of understanding Littlefinger’s ledgers, and though fluent in speaking the Common Tongue his comprehension of it was variable. Yesterday Tyrion had spent the better part of an hour roaming the archives, looking for something about a merchant who sold sphinxes.

Fortunately, Edoryen’s squire was considerably less dour. They called him Numbers, for the speed with which he could add up sums in his head, though Tyrion was yet to learn his real name. Numbers was an exceedingly short boy of ruddy complexion with a mop of dark brown-blond hair, who almost always seemed to be smiling a wide grin. “Dwarf!” he called excitedly, “there’s a ship coming into the harbour. Nay, three, four of them. It’s the dragon queen!”

Tyrion pushed back the linen drapes and peered out of the window, wiping frost from the glass. “You may be right, boy,” he said with a wry smile. “The dragon queen… and Lord Varys too, I should expect.”

There were four ships, as Numbers had rightly said, emerging from the eastern mists a few miles out on Blackwater Bay. Three of them flew tall white sails that rippled in the wind, the fourth black ones emblazoned with the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. “Daenerys,” Tyrion said. “She has come to King’s Landing at last. I suppose King Aegon will be riding out to greet her very shortly.”

“Aye, His Grace will.” Numbers jumped to his feet; Tyrion could see the boy’s fingers trembling with excitement, a grin widening on his face. “And do you know what that means, Lord Tyrion?”

“I get to reunite with Varys, for one. Oh, joy of joys.” The eunuch had been gone for three weeks now on his quest. Tyrion had not missed him at all. With the master of whisperers gone on a diplomatic mission, King’s Landing had seemed so much brighter without the eunuch’s shadow hanging over it.
“And…” Numbers beamed, prompting him…

_Gods damn you, boy_, Tyrion thought. _How can one be so ridiculously upbeat about everything? _But he grinned anyway. “Our good friend Lord Edoryen will be occupied with the king. Which gives us time…”

“Time to play _cyvasse_,” Numbers said quickly, clearing his desk and knocking a bottle of maester’s ink over a stack of papers. He never even gave it a second glance. “Come on, my lord Tyrion!”

_I swear it, boy, if those papers were anything important, I'll thrash you… and then Gorys will thrash me in turn. _Perhaps it was better not to pay any attention to the little things like the Crown’s finances. _I am only a prisoner, after all. _And an decidedly unimportant one._

They set up the _cyvasse_ table on a terrace overlooking the gardens and the royal sept below, with views out to Blackwater Bay as well. It was bright and sunny out here, but there was a chill breeze every now and again, so Tyrion wrapped his shadowskin around himself three times and settled into his chair looking somewhat like a hedgehog. “Whose turn is it to move first?” he asked. “I’ve forgotten.”

“Mine,” Numbers said immediately.

“Oh, really?”

“Aye. You must be getting rather old, Lord Tyrion, because you keep forgetting these things.”

Tyrion kicked him under the table, eliciting a startled yelp from the boy. “I thought Westerosi lords were supposed to be noble, the boy said.

“I’m no lord.” And my father would be happy to agree with that, for once. “Just a stunted little man with a talent for _cyvasse_."

“A talent for losing at _cyvasse_, you mean.”

Tyrion kicked him again. “Your move,” he said.

“My move,” agreed Numbers. He picked up one of his light horse and advanced it two squares, never once breaking his opponent’s gaze. _The boy wants to play mind games with me. I’ll give him some of my own_. Tyrion made his own move, then began to click his teeth irritably as he waited for the boy to return the favour.

Numbers glared at him. The boy might be optimistic about most things, but _cyvasse_ was different. A battle of wits, trickery and tactics, it was truly a game for civilized persons, one where you needed to think without distraction in order to win.

But Tyrion was no fair player, and his opponent would not have his peace. “And so he spoke,” he hummed, “and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere…”

“Will you shut up, dwarf?” Numbers hissed angrily as he made his next move.

“Calling me dwarf? Very uncivil. Come to mention it, you aren’t all that tall yourself. You look nearer four than four-and-ten, boy. In my considered opinion.” Tyrion pushed his heavy horse forward a square and then to the left. _He’s getting irritated_, he saw, watching the boy’s face contort with anger. Then he smiled and moved one of his pieces forwards with painful slowness.

“And now it begins,” Numbers said quietly.
No, Tyrion thought, now it ends. Once the boy had played his turn, he played two more, a sequence that he had learned, and then another two, another, until… until he found himself outplayed and utterly flummoxed.

Numbers smiled at him through two big white teeth. “Death in seven,” he said quietly.

Tyrion swore under his breath as he was forced to retreat across the board. Not quickly enough; his opponent’s heavy horse came up from its forgotten position to take him in the rear. That was when he swore for the second time, loudly and violently. “Fuck!”

“Your language has not improved since I was away, my little friend,” a mocking voice said. He had not seen Varys’s arrival, but the eunuch was there, his fat bald face showing a mildly amused expression.

Tyrion turned to Numbers. “Duty calls, my young friend, so I suppose we will have to call this game a draw.” Then he was up and away before his opponent could even level an accusation at him. Let no man accuse me of cheating. A Lannister always keeps his word.

The eunuch led him along the passageway in silence, through deserted stone halls and down the servant’s stairs. Tyrion did not say a word in greeting. He did not particularly want to either. Despite what he might claim, Lord Varys was no true friend of his.

He stopped in the doorway. “You will understand my hesitance when it comes to following you into a dark room, Lord Varys.”

The eunuch only shrugged. “No more than I want to go into a dark room with you, my lord Tyrion,” he said quietly. “But we must all do things we do not like, if we are to make any progress in this world.”

Tyrion could think of several witty responses to that, but he chose to use none of them. “Daenerys is here, then?”

“Yes.”

“Was your company so appalling that she specially requested that you not accompany her into the city?”

Varys smirked. “You have not lost your charm, my lord.”

“If anything I’ve refined it. Tell me, why are you not celebrating with the procession?”

“I am not fond of crowds, and the crowds are not fond of spiders. They have no reason to love me; I will not let their distaste for me… disfigure these historic proceedings.” The eunuch tittered lightly. “And I will celebrate when the agreement is signed, not prematurely. You are very welcome to join me for drinks later, my lord. There is, of course, the slight problem that I do not frequently partake, but…”

“An evening of you watching me drink? Nothing would displease me more.”

Varys smiled. “You were playing cyvasse when I arrived. Might I ask with whom?”

“A friend of mine. Edoryen’s squire. I’ll not have you poking me for answers; if you want to find out, I’m sure your little birds will be only too willing to share with you.”

Still smiling, Varys led him through an archway, then through a narrow tunnel in the wall, twisting
this way and that, until they came out on a balcony overlooking the throne room below. Everything was quite silent.

Tyrion shifted from one foot to the other. “Curse my luck, ending up with you, my lord. Prince Oberyn would make for much better company.”

“I have no doubts of that,” said the eunuch. “However, Prince Oberyn is not here. He has sailed to Sunspear to make common cause with his brother, and to confirm the Dornish support for the throne.”

“I know. The king tells me things as well.”

Varys made a show of sounding surprised. You have come into His Grace’s trust already?”

“If I have, he is a fool.”

A moment passed. Tyrion climbed up onto the ledge and sat there, legs dangling, holding the window-arches for support. “You will not push me, will you?” he asked of the eunuch.

“Your death would spoil the festivities. To think, having two live dragons in the throne room.”

“How large are these dragons of Queen Daenerys’s?”

“Quite large.” Varys smirked at his vague answer. “Of course, it seems unwise to bring them into the city, so they are currently roaming somewhere over Blackwater Bay.” He smiled. “I cannot help but fear for the welfare of the fish.”

“I am more concerned about the fishermen.” Tyrion clicked his teeth. “Speaking of fish… perchance you remember a certain piece of wisdom you offered to me when I arrived to take the tenure of Hand?”

“The storms come and go, the big fish eat the little fish, and I keep on paddling.” The eunuch giggled a little. “What of it?”

“Paddling seems like a rather ineffective method of movement – through the sea, or through courtly circles, in this case. Why not swim?”

“Because I have no reason to,” Varys said. “I have no name, no family, no ambitions, truth be told.” He leaned closer to Tyrion’s face. “I live to serve the realm.”

“Whereas…”

Varys nodded. “I believe we have to look to our mutual friend for that. Littlefinger.”

“I would hardly call him a friend, but…”

“Being a man of the realm, I would prefer to avoid chaos wherever I can.” The eunuch bit his lip. “Whereas Lord Petyr is of the view that chaos is instead a ladder. ‘Chaos isn’t a pit,’ he would say, ‘Chaos is a ladder. Many who try to climb it fail, and never get to try again. The fall breaks them. And some are given the chance to climb, but they cling to the realm, or the gods, or love. Illusions. Only the ladder is real. The climb is all there is.’ And thus I ask you this, my lord Tyrion, which are you?”

He did not know, quite honestly, and he did not have time to answer. Downstairs, the great doors were opening. “And the procession begins,” Varys intoned.
They had good seats, up here in the gallery, and it was easy to see what was happening in the belly of the throne room below. Despite the spectacle of the moment, Tyrion did not really listen to any of it. King Aegon and the silver-haired young woman who must be Queen Daenerys - both dressed opulently in matching black and red - spoke some words before the court, then seated themselves on a pair of chairs in the shadow of the Iron Throne. *The throne was not meant to be shared,* Tyrion thought, *neither of them mean to sit upon it, and nothing good can come of hesitancy to assert one’s power.*

The ceremony concluded with a great deal of clapping and cheering - for what, Tyrion could not say. *This is a victory for compromise and diplomacy,* he thought, but it did not feel like a victory for anyone. The air was tense and strangely humid, scented with the smell of nobles sweating through their silks. “Come,” Varys said, beckoning him to the stairs.

The throne room was packed beyond reason. Unsullied guards in black leather carried tall spears and round metal shields on one side of the hall. Aegon’s councillors - Lord Jon Connington, Lord Celtigar, the bastard Aurane Waters - stood on the opposite side of the dais, ringed by Kingsguard knights and Targaryen soldiers in black-and-red liveries. In the middle of the hall, the crowd swarmed forwards in an attempt to get to the dais first, with no concern for anything else. If there had been a pickpocket in the hall, they would have been in heaven. “Make way!” Ser Rolly Duckfield of the Kingsguard was shouting, muffled by the din, “into an orderly fashion, now! All of you!” Unsurprisingly, his words had no effect on the throng. On the gallery, minstrels had appeared to play a merry, almost comical tune on drums and lutes.

Eventually, with some help from Ser Rickard Fell, who recognised Varys, they made it through the thickest part of the crowd and up onto the steps before the dais. Lord Connington went up before them, trailing a cape of red felted wool. He bowed to each of his monarchs in turn, and kissed the queen’s hand, and then he was gone.

Then it was the dwarf’s turn. King Aegon turned to the queen and said, “This is Lord Tyrion Lannister, Your Grace. Lord Tywin’s youngest son.”

“And his most handsome son,” Tyrion added. Queen Daenerys did not look pleased by that. She was shorter than he had imagined her... but after a second look he saw that she was within an inch of Cersei. She had a delicate sort of beauty, yet there was strength and determination in those Valyrian purple eyes, and he knew that she was no mere pretty face.

“The Lannisters, who are currently in rebellion against my- our rule?” She did not sound pleased either.

“I must beg your pardon, Your Grace. My family are somewhat inconvenienced at the present time. But on their behalf, I suppose it is apt to say that the Lannisters send their regards.”

Daenerys looked for a moment as though she might continue the argument, but in the end she nodded. “Very well, my lord of Lannister. I confess myself unsure whether to feel honoured or angry at your presence here.”

Tyrion bowed his head. “The former, I should hope. They say that blood is thicker than water, but my own family is loath to acknowledge my existence, and I daresay the feeling is mutual.”

The queen did not take kindly to that either. “Good day, Lord Tyrion,” she said coolly, and he knew then that it was time for him to vacate the dais. He could hear Varys tittered as he climbed upon behind him as he went down the steps, hastening his pace so that the eunuch would not be able to catch up with him. He’d had quite enough of him for one day.
But he was not away from familiar faces yet. “Dwarf,” said Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, stepping out from behind a pillar.

Tyrion bowed his head. “If we mean to talk, can we walk at the same time. I don’t mean to let the eunuch find me again.”

“You can’t order me about like that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “As I seem to recall, I have paid for your services, old friend. More than once, and more than you deserve.”


Tyrion stopped in his tracks and shifted from one foot to another. “What do you want me to pay you with?”

“Gold.” A thoughtful look crossed the sellsword’s features. “But your father’s gone from King’s Landing, and your… sister rules in Casterly Rock now… or is it your nephew?”

“I’m not sure.” And I doubt Cersei will have figured it out either. “My father’s succession was a mess that he never resolved before his... unfortunate death.”

“Unfortunate, eh?” Bronn looked as doubtful of the words as Tyrion felt saying them.

“Well, I didn’t kill him.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re innocent in all of this.”

“Fine. Suppose I did kill my father, somehow. I didn’t, but why do you care?”

Bronn shrugged. “I won’t serve a dishonourable man.”

“You may have forgotten, but I pay you to kill people silently. Sneakily. Dishonourably.”

The sellsword nodded and flashed him a smug yellow-toothed smile. “Paid. Not any more.” Tyrion could have sworn that he was whistling the Rains of Castamere as he went. That is my song, not yours, he thought, feeling a sudden pang of anger. Deserted by friends and acquaintances alike. He had half a mind to go back up to Numbers and play cyvasse with him, but like as not the boy would be long gone by the time he reached the tower.

And what will be the point of playing a game where I am only ever likely to lose? That was the game of thrones in its simplest form. When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. And more fool I. Looking down the crowded hall, Tyrion could see Varys coming towards him, his footsteps hidden by the sound of the crowd. Hastily he turned away and went down the hall, almost tripping up in his haste to be away.

“Hiding from something, dwarf?” The speaker was an aged man with weathered skin the colour of a nut and a bushy white beard, dressed in an ill-fitting yellow and purple silk in the eastern style. All in all, he was looking somewhat out of place in the throne room.

“Yes,” said Tyrion. “Hiding.”

“Then come over here,” the man said, “most people never pay me a second look.”

“Unless they’re actively looking for you, hmm?”
“Aye. That too.” He gestured to a servant and took two long-stemmed glasses of wine from a platter. “Can I get you a drink?”

“It seems you already have.” Tyrion sipped from the goblet. “I fear I do not know you, ser.”

The man inclined his head. “I am no knight. Brown Ben Plumm, captain of the Second Sons. If I willed it, I could be up there on the dais, but I do not will it. Believe it or not, I have no great love for these sorts of ceremony.”

“Come now,” Tyrion jested, pointing to Plumm’s tunic, “a man must be bold to wear such a striking shade of lemon yellow. Ben Plumm, you said. There are Plumms—”

“In the Westerlands. Of the main branch, aye, but there are others all over the world, beleaguered lesser descendants such as myself who have a right to a family name and nothing more than that.”

Tyrion was not so sure himself. Any fool who had been away from Westeros for long enough could go around giving himself any name he pleased and no one would complain about it. And this Plumm was notably darker in complexion than the Plumms he had chanced across in his travels. Yet when he voiced his suspicions to the man in question, he only laughed and said, “Oh, but I am. A descendant of Ossifer Plumm himself.” He smiled through pure white teeth. “Ossifer of the six-foot cock, that is. He did not pass all of his traits down, mine is a lowly three—”

Tyrion found himself grinning. I like you already, Ben Plumm. A man after my own heart… and after Lannister gold too, I wonder…

“You say you are a noble son of House Plumm, but here you stand as a common sellsword.”

Brown Ben sipped his wine. “My grandfather’s grandfather’s grandfather was a noble son of Lord Ossifer’s son, but he was a second son, and accursed are we. You have an older brother yourself, do you not?”

“Jaime,” said Tyrion, swilling wine around his mouth. Did you lie to me as well? He had dreamed of Tysha the night before, and she had told him the same thing about how she was not really a whore. He shook his head. Only a dream. Jaime would not lie to me. And he wished that he could believe that.

“Aye, Ser Jaime. The Kingslayer, they call him. So many of us are given these silly nicknames to reference our great deeds, but the only notable thing I’ve ever done is be brown—”

“And the only thing I’ve ever done is be short. Halfman, Imp, those are the sorts of names that don’t require much imagination.”

Brown Ben nodded and glanced back up towards the dais. “I have served Daenerys Targaryen both faithfully and… not so faithfully, but what do you make of this King Aegon?”

“He seems a good young man. Whether or not he is fit to rule is another question… though I suppose that it is the Martells and Jon Connington who will be doing all the actual ruling. Prince Oberyn sits the small council, and likely Princess Arianne will be joining him if this betrothal officially goes ahead.”

“We shall all be drowned in a sea of vipers, then.” Brown Ben smiled. “A betting man would place his trust in them to win this game of thrones.”

“Yes,” said Tyrion. “Strange, that. Until a year ago, the Martells had not been seen at court for the best part of twenty years. But now so much has changed…”
“That just goes to show you that surprising contenders can appear out of nowhere,” Brown Ben said, fixing Tyrion with a stern gaze that said so much more than his words. “No man expected Daenerys Stormborn to become a queen a few years back, and yet here she is.” He placed his glass down beside a marble column. “I like to bet on the outsiders, Lord Tyrion. And the outsiders like to bet on me. It’s strange how much help a sellsword company can be to a man.” He bowed his head and turned away. “We must talk again sometimes. And if the motto of your House speaks truly, then we may have a lot to talk about.”

*Hear me roar*, Tyrion thought, a little confused. Then he realised. *No, not that - a Lannister always pays his debts.*

Now, there was an interesting proposition.

Chapter End Notes

*The Shadow of the Throne* is in part a reference to Varys's oft-quoted speech about 'a very small man [who] can cast a very large shadow', but more explicitly it references Tyrion's qualms about having two people share great power as Aegon and Daenerys are attempting to do. There will be a game of thrones starting very soon in the capital, and with dragons in the city it is likely to be far more explosive than it ever has been prior to the return of the Targaryens.

ENDNOTES:

a) Tyrion and Varys is one of my favourite character relationships. To some extent, they complement each other perfectly, but in much the same way as Varys and Littlefinger. Tyrion is the practical brains of the operation, while Varys works in the back with a certain measure of uncertainty as to what he is doing.

b) Tyrion and Brown Ben Plumm interacted with each other throughout the course of *A Dance with Dragons*, and I wanted to replicate that to a lesser extent here. Plumm is an interesting character of doubtful morals, but there is the question of why he would want to help Tyrion when Daenerys would surely offer much better prospects for the future...

c) And of course, Tyrion met Daenerys. Worry not, this will not be their only interaction by any means.

On a (somewhat) related note, Ramin Djawadi's soundtrack for Season 6 is out, and it's magnificent as always. I sometimes listen to this while writing for the fic as I prefer instrumentals for writing, and this is among the best of them. And (naturally), it's Game of Thrones, so that's helpful. From this year's OST, my favourites are 'Hold the Door', 'Reign', 'Let's Play a Game', and 'Winter Has Come'. (Please don't spoil the show in the comments for those who haven't watched it). :)
A Shadow and A Wolf

Chapter Summary

But we always had family back then, no matter how bad our circumstances seemed. And we were home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SANSA

“The green gown, if you would, Mira.”

The Northern girl nodded as she drew the garment out from the wardrobe. “It suits you well, my lady.”

Cersei always wore green, Sansa remembered. “Green is not my colour, but I have little choice now.” The Tyrells had picked this dress out for her, just as they had picked out everything else. As Lady of Highgarden, I will be wearing their colours for the rest of my life. Is this how you felt, Mother, she wondered, wearing the Stark colours and the Stark name, even though your heart lay in the south?

“If I may, my lady… I serve Lady Margaery, and she does not expect me to wear the colours of her House.” Mira Forrester had a kind voice, but there was wisdom there as well. “We all come from different places both near and far away, but in our hearts the house and the place of our birth always matters to us more than the colours in which our husband cloaks us.” Sansa supposed that she was right. When she was a girl, she had once thought of the direwolf a fearsome, even frightening beast, one that was savage and not befitting a lady. Now, though… the direwolf is winter, and Winterfell. Home.

It would not do to dwell on that, though. She tried a lighter tone. “You speak of husbands, Lady Mira? Do you have your heart set upon a suitor?”

“Suitors have never been kind to me, Lady Sansa.” Mira ran the brush through Sansa’s auburn hair, checking the tangles. “I had my eyes set upon a certain Lord Morghry, and we were betrothed for a time, but it was never by mutual consent. In the end I had to enlist Lady Margaery’s help to rid myself of him.”

“Was he unkind to you?”

“You could say that…” A thin smile crossed her lips. “...and such a marriage did not work out in the favour of my family. My true family. And so Mira Forrester I remain, unwed and unspoiled, and my words are iron from ice. I have been to King’s Landing and Highgarden and all manner of beautiful
places in between, but most clearly of all I remember the place where I was born—"

“Winterfell,” said Sansa. “On some days it comes to me, clear as dawn… on others, I can scarce remember it. But I remember my brothers and my sisters. I will not forget them… I can only pray that they do not forget me.”

Mira stopped brushing for a moment and stood straight in front of the mirror. “They remember, I am certain. The North Remembers, Lady Sansa, and they remember you.”

_Then why are none of them coming to my aid?_ Sansa thought. “My brother is at Riverrun. Lord Stannis wrote to me.” She was certain that the Tyrells had altered the letter before it reached her, though. It was curiously short, and from what she had heard of Stannis Baratheon, he was a thorough man who did not leave gaps in his work.

“Lord Rickon?” asked Mira. “My brother Rodrik is with him, but we have not written to one another in a while. If… if you like I could ask him if he has any more knowledge of your brother.” She smiled again. “Lady Margaery will have nothing to suspect from my letters.”

Sansa was still not sure whether or not she could trust the Northern girl. _She does not seem like a spy for the Tyrells, but surely none of the best spies do._ In the end, she tried a cautious approach. “Do you… do you long for home too?”

“Don’t we all?”

She might have said more, but then there came a knock at the door, and Mira went to it, an apologetic smile on her face. “My lord,” she said, curtseying. When Sansa turned in her chair, Willas stood in the doorway, awaiting her presence. “My lord,” Mira said again, “my lady.” Then she departed, closing the chamber door behind her.

It had suddenly grown very cold. The flames in the hearth had died down, and Sansa was unsure whether or not her gown would be warm enough. “Ser Willas. You look very…” Her words caught in her mouth. “That is a handsome doublet that you are wearing, my lord.” The colour of the cloth was somewhere between pea-green and grey, and a golden rose brooch pinned the cloak at his throat, just like the one Loras had once worn in King’s Landing. _He does look a lot like Loras._ She was not really sure if that was a good thing or not.

Ser Willas smiled modestly. “I didn’t choose it myself. Margaery makes all those important decisions.” He paused. “Oh… and you look very striking too, my lady. The green really brings out the colour in your… your… shall we?” He offered her his arm.

“Will your lord father be joining us tonight?” Sansa asked him. This was not the first time that she had joined the Tyrells for dinner, but Lord Mace had been absent almost every time, attending to matters of state with the newly arrived lords Crane and Meadows. Sansa was not sure what they were talking about, but she had seen soldiers drilling in the courtyard, so she supposed that it must be something to do with that.

“I expect so,” Willas said. “And my mother, and all of my siblings save for Garlan.”

“I am sorry to hear that he is still wounded.” Perhaps she ought to visit Ser Garlan in his chambers. After all, she was to be lady of Highgarden, and he her brother-by-law, so it might well be expected of her.

“You shouldn’t be, my lady. Oldtown was no fault of yours. I never warned him about the… well… it does not matter overmuch. There is nothing I can do about it now, and I would do well not to
dwell on it. Yes.” He stopped a moment, awkward. “Garlan’s wife Leonette will be dining with us if she can spare time away from her twins, and it may be that the Lords Rowan and Ser Hobber Redwyne is joining us too.”

“I knew Lord Redwyne from King’s Landing. I was sorry to hear of his wounding during the siege of the Arbor.” It seemed that making apologies were the only thing she did nowadays.

“Aye,” said Ser Willas, a little distant. “With his father abed, Ser Horas rules in the Arbor now in all but name.”

She remembered Horas and Hobber too. *Horror and Slobber, Joffrey called them.* They had never come to her aid in King’s Landing; no one had save for one person, and word had it that he was dead. Sansa had prayed for Tyrion in the sept of Highgarden and in the godswood, yet if any word of his survival had come from King’s Landing, it had not yet reached her ears.

Willas was looking at her, and Sansa felt that she had to say *something.* “I am afraid that I am not so knowledgeable in the names of the Reachlords, ser.”

“You have no reason to be. I expect you never thought that you would ever venture so far south.”

“No. My septa taught me of what lay beyond the North, but I doubted that I would ever see beyond Moat Cailin… and then…” *Then I came to the real world, and the real world caught up with me.* “I was a fool, Willas. I saw Joffrey with his golden hair and his green eyes - I should have known that that was not… kindness in his smile. It was his mother’s smile. Cersei’s smile.” *Stupid, stupid little girl.* “I didn’t think that a person can be truly evil without cause, not really, but Joff…” She stopped a moment. She had never really considered this before. “Although, if what they say is true about Ser Jaime and… half of the Targaryens were mad, weren’t they?”

Willas nodded. “King Jaehaerys had a saying, ‘When a Targaryen is born, the gods flip a coin, with madness on one side and greatness on the other.’ Sometimes madness and greatness are not so different.” He stopped suddenly there, in the middle of the gardens, and reached out to one of the few wilted peaches remaining on the trees. A thin sheen of frost covered the rubbery surface of the fruit. “Like… like a fruit gone rotten, even if it looks ripe. You can’t truly be sure if it is ripe or not until you taste it.”

“And Joffrey was filled with rot. And poison.”

Willas smiled. “Well, there’s an irony, my lady.”

She could not help but laugh then. “Yes, I suppose it is.” A long moment passed. “You did that, didn’t you?”

“Littlefinger and I had a mutual acquaintance. We decided that the rotten fruit needed to be plucked.” He smiled, but Sansa did not return the favour. *Did you make it so that Tyrion was arrested for the crime as well?* She doubted she would ever know.

The High Hall of the Tyrells was being prepared for the upcoming wedding, so they would be eating in the smaller feasting chamber instead, up in the Great Keep near Lord Mace’s rooms. Sansa was quite glad of that; the cavernous ceilings of Highgarden’s main hall made her feel even more lonely than she did already, and it could be perilously cold when empty. The feasting chamber was scant a quarter of the size, with a single long trestle table running wall to wall. Around it sat the Tyrells and their bannermen.

Horas Redwyne was be curly haired one with grapevines on his doublet, Sansa knew, which meant
that the other two lords gathered at the far end were Rowan and Merryweather, though she could not recall which was which. Lord Mace Tyrell sat between his bannermen and his wife Lady Alerie, her silver hair drawn back in an elegant braid. Across from them was Willas’s vast great-uncle, whom they all called Garth the Gross. He was the second fattest man Sansa had ever seen, after Lord Manderly of White Harbor, and his fingers were like swollen fruit. It was fortunate that she had been seated away from them, then, beside Margaery and Lady Olenna. Loras and Willas took the seats across from her.

The Queen of Thorns was the first to speak. “I don’t suppose that Leonette will be coming tonight. She’s probably busy with those brats.”

Mace Tyrell heard her. “Mother!” he said indignantly, “those are my grandchildren.”

“All young children are brats, Mace. Lock them in a cage until their third nameday, I say.” Her eyes fell across Sansa. “I expect you’ll learn that soon, my dear. Like our good ancestor Garth Greenhand, most Reachmen are rather generous when it comes to spreading their seed.”

“Mother!” Mace Tyrell huffed again.

The Queen of Thorns was disinterested. “Oh, look, here comes the soup.” The servants brought the bowls round on silver trays. Lady Olenna looked displeased as she sniffed the contents. “Pumpkin. Again. Mother have mercy, don’t let them serve this at the wedding, Alerie. I swear to you, Lady Sansa, there’s nothing but pumpkin in my veins. And in my son’s head too.”

She might have gone on awhile longer, but one of the lords at the other end of the table spoke up. “Well, we have more than enough to share around, my lady. We had an unexpectedly good harvest.”

“You tell me this every year, Orton. Do you know what you should do?”

“Pray enlighten me, my lady?”

“Raise your expectations. Now isn’t that optimistic?” Lady Olenna sipped her soup chastely.

“Lady Olenna does have a point, though,” said Ser Horas Redwyne.

“Thank you, dear.”

“It is unexpectedly warm for winter. I’d expected more… snow.”

The old woman set her spoon down again and sighed. “The snow will come when it wants to come and not before, and neither you nor your fool of a brother will not rush its arrival, Horas Redwyne. And besides, if you want to talk to someone about snow, try Lady Sansa here. I daresay she’s seen enough of it.”

It was a long moment before Sansa realised that they were all looking at her. Embarrassment flooded her face. “Oh. Yes. In Winterfell we used to get summer snows, and I can only imagine how it must look now.”

Lord Mace said, “something like a snowcastle, I should think.”

“Yes… Yes, my lord.” The company was not the reason for her nervous shivers this time, though. Littlefinger. I built a snowcastle with him in the Eyrie, right before he threw Aunt Lysa through the Moon Door. She had heard by word of mouth that he was at Harrenhal now with cousin Sweetrobin. If Sansa had any courage to speak of, she might have told the Tyrells about what he had done, but that might put Robert in danger as well. And the Tyrells were working with Littlefinger at Joffrey’s
wedding; what if this is still his plot, even now? Suddenly she felt a lot less safe.

“We played with them in the gardens when I was a boy,” Mace Tyrell was saying wistfully, “the last time the snow truly fell. I remember great mountains of the craggy stuff; we boys built snow soldiers and dressed them in chain mail, and threw snowballs at the cooks and our sisters. That was the year before Father died.”

The servants were coming around to take the bowls and pass out new plates. Lady Olenna squinted down suspiciously at her ribs of boar. “What is it now, thirty years since the Lord Oaf rode his horse off a cliff?”

“Thirty years,” said Lord Mathis Rowan. Sansa remembered his name now. “And barely ten years after Lord Tyrell went to meet the Seven, there came the next tragedy. War. Robert’s Rebellion.”

Mace Tyrell nodded sagely. “Cowering in the shadow of Storm’s End… you may think me a fool, but that was a harder choice than you will ever know.”

The servants came round with more dishes. Game hens stewed in their juices, rack of venison with cranberries, trout baked in clay. The table was silent as the guests broke the clay open to reveal the white fish underneath. Sansa watched Ser Loras shifting awkwardly in his seat. “Well… it seems that the maesters might have been wrong about this winter, then,” he said.

“Or perhaps not,” she replied. “It is only going to get colder.”

“Winter is coming,” said Margaery. “I am never sure whether or not to pity you Northerners and your summer snows.” I am never sure whether or not to pity you Southerners and your winter families. “I suppose this southron climate must seem easy to you?”

“I… I have seen worse.” At first she thought of winter storms where they had nearly lost Arya in all the snow, or the blizzard when they had been forced to stay inside for two weeks, hibernating like hedgehogs. But we always had family back then, no matter how bad our circumstances seemed. And we were home. So many horrors had been and gone since then. Ser Ilyn Payne swinging his sword down and her father’s head rolling into the basket. The news of the way her mother and brother had been murdered at the Red Wedding. Even the way Joffrey had looked as he choked on whatever was in his goblet. Magic stones, Ser Dontos had said. That’s all that was in the pie. She glanced between Lady Olenna and Ser Willas. Dontos had warned her of this as well, back when the Tyrells had tried to marry her off the first time. They want your claim, sweet girl, that’s all. But Dontos was dead, and Sansa could add the fool’s name to the list of tragedies that had befallen her.

“Well, I suppose this late winter will have its benefits,” she heard Lady Alerie was saying. “There is but little chance of the wedding being disrupted due to a winter chill. It looks like this will be an event to remember. When Mace and I were married the feasting lasted for seven days.”

Lady Olenna snorted. “I was abed for five of them. Lord Tytos sent us some bad wine. I don’t think it was his intent to poison us, but to this day I don’t trust Westerlanders. Cersei Lannister for a start—”

Ser Loras interrupted her. “I don’t think anyone at this table wants to speak of Cersei, grandmother.”

Margaery sipped her wine. “On that I agree. I would be quite satisfied to never have the misfortune of meeting the woman again. The Lannisters are venomous snakes, the lot of them, but Cersei isn’t particularly poisonous, just exceedingly stupid. She—”

“Tell us about the wedding, Lady Alerie,” Sansa said.

The lady of Highgarden looked only too happy to continue. “I mean to outdo the royal wedding
here,” she said. “There is to be a tourney of near one hundred and fifty knights, and I have sent for musicians from Pentos, Braavos and a group of rather excellent players Lord Costayne sent by way of Tumbleton. I did consider a masquerade ball of sorts, as they had back in Garth Greenhand’s day, but since this is the first time that the Reach and the North have come together it seems apt to give it a theme that applies to both Stark and Tyrell.” *Slaughter all the guests and be done with it, then. Poison the groom, and throw the bodies of the slain in the Mander. No one will forget that, I assure you.*

Garth the Gross spoke pompously. “It sounds like it will be a marvellous occasion, my lady. I have planned… well, the matter of gift-giving…”

Lord Merryweather looked strangely offended. “Discussion of that is something that is usually better done out of the presence of the betrothed pair, must I remind you.”

“Well, my gift is hardly difficult to keep a secret. As for your contribution-”

“I am sure you will both please us on the day,” Willas said, playing the mediator. “Out of interest, would I be right in saying that Lord Tarly does not mean to be in attendance?”

Mace Tyrell looked uneasy to say the least. “Tarly is overseeing the rebuilding of Oldtown at my command.”

“All the same, you might do well to send for Lady Melessa and her daughters. All three would be most welcome in my presence, and it’s rare enough that I can say that. The youngest of them must be… what, twelve, by now?”


“The boy’s never met her, Merryweather,” said Lord Rowan. “You could be a little more subtle when it comes to making a betrothal.”

The head of the table descended into squabbling. Garth the Gross was shouting something at Ser Horas. The Queen of Thorns held out a tray of sweets that the servants had just brought. “Sansa, would you like a lemoncake?” She took a cursory glance around the room. “I could send for Butterbumps too if it please you, though there are enough fools in the room as it is. Look at them, the Hand of the King and his brave lords, squabbling like children.”

“If he is Hand, shouldn’t Lord Tyrell be in Casterly Rock?” She had been meaning to ask Willas for weeks, but had never quite gotten around to it.

Lady Olenna cocked her head. “Yes, but that move seems unwise, to say the least. No, we’re quite comfortable here, thank you. Let Mace do whatever he wants. He hasn’t done a good thing for this house since his bloody siege of Storm’s End. We always knew that Tywin Lannister was going to turn on Aerys. A Lannister always pays his debts, they say, and Tywin had a grudge against the Mad King ever since Rhaegar rejected Cersei’s hand in marriage.

“We Tyrells owe everything we are to Aegon the Conqueror’s example, Sansa. Until the Field of Fire, we were just lonely stewards, but by his leave, we rose as Lords of Highgarden and Wardens of the South. The Florents have a better claim to this castle than us, as do the Oakhearts, the Tarlys, the Cranes, the Ambroses, even the Manderlys, would you believe it. We had little choice but to stand with the Targaryens, but we were not foolish enough to ride to the Trident and tear the Reach apart.” Across the table, Lord Mace was waving a fork at Lord Merryweather. “If somehow Aerys prevailed, we would be rewarded for our taking of Storm’s End. If not, then our part in the war would consist of nothing more than a failed siege. Call us cowards if you will, but we are no fools.”
After, Lady Alerie had the good sense to send for a musician to play them a few verses of a song he hoped to complete before the wedding. Then they were done, and the plates were cleared, and it was time for Willas to escort Sansa back to her chambers. The night was chilly, and she was grateful for the long sleeves of the gown. Darkness was falling over Highgarden, and with it came the evening birds, owls and nightingales, singing a new, unfamiliar tune. They roosted up among the leaves of the orchard, their cries muffled by a slight wailing breeze. It was only when they were passing the godsdownd that Sansa remembered. “My lord, could you leave me here?” she asked. “I would like to pray awhile.”

He did, kissing her hand as he departed. Then Sansa was alone, with only whatever lurked in the weirwood for company. Back in Winterfell, she had tended towards her mother’s gods, but here, she longed for the company of the wolves, for the true North. I am a Stark, she told the old gods, and I pray for your guidance. She did not know what else to say, but her prayers were no use anyway. Everything felt wrong, somehow. Very soon, she knew quite simply that she hated this godswod.

It ought to be a place where one could be alone with only the gods and their own thoughts for company, but the constant twittering of the things up above relieved any illusion of that. There were mockingbirds nestling among the branches and spiders hiding in the brush, and the wild roses bloomed everywhere, up the trunk of the heart tree and along its branches, a thousand reddish-pink leeches choking the pale white wood of life. The godswood back at Winterfell was a silent place, silent save for the sound of the wind gently rustling the red leaves, of quiet ripples spreading across the hot pools, of her father sharpening his sword Ice by the light of the dying sun…

Winter is coming. The whisper came to her on the chilly wind, and disappeared just as quickly.

Sansa stood, brushing a few russet-coloured leaves from the hem of her gown, and gazed out across the courtyard. The godswood gave an impression of vastness and openness, but there were pale white walls climbing all around, hemming her in, and she could see Tyrell guards standing between the arches in their green-and-gold livery, all eyes fixed upon her, lest their lady flee.

But where might their lady flee to? If Sansa had wanted to escape from the hospitality of House Tyrell, she would have to make her way down to the outer ward unchallenged, and then saddle a horse – on foot she would have no chance – and make her way through two gates or past the walls of the castle otherwise. That would be impossible without arousing suspicion. And once they discovered that she was gone, all the gallant knights of the Reach would be after her within an hour. She had freedom of the castle, but nothing more than that. A little bird in a gilded cage.

“I did not know that you still kept the old gods, Sansa,” said Margaery Tyrell, coming up behind her. “I always have,” Sansa told her simply. I am a Stark. I am a Stark.

The Tyrell girl smiled thinly. She folded her arms across her chest and stroked her fingers across the ground beneath the weiswood, leaving shallow tracks through the snow. “I don’t,” she said, “but I suppose that the old gods deserve some small thanks for this victory, as well as the new.”

“Victory, my lady?”

“Aye.” Lady Margaery picked a leaf up in her hands, the frost gleaming off its surface as she inspected it. “The small things in life are beautiful, aye, but they pale in the face of the bigger matters.” She smiled. “Perhaps you do not know, but a letter arrived from Casterly Rock only a week ago, stamped with the king’s royal seal. It stated that if I do not return to Casterly Rock, then the High Septon –” Her smile widened. “–everyone has their own High Septon now, it would seem – will annul our marriage. And I have not returned to Casterly Rock, so my unhappy union is over.”
She pursed her lips as though holding back a laugh, then twisted her hands into one another. Her fingers were long and slender, with no rings in sight. “I have made no secret of the fact that marriage does not best suit me,” she said. “Mayhaps it is just who I am, but… three times now I have been wed, and three times now that contract has been broken in one way or another. Would it sound mad if I were to say that perhaps the gods are telling me something?”

Sansa glanced upwards into the airy reaches of the weirwood. “The gods watch over all of us.”

Margaery smiled. “That they do, sweet girl.” She brushed a finger against one of the roots of the heart tree. “And that is exactly why I thought that I’d find you here. I do hope that I am not prying… but what are you praying for?”

_I pray for a storm to come down and sweep all the Tyrells out into the sea... and myself along with them._ “My brothers,” she lied. “Rickon. I pray for his health. And… for Bran, if he lives as they say. And for anyone else out there from Winterfell.”

Margaery took Sansa’s hand in her own. “I am sure you and your little brother will reunite soon enough. Perhaps he might be able to come to Highgarden as well, after the wedding—”

“So that you can take him prisoner as well?” She smiled and nodded stupidly, like an airy little girl. She had always been good at playing that part.

“I must confess that I was surprised to never meet any of your brothers,” Margaery said. “Father always paraded me before the heirs to the Great Houses, but none took my fancy. A crown did… but, alas… the same could not be said for any of the kings wearing them.” She straightened up. “I will leave you to your prayers.”

She could hear the winds of winter rustling through the leaves. Weirwoods kept their upper leaves year round, even in the coldest times. _The old gods watch over us always_, her father had reminded them. Sansa picked up a handful of snow from the roots and watched it melt in her hand. There was sap in there as well, so it turned a reddish colour, almost the same as her hair. She wondered if that meant anything. Perhaps the gods were telling her something, but she was too stupid to realise it._

_We should have stayed in Winterfell._ That was obvious. _It was my fault. I told Cersei what Father was planning... and... all of this, it was because of me. If only I hadn’t told them, then Father wouldn’t have died, and Robb, and Mother, and Septa Mordane and everyone else. Even Jeyne Poole. Surely the other girl was dead._ _Winter has come, as Father warned, and yet I am alone still._ Then the tears were running down her cheeks, cold as ice.

_The pack survives_, a voice in her head said suddenly. It sounded like her brother. Bran. _Remember that, Sansa, and we will not forget you._ _When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives._

“The pack... survives,” she said. _Something else that Father told us._ If only she had listened more, instead of...

_The pack survives_, Bran’s voice told her again. _You need to come back, Sansa. And you’ll find us._

“Where...” Her fingers reached out towards the tree trunk, trembling. “Where are you?”

“Little bird,” a man’s voice said, behind her. “You shouldn’t be out here on a cold dark night like this.”

She hid her face from him. _I will not let him see._ “Why do you always have to scare people?”

“It’s what I’m good at, girl.” Clegane gave a throaty laugh. “As you well know.”
Sansa felt a sudden spurt of bravery go through her, though she could not say why. “I suggest you find something else to do, then.”

“You wouldn’t like the other things I’m good at, girl. Killing, for one.”

“That isn’t something to be proud of,” she told him.

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d ever killed anyone.” The Hound laughed again, and came closer to her. She could smell him, blood and wine and boiled leather. “You and your sister,” he said. “Night and day. I’d love to see the pair of you reunite.”

_The pack survives_, Sansa thought. “But Arya wouldn’t—” Then she stopped herself, and was glad that she had.

“Your hesitation speaks more than you do, little bird.” Sandor Clegane stepped up beside her, so that she could see his hob-nailed boots and the bottom of his trousers. “Do you honestly believe that, little bird?” he asked hoarsely. “That sister of yours was an angry girl, and so full of hate that she almost surprised me. _Almost_. I’ve got more than enough hatred in me for three lifetimes. Some Dornish fool took Gregor’s death away from me. I’m glad that he’s dead, but I’ve missed the vengeance that I deserved. Do me a favour and look at me when I’m speaking to you, girl. Or have you forgotten?”

Slowly, slowly, slowly, Sansa turned her head and looked up. The burned part of his face was as horrible as ever, and the snowflakes were melting in his thinning hair. “I haven’t forgotten. I don’t think I ever will.”

_He came to me in my room after the Battle of the Blackwater, offered to take me away and took nothing in return save for a song and a kiss._

Sandor Clegane towered over her. “You’ve been crying, little bird,” he said softly. His hand reached down towards her cheek. “Why?” His voice was a gentle growl.

Sansa did not answer. The Hound’s finger thumbed across her cheek slowly, taking away the wetness of her tears. His hand was strangely soft for such a cruel, hard man. “Good girl,” he said. “Almost too good. Much too good for those Tyrells. They smell of the same shit as the Lannisters, only they bothered to wear perfume over their stink.”

Sansa did not respond to that either. “Fuck me,” the Hound said coarsely. “You know that we could escape from this, don’t you, girl? We could head north, just the two of us. To Riverrun, Winterfell, wherever you want to go.”

“Why should I believe that?” Sansa asked.

“Why would you not? Look me in the eye, little bird, and tell me one time that I’ve actually _hurt_ you.”

“You-you… you were…”

_-Joffrey’s guard,” he finished, “and you were Joff’s betrothed. That doesn’t make you him.”

Sansa smoothed down her gown, wiping snow from the hem. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m to marry Willas Tyrell, and there’s nothing _you_ can do to change that. You said it yourself - you’re just a dog. A Hound.”

“Sandor, girl. My name is Sandor. I might not be the righteous cunt that the Elder Brother wanted me to become, but I’m no Hound, not anymore. Not really a Clegane either, I’m not standing beside Gregor, alive or dead, in anything.” He stared at her with his terrible burned face, hesitating, as though meaning to say something else, then decided against it. “Aye, night and day, you and little
Lady Arya. That proves my point through and through, little girl. Brothers and sisters don’t have to be anything like each other, now do they?” He left her there.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for reviewing, and especially to Gracques over on FF.net, whose work massively inspired this chapter. If you liked the Tyrion/Sansa ship from A Coat of Gold, then I cannot recommend their fic 'A Shadow and a Wolf' highly enough.

Also inspired by Ramin Djawadi's tracks 'The Old Gods and the New' and 'Winter Has Come' from the Season 2 and Season 6 soundtrack especially. This chapter is really a callback to the Sansa of old, and her time as a 'little bird'. See references to 'a handsome doublet, my lord' (which Sansa says to Tyrion in ASOS) and 'trout baked in clay', which Joffrey serves to Sansa at the tourney feast in AGOT.

Next up: Bran Stark's first POV in the series. I did plan for Quentyn, but his POV isn't exactly doing wonders for me in terms of excitement.
And What Is Our Heart’s Desire?

Chapter Summary

“What is our heart’s desire?”

Chapter Notes

She narrowed her eyes. “What is our heart’s desire?”
“Vengeance.” His voice was soft, as if he were afraid that someone might be listening.
“Justice.” Prince Doran pressed the onyx dragon into her palm with his swollen, gouty fingers, and whispered, “Fire and blood.”

Arianne Martell and Prince Doran Martell, A Feast for Crows, Chapter 40, The Princess in the Tower

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE CAUTIOUS PRINCE

A fly circled around his head, buzzing tunelessly. The sea of banners flapped limply in the mounting red wind. The heat was stifling, but Quentyn Martell was more than used to it. He pushed a hand through his hair, forcing out sand, dust, cobwebs and other things that had somehow gotten tangled in it, then wiped his hands down on the sleeves of his silken tunic. He inadvertently flicked the reins as he did so, and the sand steed gave a sudden and pained whimper.

“Steady there, Quent,” Archibald Yronwood said. “She’s not meant to go that fast.”

“Aye,” Gerris Drinkwater agreed, “but even if she was the fastest destrier in the world, Quentyn wouldn’t be taking her to anything past a trot.”

They all laughed at that, and Quentyn smiled as well, but there was a small measure of harshness to the jest, and he tasted bitterness in his mouth. If my friends cannot think of me without laughing, then how will I ever be able to stand proudly before my father. He was the butt of most jokes among them, save for when Gerris did something stupid with a girl and it seemed only natural to mock him. And when that happened… well, Quentyn felt somewhat uncomfortable about laughing along, since his experiences with women was limited to a couple of sloppy kisses with Gwyneth Yronwood when they had both been twelve years old… and that had been a silly dare from Cletus as well, nothing that Quentyn had done of his own volition.
Even this ‘mission’ of his - to ride from Yronwood, to the Tor and Godsgrace, and then back to Sun spear, accruing the loyalty of the Dornish houses and raising their levies along the way – had succeeded more through the intervention of his foster father Lord Yronwood than anything else.

Despite all that, though, Quentyn did feel some small sense of pride when he glanced back at the column. It was perhaps a quarter-mile long, some men walking afoot in sandals and silken robes, others mounted on sand steeds and a few on coursers, trekking along the dust road through the sands and arid grassland of the Dornish interior. It was stupidly hot, so men flapped their great house banners to use them as makeshift fans more than to declare their loyalty, and the pace of the column was incredibly slow and Quentyn was left to wonder whether they would actually reach Sunspear by nightfall, as he had promised his father in his most recent letter.

“Arianne is still at Sunspear, is she not?” Cletus called from the back of the column.

Gerris Drinkwater shouted, “I hope so! She and I have had some rather… interesting experiences together, in the plainest possible terms.”

That brought raucous laughter from Arch, and a half-smile from Cletus, even though the joke had been told half a hundred times before. “Let’s not bully Quent too much,” he said. “We’ve done enough foolish things in our time.”

But none are so foolish as I, thought Quentyn. “Arianne is at Sunspear,” he said mildly, but he was not smiling. Prince Doran’s two eldest children were not over fond of one another, and that was well known. Arianne seemed predisposed to think that Quentyn was trying to steal her birthright. Even if I did steal it, she would take away all my friends and allies and take it right back. If I was lucky, I might be Prince of Dorne for a day.

They made surprisingly good pace in the afternoon, and by evenfall the walls of the shadow city were rising on the horizon, silhouetted against the purple of the Dornish sunset.

Some of his father’s horsemen met them three miles from the city gates, and led the column through the twin walls of Sunspear, into the old palace. Groomsmen were on hand to help old Lady Santagar and Lord Uller down from their horses, and to saddle the steeds of the other great lords. They led the mounts away by their bridles to the stables, a single train of many different colours. Then the lords went inside to be welcomed.

Not Quentyn Martell, though. Areo Hotah met him in the bailey and led him through a postern into the oldest part of Sunspear’s palace, and up onto the ramparts. Gerris, Arch and Cletus went the other way, into the Great Hall, making faces at the guardsmen and jostling each other like children.

“I saw Lord Gargalen’s banners already flying from the walls,” Quentyn told the captain of guards. “How long has he been here in my father’s castle?”

“A week,” said Areo Hotah. “And Lady Toland arrived the day after him.” He was a man of few words, and they did not strike up another conversation.

As they went inside the Tower of the Sun, Quentyn could feel his palms beginning to sweat, and his fingers were shaking. Prince Doran was not a harsh father, but he was anxious not to disappoint him, and anxious not to disappoint Dorne. If he failed here, everyone would know about it somehow, and that would be yet another reason for Arianne and the others to mock him. His father was not alone, he saw, as they went inside the solar. Prince Doran was sitting beside the fire in his wheeled chair, prodding the embers with a metal poker. Beside him, facing away from the window, sat his brother. Prince Oberyn was the first to stand and greet him. “It has been a year now,
has it not, or mayhaps more? I hear that you have gotten yourself a knighthood, Quentyn.”

He gave a stiff little nod. His uncle stood half a foot taller than him, and he was slimmer as well, but doubtless stronger, smarter, better in almost every way. Quentyn himself had never been much of a warrior, or much of anything. “Your father should be proud of you, boy, but he keeps his emotions close to his chest. Not unlike himself, eh?” He punched Quentyn lightly on the arm, but it stung. *Oberyn is mocking me.* He was certain of that, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. “It is good to see that you are well, nuncle.” He was careful not to stutter; doubtless he would be mocked for that as well.

“Quentyn.” That voice came from the fireside. His father’s knees were covered by a blanket, for which Quentyn was immensely grateful. He had never been able to stomach the sight of his father’s gouty limbs.

“Father.” He bowed his head, aware all the while of Oberyn staring at him. “Are you well?”

“I am not dead. I suppose that is something.” His father smiled. “It was a jape, Quentyn, and you may laugh at it. You are ever more sober than I was.”

But the moment for laughter had passed now. “Not quite,” Oberyn said. “You are forgetting the time Queen Rhaella came to visit us in Sunspear. I was a boy of eleven, and you the heir to Dorne, nearer her age, yet I daresay she was far more amused by my talents.”

“You were always an amusing boy,” Prince Doran said, with the flicker of a smile. He turned back to Quentyn. “Lord Yronwood is here, then? And Lord Jordayne?”

He nodded, but did not say anything. Mayhaps it was nerves, or mayhaps it was because he did not know what to say, and because he knew that he would only make a fool of himself if he tried.

Oberyn clapped his hands and raised a questioning eyebrow. “Well, it would seem that we all have successes to speak of, then.” Quentyn did not know what his uncle meant, but the explanation followed. “I have successfully managed to convince Daenerys Targaryen that a healthy partnership with King Aegon will do the Seven Kingdoms no harm.” He raised his wine cup and saluted the setting sun. “Long live the king and long live the queen, joint rulers on the Iron Throne.”

In his wheeled chair at the fireside, Prince Doran remained solemn. “This presents more problems than it has solved.”

Prince Oberyn did not try and deny that. “Oh, to be sure, there are certain issues to be worked out - we will have to have a Hand of the King and a Hand of the Queen, it seems, and the small council will need to consist of king’s men and queen’s men alike, but for now let us revel in our success, eh?”

“And what am I to do with Ser Barristan Selmy? What if he explains the nature of his imprisonment to Queen Daenerys and-”

*Barristan the Bold?* Quentyn knew that name; everyone in the Seven Kingdoms did. He was damned if they were going to explain it to him, though. Still smirking, Prince Oberyn ran a hand over the top of his wine goblet. “I refuse to believe that *you* have miscalculated, brother.”

His father’s lips moved into a wry smile, but the next words he spoke were directed to Quentyn, not to his brother. “You would do well to change for the feast, Quentyn. I daresay you will find more excitement with your peers in the Great Hall than you ever would here. I will call for you later this evening, when my pains have faded. In the meantime, try not to drink too much.”
As if I would. Quentyn Martell was as sober as they came, and he only drank to drown out his sorrows. And as it happened, his sorrows needed drowning. *Only watered wine, though, to suit my watered Martell blood.* “Thank you, father.” He nodded to Oberyn. “Uncle.” Then he passed Aro Hotah with his ash-and-iron longaxe and went out without a second glance back.

The weight of the evening weighed heavily upon him. In the courtyard below, he could see a juggler dancing with balls that glowed like half a dozen fiery suns as he tossed them into the air. He did not linger in watching him, part-shame and part-jealousy flooding through him. *I am no Dornishman. I cannot fight, I cannot bear to lie with a woman; seven hells, I cannot even juggle.*

A servant had prepared a bathtub in his chambers and added lavender oils till the water was steaming. It was even hotter in the bath than it was outside it, but Quentyn was grateful for the chance to clean off the mud and the grains of fine sand that clung to him and his clothes. *There is no way to clean away the shame, though,* he thought as he washed. *No way to clean away who I am.*

So he sipped his watered wine and brushed the cobwebs and midges from his hair as he bathed, and stayed there until the sun had gone down and the water was cooling.

He dressed in a new tunic that had been left for him, crimson sandsilk stitched with purple thread. Quentyn would have preferred dun or another bland colour, plain cloth to suit a plain boy, but he had no choice in the matter. He pinched the silk between thumb and forefinger and pulled out a thread. *What do I have to offer my father and my family save for my failures? I have bowed, and I have bent, and I broke long ago.*

As if in answer to his questions, a long arm wrapped around his throat and pulled him backwards off the stool. Quentyn slammed into the ground heavily, reaching for a dagger that was not there. *Fool,* he thought, *fool, you forgot your place, you forgot-* His thoughts trailed off as a knife pressed to the bare skin of his throat. A pair of snakes entwined like ebon lovers on the bronze-finished hilt. *Sand Snakes,* the prince thought. He wiped sweaty hands on his tunic, and met soft fingers. *Only the one of them. Nym.*

She stood over him smirking, her long braid wrapped about her waist like a sash, laughter in her cool brown eyes. “You look a fool, Quentyn.” She released the pressure on his throat.

He spluttered. “S-shouldn’t you be at the feast?”

“Shouldn’t you?” Her eyebrows arced gracefully into the shape of a bird’s wings. “I didn’t want to miss my dear cousin’s arrival. Gerris said that you were back.”

Quentyn swore a silent curse against Drink. *This is some game of Arianne’s, no doubt, and Gerris was party to it.* He tried to struggle to his feet, but Nym held him fast with her knees on his chest. “Have you thought any more about the promise you made?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do.” She stroked his cheek in pity of the lie. “Should I remind you? The last time you left for Yronwood, I asked if you wanted me to make you a man before you left. You mumbled ‘maybe next time’ and ran. That didn’t make much sense, Quent, but I relented. It does not matter, though, not now. Next time has come, and I am here to see if you would make good on that promise.”

*Damn her. Damn her to Seven hells.* Quentyn did the only thing he could and shook his head in fervent denial of the fact. “You… t-this is some jape of my sister’s, is it not?”

“No, Quentyn. It is a jape of mine own, but very soon you will be the jape yourself.” Her hands rose further up her leg, revealing another half-inch of copper-coloured skin. She purred, and placed her
fingers over his navel. He drew a sharp breath. “I-

Nym silenced him, placing a finger over his lips. “I only want to help you. Perhaps it is me that makes you so nervous, no? Tyene often reminds me that I have that overbearing quality. By all means, my sister is not the perfect maiden she pretends to be - I have heard it said that she knows her way around the bedchamber. Your timidity should compliment hers perfectly, cousin. Or why not your sweetheart Gwyneth Yronwood? Are you saving yourself for her? I have heard that you kissed her already, and I daresay the girl would not object to the persuasions of the prince of Dorne-”

He pushed away with his legs and somehow managed to stand. “My father is the prince of Dorne.”

“And you will be the prince after him, if the rumours are true-”

She is mad, just like my uncle. “What are you saying? Arianne is my father’s heir.”

Nymeria tutted. “Not if she marries King Aegon. Their children will be born Targaryens, and the Martell name will fade if that happens. If Arianne should wed Aegon, then you will become your princely father’s heir. You will become the Prince of Dorne.”

Quentyn took that with a moment’s pause. She is not wrong, was his first thought. This will only widen the rift between Arianne and I… A shiver went through him. “I will believe no such thing unless I hear it from my father’s mouth.”

Nym made a bored gesture towards the door. “As you will, cousin. Would you do the gracious honour of walking me to the feast?”

He did not deny her that. Mercifully, she was unwilling to start up another conversation, and so they walked in silence.

Prince Doran was entertaining Lord Qorgyle and Lady Toland on the dais, Areo Hotah standing silent alongside, a statue clad in a decorative mail shirt. The captain of the guards nodded at Quentyn as they went past, then turned back to his charge. Prince Doran did not spare his son a glance. They kept going, down the stairs and into the vast belly of Sunspear’s Great Hall. As they did all across Dorne, the highborn mingled with those of a lower station here, paying no attention to sigils or standards. A group of merchantsmen were bickering over a cvasse table. In the gallery a piper was playing ‘Six Maids in A Pool’ while the guests dined on herb-crusted lamb and pitchers of sweet cream and peaches, washed down with a sour red from the Planky Town.

He saw Will and Cletus first, girls in their laps. The Fowler Twins, Quentyn thought, but he did not know which girl was with which knight. Rarely did a maid shy away from Cletus Yronwood with his freckles and gap-toothed smile, and all were fond of his good humour. Quentyn had never known the same adoration, nor had he particularly wanted it, truth be told. Cletus and his cousin Archibald had been his friends for most of his life, yet Quentyn did find himself wondering whether they had befriended him by choice or out of stubborn duty. Not even I would be friends with myself by choice.

The rest of the floor was filled with Arianne’s companions. Beside the two Fowlers were the Sand Snakes Tyene and Elia, third and fifth-born respectively, Lord Jordayne’s tall daughter Myria, Spotted Sylva Santagar, Garin of the Greenblood Orphans and more. His sister sat between Drey Dalt and Ser Daemon Sand, who was eating cherries out of Arianne’s palm. She rose when she caught sight of Quentyn and advanced towards him. Her gown was a red and gold samite that shimmered like fire as she drifted across the floor. It makes her look shapely too. Despite the maiden in his lap, Will could scarce take his eyes away from her. “Brother,” Arianne said, greeting him with a light kiss on each cheek.
Quentyn stood stiffly to attention. “Arianne. You are well.” He could see Ser Daemon smirking at him out of the corner of his eye. Nymeria Sand had gone off with Valena Toland. He did not know whether they had gone to drink or to bed, and he did not care.

“You sound so stoic, Quentyn.” Arianne picked up a cup of wine and all but forced it up to his lips, tipping the glass so the purple liquid spilled down his throat. “Drink up, brother.”

Sour, Quentyn thought, glaring at her. By then she was fetching him another cup. “I shouldn’t-

Arianne smirked. “You probably shouldn’t, but I think you are owed some merriment after such a heroic journey.” She turned to the group of companions gathered around her. “Wouldn’t you agree, Ser Gerold? Sylva? My brother has proven himself a true son of Dorne.” There was no plain mockery in her voice, but there was in her words.

“Indeed,” said Sylva Santagar, almost swooning. “Will you come and sit with me, my prince?”

She had taken him by the hand before he could argue against her, dragging him off to a place beside Cletus. Will had gone, and Quentyn did not have to guess where he and the first Fowler twin had gone. “Arch’s gone off to find himself a barrel of wine to drown himself in,” Cletus told him, smiling drunkenly, “And Gerris is fucking some pretty girl in the gardens, damn the blond bastard. You know that you ought to join him.”

Sylva Santagar poked Cletus’s cheek playfully. The pair had bedded each other before, Quentyn knew, which made the situation all the more uncomfortable for him. “Now, ser,” she chided, “don’t give him any ideas. I’m keeping the prince all for myself, you know.”

Cletus bowed his head. “I apologise, my lady.” Then he went back to the Fowler twin, mussing her ratty brown hair as he pressed his lips to her ear. Quentyn searched around for someone else to talk with, and found only Sylva Santagar. “I-

“Will you be riding to war with Prince Oberyn, my brave prince?”

“War?” Quentyn blurted. “What? - I mean, possibly. Probably.” This is Arianne’s game, to make me look a coward. She will not have an easy victory, he vowed.

“A glorious conquest, Quent,” Cletus said, swallowing the Fowler girl’s kiss before turning back to him red-faced. “To fight the Reachmen in the Dornish Marches, and to take Highgarden in King Aegon’s name.”

“How very valiant of you,” Quentyn said dryly.

“How very valiant of us, you mean.” He turned to the two ladies, offering them each one of his hands. “Quentyn will make a great fighter, you know, assuming that he favours his uncle’s talents over his father’s.”

“Shall we see, my lord?” When Quentyn looked down, her hand was hovering over his breeches. Worse still, he could see the conspicuous bulge there. Was it because of her? He had never glanced twice at Sylva Santagar before, she was not that attractive, with all her freckles, and…

He flushed with shame. “I… don’t know. I’ve never fought a war—”

“How hard can it be?” asked Lady Fowler.

“Not as hard as I am right now, Lady Fowler,” Cletus told her. Then he rose up, brushing his tunic down, and clambered onto her, pushing her down onto the seat. Her hands brushed through his hair
and he poked his fingers into her bodice, grinning.

Quentyn stood up before Sylva could think to try the same trick. “My lady.” He might do well to try and find Archibald in all of this; the big man often had more time for drinking than he did for women, and Quentyn was in sore need of a drink. Or a sleep. He was wandering across the floor looking for the familiar dome of Arch’s bald head when the knight stepped out into his path, sketching a small nod in his direction. He wore a loose grey tunic with a velvet cape stretching from both shoulders, stars sketched against the midnight-black fabric. Darkstar.

“Ser Gerold…” Quentyn hesitated. “I… we have not spoken in a long time.”

“No, we have not. But I think we shall talk again a good many times over the coming months, especially if we end up sharing the road to Highgarden.” Ser Gerold smiled at him, his lips sharp as razors, but his eyes glowed an angry, iridescent purple. “Know this, my lord. The Daynes of High Hermitage stand behind you… and so will Starfall very soon, I think.”

Quentyn did not understand. “Doesn’t your cousin-“

“Edric,” Ser Gerold said distastefully. “The squire. The boy should be returning to Starfall soon, but he has spent so long roaming the Riverlands that I think he has forgotten what it means to be Dornish. Ah, well… let us hope that Dorne welcomes him kindly upon his return. I know I will.” As he spoke, Quentyn noticed that his fingers brushed the hilt of the jewelled blade at his belt. The Daynes possessed a magical longsword, Dawn, that was said to be made of a glowing sky-metal. The wielder of the blade was called the Sword of the Morning, a title afforded only to the House’s most noble knights. It was said that the wielder of Dawn could never fall, not in battle, at least. Ser Gerold clearly fancied himself among that number, but as a son of House Dayne’s lesser branch he was not fit to wield the sword. Unless the main branch should die out, and he should become Lord of Starfall...

Quentyn’s musings were interrupted by the drummers and the musicians slowing to a standstill. A reedy breeze swept through the windows of the hall, and the scents and sounds of Sunspear and Dorne floated through the window and departed further down the hall. At the far end of the hall, Prince Oberyn Martell approached the end of the dais, holding a cup in salute. Prince Doran sat on a chair at his side, beside a tall lectern decorated with golden sun and onyx spear.

“My lords, my ladies, sons and daughters of Dorne,” Prince Oberyn shouted, “We are gathered here today in celebration, to salute the peace that has brought all of Dorne together! From this day forth, we shall pledge our fealty to King Aegon, the Sixth of His Name, whom I affirm is my sister Elia’s son by all the gods!” He raised his cup. “Long may he reign!”

“Long may he reign,” the hall echoed, and they drank.

“And to his aunt and co-ruler, the Queen Daenerys, who has come from across the Narrow Sea with three dragons, fire made flesh; she is the Liberator, the Breaker of Chains, the Mother of Dragons! Long may she reign!”

“Long may she reign!” they called back. But this time the echo was quieter, Quentyn realised. And some of them did not drink at all, the Sand Snakes and Lady Jordayne among them.

“In celebration and in respect of this, I shall lead a host of Dornishmen up the Prince’s Pass, to march upon the Reach and Highgarden, and then onwards to Casterly Rock and Riverrun, where false kings have raised their banners in defiance to the Targaryen claim! The Lannisters shall pay for what they have done! The Tyrells shall pay in blood! We do not forgive, we do not forget. My sister Elia and her daughter Rhaenys, butchered and murdered in cold blood. My nephew Trystane and my
dearest Ellaria, and dozens, dozens of other Dornishmen, cut down before their time. We shall have that which is owed to us. Our heart’s desire…”

“Vengeance!” he shouted, so loud that the chandeliers rang in their places and the hall shook as the guests banged cups and plates in fury. “Justice!” The tumult rose, cups raised in salute, and all across the hall Dornish hearts beat as one. “Fire and blood!”

When the thunder had ended, it was time for Prince Doran to rise. He went unsteadily to the lectern, but the guests were so engrossed in the spectacle that only a few of them chanced to see it. Swollen fingers clutched the edges of the plinth.

“Brothers,” his father shouted. His voice was surprisingly strong and clear. “Today is the start of a new day for Dorne. We have opened a book to the new future, and to seal it… to seal it I would betroth my daughter Princess Arianne to King Aegon, so that she might sit beside him as queen consort, to advise and to rule and to raise his children, to bring Dorne and the Iron Throne together once more.” He paused a moment. “Long may they reign!”

“Long may they reign!”

Quentyn looked for Arianne, but she had become lost in the sea of applauding courtiers. Nymeria spoke truly, he thought, feeling eyes falling across him as others came to the same truth. He felt suddenly sick, and his palms were clammy once more. His father had sat back down in his chair at the edge of the dais. His eyes were on the crowd, and it seemed that there were tears in them. Quentyn was unsure what to make of that. He wandered through the press, towards the dais, struggling against the weight of the crowd of Dornishmen. My Dornishmen. All at once it became too much for him, and he half-stumbled, half-fell against a pillar, sucking in deep breaths of air, drinking wine as if it were water. Moments later he was lost to the crowd, and for the longest time he did not know who or where he was. Their words went over his head like so many clouds.

Arianne was the one who found him, of course. He had expected nothing less. She took him lightly by the shoulders and led him into the shadow, away from the mockeries and cheering of her companions. Her fingers brushed back his hair as she had when they were children and she laid a kiss on his brow. The smile left her face. “You look lonely, Quentyn.”

He felt lonely. “And you… congratulations on your betrothal.”

“It was not done on my part. Nor by my consent.” Arianne leaned against the pillar. But we must go ahead with it.”

After a long moment, Quentyn spoke. “I suppose that Aegon was the real thing, then.”

“Well… as far as Uncle Oberyn could tell.”

“And if he was wrong?”

Arianne looked unsure whether to smile or frown. In the end, she did neither. “Then we have just wed our house to the Blackfyres, and we have been duped by the greatest fake that ever was. And in that case… well, if my new husband is as good a lover as he is an actor, then I should be in for a treat.”

“Will you be heading north with the rest of the army?” It felt odd even saying those words, knowing that he would be riding with that same army when the time came.

She shook her head. “Father has commissioned a small fleet to take us across the sea to Storm’s End, and we shall ride the rest of the way to the capital on the kingsroad, to avoid any pirates or
interruptions in the waters around King’s Landing, he says. I think that he just wants to ensure that the Dornish procession into the city is taken seriously. Tyene will be a part of my entourage, and Nym and Elia will most like be coming with us too. Ser Daemon Sand too, and a dozen other companions. Darkstar will be among them…” She paused. “I am loath to trust the man.”

He finally saw Archibald then, downing a cask alongside a pair of buxom wenches. Drey Dalt and Sylva Santagar were dancing, spinning and whirling across the floor to cheers and clapping. They were playing ‘the Bear and the Maiden Fair’ now. “You should join them,” Arianne said, nodding at them. Sadness clouded her eyes. “It may be a long time before we see such celebrations again, and the coming war will have not benefit these friends of ours. You… you never really appreciate what you have until it is gone, and you can have it no more.”

He knew exactly what she meant. “Trystane.”

Quentyn had not seen his brother in almost a year when he had heard of Trystane’s death on the road to Yronwood. The way that his father and his sister both spoke of the youngest Martell child made him realise something deep inside… he didn’t know what, but it was there. Arianne and I have had our disagreements, but I do love her.

She continued much in the same vein, “You do realise… that now there are only two of us, we cannot afford to war against one another, Quent. If I am to be queen, then you must be prince of Dorne, for I cannot rule in King’s Landing and Sunspear at the same time. And if I should be in the same position as Elia… and you are forced to play Father’s part…”

When he looked down he was holding her hand, though he did not remember taking it. “It will not come to that.”

Arianne’s eyes rose to his. She had always been a confident woman, his sister, but now she seemed unsure. “I hope that you are right, little brother. I hope so with all my heart.”

A voice invaded their conversation. “Niece. Nephew.” Prince Oberyn stood tall in the new tunic he had donned for the feast, chequy yellow and gold.

“I was just leaving, uncle,” Arianne said. She kept her word and went.

Quentyn looked up into his uncle’s fiery eyes, feeling a pang of nervousness. “Father wants to speak with me again?”

“He does. I trust that you have worked out the reason for this?”

“Yes.”

Prince Oberyn beckoned him onwards through the shadows of the darkening hall. The moon was rising behind the stained glass windows. “This was no easy decision for your father to make, betrothing his heir to the king. For thousands of years the eldest child has inherited their ancestral titles, regardless of their sex. By placing you ahead of Arianne in the Dornish succession he would be undermining that rule, and all the years of history that have come with it. And it is just that. Over the years, your sister has gathered her friends around her in Sunspear, leaving you to be fostered on Lord Yronwood alone. Most of Dorne hardly knows you, Quentyn. You must make friends… or you must make yourself a reputation.”

“And… war will be the way to do that?”

“War makes monsters, Quentyn,” his uncle told him. “But it also makes men out of boys, and heroes out of some of us. I did not become the Red Viper by sitting in the Water Gardens. You must do
what needs to be done. You must avenge your brother for the sake of all of Dorne. You must take the new responsibilities your father has placed upon you, and you must act upon them. As a prince would.”

He stopped abruptly, just before the dais. Areo Hotah stood at the top of the steps, admiring his longaxe. *I have three vows,* he had told Quentyn before. *Serve. Protect. Obey.* Prince Oberyn twisted his hands into each other. Garnet rings glimmered on three of his fingers. *Serve. Protect. Obey.* “So I ask you, are you truly ready for this?”

*Am I?* Quentyn stopped, swallowed, nodded. “What do I need to do?”

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to VVSIGNOFTHECROSS, yyzEthan, Bragation, DanyelN, aeb, Tommyginger and Thoren Bolt for their recent reviews.
The water was steaming now.

Behind the tall wooden screen, Princess Myrcella folded her clothes into a heap and lowered herself into the bathtub, letting the cool water lap around her thighs, her knees, her breasts. She undid the braid that Rosamund had fashioned for her ride and soaked her hair in the water.

A goblet sat on the sill, brimming with dark red wine, and a candle sat beside it. By the time the princess climbed out to dry herself on a towel, the candle had burned down to a stub, only a half-inch of the dark liquid was left in the goblet, her skin was soft, scrubbed and pale, and the evening sky had a fresh smattering of stars.

Eleyna and Rosamund brought her a new robe, and Cerenna asked if the princess would like another cup of wine with her supper. “No, thank you,” Myrcella replied. “You may go, and you too, Rosie. Eleyna, if you would stay awhile?”

When they were gone, Myrcella settled herself onto the chaise by the window. Eleyna bobbed an awkward curtsey and resigned herself to the nearest chair, her fingers so tightly clenched that she seemed like to break the arms. “You need not look so troubled,” Myrcella said, “our conversation is due to no fault of yours.”

“Your brother,” Eleyna replied, tight-lipped.
“His name is Tommen. He would like you to use it, he says.”

“I… I have not seen His Grace – Tommen – in a while, my lady.”

Myrcella nodded. “A while? By which you mean ‘since the day we met.’”

The girl said nothing. *She can be as timid or as bold as she likes, Myrcella thought, she should complement Tommen perfectly.*

Myrcella could see that Eleyna’s fingers were shaking. “I-I have been… quiet when it comes to matters regarding your royal brother, my lady.”

*That’s hardly a surprise.* She had expected nothing less. If it had been any different, she might have had reason to doubt the girl due to her overconfidence. “As you will. Let us take our mind away from Tommen for a moment. Have you made any headway in the matter with your mother, or will I need to speak to Lady Westerling myself?”

“Rollam… he has been attempting to convince her these past few nights. But we haven’t told her the plans outright.”

“Try harder. This will be so much easier if we have the full support of your House on our side.” She frowned. “You do want to be queen, don’t you?”

“Oh. Yes, my lady.”

“You don’t sound very certain.”

“Not… uncertain. Just… well, nervous, my lady.”

“Of my brother? I’m not marrying you to Joffrey – thank the gods, else you’d have to endure a beating every night before you coupled to get him hard.” The wine tasted bitter in her mouth. “My little brother has very simple tastes. He likes cats and he dislikes beetroot. Find him a kitten and he’ll love you until the end of his days, or at least promise to. Tommen is good at keeping promises.”

*Not so good at keeping secrets, mind.*

“How… how was your ride, my lady?”

Myrcella sipped her wine. “It was pleasant, though I do regret racing Lady Lefford through that puddle and getting mud all over my dress. But we have more pressing concerns.” She took Eleyna’s hand in hers. “You must try and get my brother to like you.”

“I…” She sucked in a breath. “I’ll try, my lady. Maybe… we could ask if he would like to sup with us? Rollam and me… and you and him?”

“No. You must do this alone, Eleyna, without my help, else—”

A door creaked open at the far end of the room. *Mother,* she knew. Myrcella curled her lip with distaste. *That was unfortunate timing.*

“My apologies for the interruption,” Queen Cersei said, in a tone that suggested anything but. “Myrcella. And Lady Eleyna. I trust I find you well?”

“Y-yes, Your Grace.” Eleyna stood and made to leave, but the queen stopped her halfway. “I do hope to see more of you around the Rock,” she said, “perchance you might join me for tea on the morrow, sometime in the afternoon?”
Eleyna nodded and hurried a curtsey. “Your Grace. My lady.” She went, trembling.

The queen seated herself in Eleyna’s place. She picked up the decanter of wine and swirled it around a little before pouring. “The girl seems rather bland.”

“Bland?”

“Dull. That being said, there have been plenty of dull queens over the years.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Myrcella said.

“Do you honestly think I’m an idiot? A temporary betrothal? One that you can make permanent as you please, with only your blessing and the aid of some septon in your pocket? Oh, yes, very temporary indeed.”

Myrcella straightened up. “And who have you told?”

Cersei frowned. “No one… yet. Telling Ser Kevan or one of his cronies would only escalate the situation.”

“You’re right. But by all means, feel free to tell them. Shout it from the highest tower of the castle if you so desire. I’m sure Lady Lefford or some grasping bitch will be kind enough to kill any threat of this union in its infancy by making a public betrothal. With Ser Kevan advising him to agree before all of the court, Tommen can hardly refuse that, now can he?”

Queen Cersei put her cup down. “As you will. I’m not here to talk about betrothals and weddings.”

“I did not invite you here with any purpose, Mother. I did not invite you here at all, come to think of it, so pray enlighten me as to why you are here.”

For those first few moments, her mother said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on some faraway point. Then she rose to her feet slowly and crossed the room to take a seat beside Myrcella on the chaise. And then, most curiously of all, she took her daughter’s hair in her hands, turning and twisting the golden locks. “Do you remember when I used to curl your hair for you, when you were younger? I always insisted that I did it myself, instead of your handmaidens.”

“You threw them out if they even tried.” Despite herself, Myrcella was smiling. “Why?”

“We never meant to call you Myrcella, you know. Once I was certain that you were a girl – a mother’s intuition, that was – I wanted to call you Joanna, after my lady mother. She would have liked you. She would have liked you a lot.”

Ser Kevan said that too. “What was she like? I’ve only heard the stories.”

“Fierce,” Mother said, smoothing out the tangles. “A true lioness of the Rock, headstrong, wilful…and a protector – a protector most of all. She loved her children fiercely, all of us… even the Imp, though he killed her with his first breaths. Even Tyrion. So I wanted to name you after her, in the hope that she might lead you as an example, and so that I might remember her more clearly whenever I looked at you.

“Your father insisted otherwise, however. He said that we should move on from the past, and look to make a better future for our children. And so I chose a name for you that had no recent history, no ancestral past, one that had not been given to anyone of note for two hundred years or more. And Robert agreed.”
Your father… and Robert. “It’s true, then? You do not deny it?”

The queen took a long moment’s pause. “I love my brother more than anything in the world,” she said. “More than almost anything in the world. I will not lie to you about Jaime, but you must know the whole story. The true story, not whatever lies our enemies spin. We were born together, and the witch said that we would die together…”

“The witch?”

“Maggy the Frog. A witching woman from the East. Not that her empty words matter anymore. Prophecy is full of empty words.” The queen frowned. “My father promised me that I would marry Prince Rhaegar, and he held a tourney at Lannisport where he hoped to announce my betrothal, but the Mad King refused his offer, calling Lord Tywin ‘his servant’. Well, a Lannister always pays his debts, and when my father came to sack King’s Landing, he had his men cut down the Targaryen children and Jaime shoved a sword through Aerys Targaryen’s back.

“But that is another story, for a different day. It is interesting, though, to think of how much slaughter would have been avoided if Aerys had accepted my father’s offer. We would have had beautiful children with purple Valyrian eyes and silver-gold hair, blessed with the beauty and strength of the dragonlords and the wits of a Lannister. But that was not to be, and I was saddled with Robert Baratheon instead.

“It would have made no matter if you were his trueborn children, black of hair and blue of eye; he would have ignored you all the same. From the day we married, Robert cared for fighting and fucking and drinking and nothing else, least of all me. In the start I was enamoured with him, actually. He was not the Robert you knew, back then. But after a long year of watching him whore and drink his way through life I decided that I would never let that man have a child of my loins. I drank the moon tea Grand Maester Pycelle provided me, until Jaime managed to find a secret place for us to share a bed.

“And nine months later Joff was born to us, while Robert was out hunting. Jaime was in the birthing room because none of the midwives dared to throw him out. And for two years we were happy, until Tyrion came upon a book written by a Maester Malleon of the Citadel and showed it to us. He knew about us; he always had, and for the first time then, the three of us came together with a plan.

“In the years that followed, you and Tommen were born, and passed off as Robert’s brood. When you came of age, Tyrion, Jaime and I petitioned to have you sent off to lords across the realm, in the hope that you would be fostered, betrothed – and should the time come – they might even choose rise up against the king to protect you and your claim. The Martells and the Tyrells in particular would have been only too eager to rise up against Robert– or so we hoped.

“A mother’s love is a fierce thing, though, and I refused to let you leave. One thing led to another, and very soon Robert involved himself more than he should have, and on some whim he decided that Lord Eddard Stark would be the appropriate man to raise you. We had not anticipated this, but Jon Arryn was nosing around in the capital by then, and we had to do something, so we sent you north as Robert commanded, in the hope that the situation in King’s Landing would be resolved in short order and you would be relatively safe with the Starks, odd as that sounds.

“It took the better part of the year, but Jon Arryn’s actions eventually got him killed, once I asked a few favours of Varys, Littlefinger and Grand Maester Pycelle. I petitioned Robert to look to Jaime or my father as the next Hand of the King, knowing full well that this would be the last thing he did, and Tyrion, now in my lord husband’s confidence, planted the notion to look north, to Eddard Stark.

“And so we rode to Winterfell and reclaimed you from the wolves, and there Jaime and I came to the
decision that Robert had to be disposed of so that Joffrey could rule. The death of one Hand was suspicious as it stood, murdering another would make the whole realm wary. But Stark had to be disposed of to rid Robert of his last friend in any potential wars to come. The easiest way to do this would be to kill Robert and accuse Stark of orchestrating some sort of coup. Littlefinger had all the plans made up, and Varys – who had a vendetta against Robert ever since the killing of Elia and her babes – decided to help us along with Robert’s death.”

Myrcella remembered a song that had been played before the court in King’s Landing. “The lion ripped his balls off, and the boar did all the rest.”

“The lion had rather more to do with it than you might think. Cousin Lancel gave Robert a particularly potent strongwine that made him incredibly sluggish, so he missed his thrust when the beast came at him. But yes, the boar did all the rest.”

“And what of Lord Stark? Where did he figure in all of this?”

“The Imp probably saved your life, but so did Lord Eddard, come to think of it. Being the stupid honourable Northerner that he was, he came to inform me of his intentions to tell Robert the truth about his feigned children before going to the king himself, giving us time to act. We meant to have him arrested for high treason and sent to the Wall after the coup, but Joffrey decided that Stark’s head would look nice adorning a pike, and so here we are.”

“Here we are,” Myrcella echoed gloomily. The chamber had darkened considerably in the minutes since her mother had started talking. Smoothing down her gown, she rose and took a taper from beside the hearth. How many have died for our sakes? she wondered. Lord Eddard. She lit a candle. Lady Catelyn. She lit a second. Robb. A third. Uncle Renly. Lord Arryn. King Robert. When the fourth, fifth and sixth candles were lit, she sat back down. “What do we do now?”

Her mother sighed, pressing her hands together. Myrcella might have chosen to hug her if she had the strength to put aside her old grudges. Tommen certainly would have, she knew. “Of the three of you, I always knew that you would be the first to find out, if any of you did.”

“I read Maester Malleon’s book. And… Tyrion confirmed it for me.”

“He isn’t dead,” her mother said dryly, “I have never loved him, but I would know if the Imp was gone. He can’t be dead… the valonqar…” She swallowed a sob. “It does not matter.” She took Myrcella’s hand in her own. “Your brother must never know. He has always been a delicate soul, and knowing this… what he is… it would break him, shatter him. It might even kill him. But at the same time… we have to stand together, Myrcella. The three of us, and Jaime too, once he returns.” She rose. “Good night.” And she was gone.

Myrcella sat in silence until two of the six candles had burned down to stubs. She relit both, then pressed the taper to a seventh. Trystane. He had not died for her, so to speak, but his death had been born out of her mother’s work.

She went to the bookshelf and picked up a well-worn tome. Rhaenys and Visenya: The Story of Aegon’s Sisters.

It was hard not to admire the two Targaryen sisters for what they had achieved during the years of Aegon’s reign. Rhaenys was the great beauty after whom men lusted, clever and sweet and cunning, while Visenya was a double-edged sword, a warrior woman said to be fiercer and more at ease in battle than the Conqueror himself.

She remembered Arya Stark turning her nose up at the fact that Myrcella had preferred Rhaenys to
Visenya. “Rhaenys was boring,” she said, “she didn’t fight, she didn’t lead, she probably didn’t even like flying.” But as Arya had come to appreciate Rhaenys more and more over the year, until she judged them ‘almost equal’ on the day of their departure from Winterfell, Myrcella had found a new respect for Visenya. She fought for what was hers, without cares for beauty or properness or other vanities. She didn’t care how they saw her, what they whispered behind her back. She was fire, and Rhaenys was blood, deep and nurturing, sweet and binding.

And they were both born of incest too.

Later, Tygett brought her supper. He’d grown two inches since their arrival at the Rock, and the start of a tawny beard had started growing on his chin and cheeks. You look a fool like that, she had told him, you ought to shave it off - and he had. Myrcella hadn’t been bothered by it in the slightest, but she had wanted to see to what extent he was willing to listen to her commands. And now she had her answer.

“You look very spectacular this evening, my lady,” he said.

“Spectacular?” She smiled. “What was yesterday’s word, Tyg?”

The squire looked down at his feet, plainly embarrassed. “Enchanting, my lady.”

Myrcella smiled at him. “I like ‘spectacular’. A rather grandiose word, wouldn’t you say?” She stopped him as he placed down her plate, and reached up to his face, brushing back a stray lock of hair. The squire turned red with embarrassment, then purple when she kissed his cheek for good measure. Just enough, just a little more every day, but not too much. Never too much, else the illusion is worthless. She smiled. “There. Now, what has my brother been up to whilst I was out?”

“The king has planned some sort of squire’s tourney to occupy his time. Tymond Vance is favoured to win, but Daryn Hamell isn’t so keen on that, as Vance is a traitor’s son, he says. He told some of his friends that they’re going to go and beat Vance up, and make sure that he can’t ride.”

“Who is this Daryn Hamell, whom I hear nothing good about?”

“Lord Hamell’s younger brother,” said Tyg.

“The Hamells were made vassals of the Westerlings by Lord Tywin. No doubt that has displeased them… but I see no reason for him to take it out on a Vance. Send this Hamell boy up to Maester Creylen on the morrow. Tell him that his help is needed to clean out the raven cages. I’m sure cleaning birdshit will occupy him for a few hours. In the meantime, I’ll try to find something more interesting to occupy yours.”

Tyg nodded, reddening in the face. Must you blush at everything I say? “Very good, my lady.”

She took his hand in hers, rubbing slow circles on his palm. His fingers clenched and relaxed.

“You’ve been a great help to me, Tygett,” she said. “I hope you realise that.”

“I – thank you, my lady.”

“A Lannister always pays her debts. Remember that, Tyg, if you ever start to doubt how valuable your service is to me. If there is something you want, doubtless I can help you with it...”

His eyes did not leave her face. Well, stranger things have happened. She was a woman widowed, and there was no maidenhead for her to safeguard. But not today. Not for a very long time, I think. Her fingers brushed his palm, and settled. “Go on. Get yourself a good night’s sleep.”
After that she was alone for the evening. Dreams did not come swiftly that night; instead she lay awake for a long time, watching shadows contort and twist across the ceiling. Sometimes they were familiar shapes: lions, towers, Joffrey’s silhouette. When sleep came at last, it did not last nearly long enough.

Ser Kevan summoned her when she was breaking her fast. “Beg pardons, my lady,” his messenger said, “but his lordship said the matter was urgent.”

“Is he with my brother?” she asked, hopeful.

“His Grace is with the King’s Companions today, my lady. Battle drill.” Wasting time, more like, she thought. She should never have encouraged Tommen to create the damned thing. Nowadays he spent most of his time staring at pointless battle maps with Ser Benedict Broom and his veritable army of squires, or locked in Ser Kevan’s solar reading ledgers and letters. Kindly business, he’d told her the last time they’d seen each other, three days ago.

Myrcella rose. “Very well. I will see my uncle now.” She turned to Rosamund and Cerenna. “Where is Eleyna this morning?”

“With her brother, my lady,” said Cerenna, refusing to meet her gaze. “She will be back by mid-morning.”

“See that she is. I would like to speak with her here, in my chambers. And her brother too.”

Rosamund started. “My lady, if I may—”

“You may not, unless the matter concerns Lady Eleyna and Rollam.” She stared the two girls down. One of you is reporting on me to Mother, she knew. Doubtless Tygett could be helpful in the matter of finding out which one. For now, though, she did not let that trifle her.

Ser Arys Oakheart met her outside her door. Unlike the Peckledon knight and some of the other Kingsguard knights, she felt assured in her trust of Ser Arys, who had seen her safely through Winterfell and Dorne and King’s Landing. My little princess, he called her, as though Myrcella were still a girl of ten and he her brave white knight. In return for his loyalty, the princess had agreed to turn a blind eye to some of Ser Arys’s own indiscretions involving a certain servant girl sworn to Lady Kenning. After all, when one Kingsguard knight can father three children upon his own sister, it would be unfair to deny the same rights to his brothers.

“You seem in a sprightly mood, Lord Commander,” she said as they walked.

“It is a beautiful day, my lady. When you spend long hours standing on guard, you start to notice the little things even more. Every new day comes as a blessing. I have seen my fair share of sunrises over the years, but that only serves to make them seem all the more beautiful.”

“You should have been a poet, ser. Your talent with words is wasted as a knight.”

“I have seen far more beautiful things as a knight than I ever would’ve as a poet.” He was staring at her when he spoke. She rarely went ten paces nowadays without some suitor ogling her. A young widow, and a powerful one too, they said, the princess Myrcella, just like her mother and Lady Joanna before her.

That was high praise; the older servants here spoke of Lady Joanna almost as though she had ascended to godhood. “May the Mother and Lady Joanna watch over my children,” Myrcella had heard a washerwoman saying in the hall a couple of days past.
There was a statue of the late Lady Lannister near the chambers that had once been Lord Tywin’s and were now Ser Kevan’s. A stream of water trickled down from the lady’s outstretched marble hand to fill a pool of water lilies below. A monument from Lord Tywin to his wife, Myrcella had thought, but her great-uncle had confirmed otherwise. “Tywin ordered it built, aye, but he rarely ever came here himself, and he forbade his children from doing so. He didn’t want them to dwell on the past.”

I wonder if they will ever build a statue for me, Myrcella thought as they came to Ser Kevan’s door, or if I will have to build a statue for someone else.

The Lord Regent was alone at this early hour, a solitary silhouette shadowed against the rising sun. “Grandnuncle,” Myrcella approached and kissed his cheeks. “How are you this morning?”

“Troubled,” he said, “and cold. The Starks had the right of it. Winter is coming. Maester Creylen says that storms are coming from across the Narrow Sea, though they will be a while getting here. Then the winter will be upon us. Dorna has bought me a shadowskin from an Ibbenese trader. I am not over fond of the colour, but I daresay its warmth will come in useful as the nights grow longer and the days colder. But I did not bring you here to speak of that.”

“No.”

He laid a letter down on the table before her. It was written in black maester’s ink and only a few lines long. The broken seal showed a fawn’s head on pale grey wax:

To the Lord Regent Kevan Lannister, she read.

We remain, as ever, faithful servants of House Lannister and King Tommen. This message may be of note to you. Your nephew, Lord Tyrion, is alive and well in King’s Landing. We sighted him at the feast for the coronation of the Targaryen pretenders.

Glad tidings,

Lord Gyles Cafferen

Myrcella placed the letter down. “Encouraging,” she surmised. “And is this definitely true?”

“No,” said Ser Kevan. “Of course not. But we must cling to any smallest fragment of hope as a drowning man clings to wreckage.” Kevan bit his lip. “They will not trade him back, though. Not for… well, not for all the gold in Casterly Rock. The only prize that will placate the Targaryens is the Seven Kingdoms, and it’s a wonder we’re still managing to hold onto three of them… if we can include the Vale in that.”

Myrcella frowned. “If your tone is any indication, I assume that you have some sort of discouraging news from the Vale.”

Kevan sighed. “You are a worryingly good judge of character, niece.” He produced another letter, this one written in a delicate hand and sealed with a fat blob of sky-blue candlewax. “Harrenhal,” he
She picked up the parchment and held it between two fingers. “Forgive me, nuncle, but this seems like a matter you ought to put before the small council.”

“The small council is full of idiots. Granted, some of those idiots are mine, and some are your mother’s, and some are yours, but there are too many factions among our number for us to make a decision on anything. I like to keep them busy with taxation laws and inheritance settlements while we settle the important things.”

Myrcella glanced round. “We?”

“Certain trusted members of my household, and the pair of us. Despite our disagreements, we have a mutual appreciation for one another’s talents, wouldn’t you say?”

Aye. I am capable of doing things without talking much, and you are capable of talking about things without doing much. Myrcella glanced down at the letter. “Littlefinger,” she said.

“You have finished reading?”

She had. “Baelish wants our help. The Moonrunners have abandoned him, he writes. I have to wonder where he is finding the coin to pay them all.”

“Oh, I don’t. Stealing from the Iron Throne’s coffers, most likely. Fortunately, that is no longer our problem. That is another advantage of being in Casterly Rock, I suppose.”

Myrcella nodded. “Casterly Rock is large enough for two Lords Paramount and all their courtiers, isn’t it?”

“Most certainly. The issue with bringing Baelish and his entire army to the Rock is that it leaves too much to chance during the journey. Littlefinger might betray our trust, his sellswords could turn on him, they could be captured by Stannis or by the Targaryens or outlaws, Yohn Royce could reclaim Lord Arryn, the list goes on and on…”

“And we cannot send an army all the way east to Harrenhal either. We barely have enough men to defend the Tooth and Deep Den as it stands.”

In the back of her mind, a plan was forming. “Lord Baelish,” she said. “It’s him they despise, and not us.”

Ser Kevan smiled for the first time in an age. “That’s what I thought, niece. I have no doubt that Tywin would have said much the same.”

Well, there’s a backhanded compliment if I ever heard one. “Lord Tywin knew his lords. He always made sure that they respected him. But if we overthrew Baelish and proclaim Robert Arryn as lord of the Vale by all the laws of the realm… then Royce and Belmore and Redfort just may return to our side, and we can take Stannis’s invading force in the rear.”

Ser Kevan shrugged. “We need to send someone who is capable of convincing them otherwise, then.”

Myrcella was more than willing to make suggestions. “Ser Harys Swyft.” The chinless knight of chickenshit. Ser Kevan had named his goodfather to the small council as his justiciar.

“Ser Harys is preoccupied,” he told her.
“Then who?”

Ser Kevan bit his lip thoughtfully. “It is for the Hand of the King to make considerations on such matters,” he said. “I will tell you when I have made my choice.” But his eyes were fixed firmly on her.

You need someone to send to Harrenhal, Myrcella thought, and who better than me, the king’s own royal sister? I am a ripe marriage prospect, perfect for some unexpected betrothal to young Robert Arryn. And a troubling thorn in your side will have been removed, your path cleared to the king and his throne. He did not see her smiling as she went. Oh, very well played, Ser Kevan, but you forget one thing. I can play this game too.

Chapter End Notes

I think what we see here is a really nice comparison between three generations of Lannisters: Lady Joanna, Cersei, and Myrcella, all of whom are more similar than they seem. For example, take Myrcella's last paragraph in this chapter:

You need someone to send to Harrenhal, Myrcella thought, and who better than me, the king’s own royal sister? I am a ripe marriage prospect, perfect for some unexpected betrothal to young Robert Arryn. And a troubling thorn in your side will have been removed, your path cleared to the king and his throne. He did not see her smiling as she went. Oh, very well played, Ser Kevan, but you forget one thing. I can play this game too.

The self-assuredness of this proclamation is very similar to how Cersei acts sometimes in A Feast for Crows.

Then there are Myrcella's thoughts regarding Tygett and her manipulation of him:

A rather grandiose word, wouldn’t you say?” She stopped him as he placed down her plate, and reached up to his face, brushing back a stray lock of hair as the boy turned purple with embarrassment, then kissed his cheek for good measure. Just enough, just a little more every day, but not too much. Just a little. Never too much, else the illusion is worthless.

This is very similar to Cersei’s interactions with Ser Osney Kettleblack in A Feast for Crows, particularly in Cersei VIII.

Next: who's up for a good old-fashioned wedding?
First of Her Name

Chapter Summary

This is my city, this is my place, and it will be ruled as I see fit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAENERYS

She could see all of King’s Landing from here. The seven great gates of the city that had stood since Aegon’s time, each carved with a different likeness in mind; the Dragonpit up on Rhaenys’s Hill and Baelor’s Sept on Visenya’s, both undergoing a construction process overseen by her Unsullied. We will rebuild what my ancestors and the Lannisters knocked down, Dany told herself as she watched. And I will be a queen.

And in the west, the tourney grounds awaited, marked by bolts of shimmering black-and-red silk, the three-headed dragon of Targaryen flying over the royal box for the first time in years. She could see the pavilions that had sprung up almost overnight, the spectator’s gallery that had been constructed along the northern side of the course, and a few tiny specks that must be knights going about their business.

Her thoughts drifted to Ser Barristan, her loyal knight and watchful protector on a quest in Dorne. No word had come from him in near two months now, and Dany was beginning to worry. He will come, she told herself. Do not fret. You are the queen, this is your kingdom, this is your home.

Irri and Jhiqui arrived to dress her. They brought silks of midnight black and silver, but Dany chose a dress of pale cream instead, with a deep cut and an airy cloak of moonstone colouring as well. Her crown was a slim silver coronet.

Irri smiled at her, a little unnerved. “I suppose it goes nicely with the colours on the… dragon… flag.”

“Sigil,” Dany corrected softly.

“And it will hide the blood,” Jhiqui added.

Irri hit her. “You are stupid girl. There is no blood in Westerosi tournament. Knights wear the armour, remember?”

Jhiqui shook her head. “Yes, but if there is no blood, why do knights wear armour?”

“You are stupid, stupid, stupid girl,” said Irri. “There is no blood because knights wear armour.” She looked to Dany for approval, and then added, “It is known.”
“It is known,” Dany agreed. “I will wear the white sash too, I think. The Targaryen colours are red and black, but I do not think that those would suit me over well. Not today, at least.”

“It will go with your hair, Khaleesi,” said Jhiqui, “but before you dress, you must bathe yourself.”

Irri hit her again. “Khaleesi is not a child. Khaleesi is a… well, a khaleesi.”

Dany moved away from their bickering and stepped into the bath that they had run for her. Irri climbed in after, scrubbing her with a brush and looking displeased at the heat of the water, sweating from the heat. “Must we wear these silly Westeros gowns, Khaleesi?”

“I am afraid you must,” Dany told her softly, “other times, your Dothraki garb and the clothes you wore in Meereen will suffice, but here we must act ceremoniously. You must don a pair of floppy ears.” As I have. “For you shall be more than my handmaids. You shall be my ladies-in-waiting.”

“What is lady-in-waiting, Khaleesi?” asked Jhiqui, as she massaged Dany’s hair with scented oils that smelled of citrus and pomegranate.

“My mother had ladies-in-waiting,” Daenerys said. “I suppose they wait on the queen, as the name would suggest. Other than that, I am not really sure. It will be an adventure of sorts, I suppose. For all of us.”

After, they dried her with rough towels and helped her into the fine silken gown. “There will be breakfast at the tourney ground,” she told them when they asked if she wanted to eat, “and I have a tender tummy today.”

“Is good sign, Khaleesi,” Irri opined. As to what, Dany could not say. Once the handmaids had struggled into their own outfits for the day, she led the way down the tower, down the serpentine stairs and into the courtyard, where her horse awaited. The filly had been a gift to her from Khal Drogo, and had crossed the Narrow Sea with her as her sun-and-stars never had.

The streets of King’s Landing were busy at this hour. Wagons trundled back and forth along the thoroughfares and traders shouted at her from the alleys. “The best prices in the city, Your Grace! Try this wine, Your Grace!” Briefly, Dany recalled the time when she had been about to drink poisoned wine, in the market of the Lhazareen town near Vaes Dothrak. Ser Jorah saved me then, she thought, and decided not to let her mind wander any more. Thinking about him will only bring me hurt.

The sun was bearing down relentlessly, almost as though she were back in Essos. The gentle back-and-forth sway of the huge Targaryen banners created a cooling wind against her face. “Make way, make way!” Daario Naharis shouted at the populace crowding the road ahead, “Make way for the Queen’s Grace!”

They rode down past the harbour as they went; Dany could see her ships docking in the quays, great wooden hulks and elegantly carved galleys alike with names like Dracarys and Drogon’s Fire and Glory of Meraxes. They had sailed from Dragonstone in the past week, bringing supplies, horses, the rest of her advisors and most of the sellswords and Dothraki soldiers who had remained on the island. She had given command of her royal fleet to Admiral Lomo, who had been GroLeo’s second-in-command back in Slaver’s Bay and had taken over the post after the Ghiscari had murdered his superior.

Despite its homely sort of beauty and the elegance of the Red Keep, King’s Landing was no paradise. Dany saw starving children so thin she could count their ribs, mothers begging for money in the streets as they rocked limp babies in their arms, lepers coughing themselves to death. “Strong
Belwas!” she called. The eunuch lumbered over and gave her a pleasing smile. She passed him a small leather pouch. “Give each of these beggars a silver stag for their trouble,” she told him.

“Your Grace,” Marwyn the Mage said from his grey donkey, “is this wise? You must be charitable, aye, but King’s Landing is a city of half a million. If the popular word gets out that the new queen gives openly to beggars, we will have them clamouring-”

“I cannot let my people starve,” Dany told him bluntly. “I will not let my people starve. Kindness is better than cruelty, Marwyn-”

The archmaester nodded, shifting on his mount. His many saddlebags flapped against the donkey’s flanks as he turned in the saddle. “I do not doubt that, Your Grace… but sometimes cruelty is a necessity. Aegon the Conqueror was never kind to his foes, and even Daeron the Good sometimes saw-”

“Our queen is naturally benevolent,” said Moqorro, the Black Flame, “I am satisfied with her choices, and I will not oppose them, maester. Nor should you.”

“I’ll wager that satisfies you somewhat less,” said Marwyn, pointing down the road to where a crowd was gathering. Dany looked, and saw: a throng of begging brothers in black and brown roughspun robes. Under the Lannister reign they had called these men sparrows, and they had caused the city no end of trouble, or so Marwyn told her. She did not oppose zealotry – if her time in Meereen had taught Dany anything, it was the importance of traditions – but Moqorro, in the robes of a red priest of R’hllor, looked somewhat less impressed. He did not speak, but Dany could see the distaste in his eyes.

“Seven blessings on Your Grace!” one of the sparrows shouted.

“Seven blessings upon Queen Daenerys!”

When they were past, Moqorro turned to Dany and Marwyn and said, “we were lucky to be treated so lightly there. Some of them are preaching treasons against you, Your Grace.”

“Yes,” said Marwyn, “but they weren’t. We cannot go around killing every septon and brown brother in the city. I am certain that Her Grace would not be well-disposed towards the red priests who murder women and children as sacrifices in the Lord of Light’s religion, but that does not mean she should burn you alive for your crimes.”

Moqorro’s lips set in a thin line and he looked away. “Your Grace,” Marwyn said to Dany a little while later, “I have just seen a cask of melon wine from Ib. A particularly favourite of mine.” He slapped his belly for effect. “With Your Grace’s permission, I would like to go and haggle with a trader-”

“Strong Belwas wants this melon wine,” said Strong Belwas.

Dany nodded her approval. She had Daario and a few of his Stormcrows as an escort, as well as a good number of Grey Worm’s Unsullied. And she would be glad to hear an end to Moqorro and Marwyn’s bickering – for a while, at least.

As they left the city through the King’s Gate, Daario spurred his horse forwards and fell in beside her. “My queen,” he said, bowing his head.

“Your beard is more purple than blue now,” Dany observed.

“Purple is a royal colour,” he replied, smirking. “In honour of your noble victory, it seemed only
fitting to make some small tribute to Your Grace.”

_It was not much of a victory._ She had never envisioned her taking of King’s Landing as being so simple… which made her worry that this war was not yet over. She turned back to glance up at the Unsullied mingling among the City Watchmen on the walls. _Keep your spears ready, Grey Worm. Your duty is not yet done._

Outside the city, around the tourney fields, the Dothraki had thrown up their dun-coloured tents and built huts of grass weave between the sellsword encampments. Drainage trenches had been dug around the camp and out to Blackwater Bay, and healers lived among their number, but Dany was still worried about the potential for disease to spread in such a tight space. Yet she was loath to send the Dothraki inland; it was already difficult enough stopping them from raiding King’s Landing as it were. The Dothraki would become a more and more pressing problem with every day she left it unsolved, and they were unlikely to respond to the orders of her councillors, so Dany would have to undertake such a task herself. _This is my city, she reminded herself, this is my place, and it will be ruled as I see fit._

“I mistrust this whole damned thing,” Daario told her, “if we were in the fighting pits—”

Daario was going to tell her how he would beat them all in single combat, doubtless. “We are not in the fighting pits,” she reminded him. “And even if you were, there are Westerosi knights you could not hope to beat. Prince Aemon the Dragonknight. Ser Arthur Dayne.” Viserys had told her those stories, but for all she knew he could have been lying about them as well.

“I have heard it said that your own Ser Grandfather is among these great Westerosi knights,” said Daario. “If so, I pity these Westerosi—”

“Do not speak ill of Ser Barristan,” Dany said harshly.

Daario dipped his head and smirked. “As my queen commands.”

They came to the tourney stands next. A goodly number of smallfolk had turned out to watch, and many of the courtiers of King’s Landing. Dany did not have time for them all, though, as her place was on the dais at the middle of the lists, on one of two carved wooden thrones edged with gold. Dragon banners fluttered black and red on either side of the dais, and the pillars that supported the canopy were topped by golden dragon figures. “Lord Connington designed it after the pavilion your father sat under at the tourney of Harrenhal,” Aegon explained, rising from his own throne to lead Daenerys up the steps. Today he wore a doublet of red leather over black shirt, black breeches, with golden dragons duelling across the breast. At his belt, the Valyrian steel sword Blackfyre hid inside its ruby-encrusted scabbard. Her nephew’s crown was a new one of his own commission, a slender band of gold, the centrepiece a dragon’s head at the front set with onyx eyes.

The jousting itself was a spectacle of such brilliance that Dany had not seen since the festivities in Daznak’s Pit. The knights and their horses were barded in every colour known, bright vermilion and daffodil yellow, deep purples and sea greens. Some of the sellswords and the Golden Company men played a part; plainly armoured Ser Laswell Peake took down two well-dressed knights but was unhorsed by a freerider in the service of House Rykker, and the Tattered Prince jousted well against his first three opponents but lost to the fourth, a hedge knight in battered armour by the name of Ser Morm. He bore a winged black heart on his shield. “Those are the arms of House Toyne,” Aegon told her, wariness in his voice.

“I do not know this House Toyne,” Dany said.

“They do not have lands in Westeros anymore,” he told her. “King Aegon the Fourth had them
Dany had some vague recollection of that. “Was the Smiling Knight a knight of House Toyne?” she asked. “Of the Kingswood Brotherhood.” Viserys had enjoyed telling her that story.

“No. It was Simon Toyne who led the Brotherhood – slain by your own Ser Barristan, my lady – but it was Ser Arthur Dayne who cut down the Smiling Knight.”

“The Sword of the Morning,” Dany said. She nodded towards the tiltyard. If the Toyines are so disgraced, why does this one wear their arms on his shield? But she did not ask any more questions, lest it made her seem slow-witted. The mystery knight in question did rather well for himself, advancing to the final four knights of the tournament, who would joust for a final time after the interval.

The next fighter was Ser Rolly Duckfield of the Kingsguard, in his pristine white plate; he had unhorsed his fellow Kingsguard Ser Rickard Fell in his fourth bout.

The second of the final four was Ser Myles Rosby, a young knight of not more than eighteen who had only recently become Lord of Rosby at Dany’s behest. “Your Grace,” he said, going to one knee before her, sweat falling to his brow as he pushed his hair from his eyes. “I live to serve at your pleasure.” The words had been said to both king and queen, but the knight only had eyes for Dany.

And lastly Ser Tristan Rivers, a bastard knight of the Golden Company, who had won the best joust of the tournament (in Aegon’s own humble opinion) against Lord Buckler’s second son, after the pair broke three lances each against one another. The king had suggested that they award the joust to Rivers, for he had ‘couched his lance more skilfully’. “I am no fighter, and know little of this sort of combat,” Dany had said, and agreed with him. She found herself wishing for Ser Barristan’s council – and she was quite convinced that her old knight could have beaten all of these challengers.

Dany had enjoyed the spectacle, but Lord Jon Connington was less impressed by it. “A mystery knight and a sellsword are among the finest champions of the realm,” he said scornfully, when the jousting paused for the interval. “The knights of the realm have changed, Your Graces, and not for the better. Few men can today boast the chivalry of King Aerys’s day.”

“What was it like?” Aegon asked, his voice taking on a boyish charm.

Lord Jon glanced around. “Less pomp and grandeur than this and more actual fighting. The Tourney at Harrenhal saw three hundred knights tilting in the lists, from all corners of the Seven Kingdoms. I remember the sounds of the songs and the smells of the feast, the morning sun shining off Rhaegar’s armour; black plate with rubies set in the breast, his helm topped with dragon’s wings.”

We have real dragons now, Dany thought. Her Dothraki riders had told her that Rhaegal and Viserion had made themselves lairs among the rocky cliffs that fringed Blackwater Bay. The time may come when they start to lay eggs of their own, Maester Marwyn told her. He also wanted to study their reproductive means, which Dany had allowed. “But if they singe your beard off, I will hear no complaints from you,” she’d told him.

As for Drogon, he rarely rested in the same place for more than a night, the fishermen said, and spent most of his time flying beneath the stars. Dany wondered where she went, though sometimes she dreamed of her black flying through dark clouds and over starlit sands. Are these just visions or are they real? She did not know.

Presently Marwyn and Strong Belwas returned with their skins of melon wine and made their courtesies. Dany made a mental note to ask the archmaester about her dreams, but she never got any
further than that, for when she turned round Tyrion Lannister was coming up the steps to their pavilion.

“Your Grace.” Lannister bowed to Aegon and then to her, “and Your Grace.” He wore a red undershirt and black doublet with golden lions worked upon the buttons. “I am told that you have need of my service in matters regarding the surrender of some holdouts loyal to my family.”

“Yes,” said Aegon, taking command. “Notably Fawn Crag, where the lords Cafferen, Selmy and Meadows have taken a stand – though Lord Connington doubts that you will find much trouble there – and Grandview, where Lord Grandison still hoists the Lannister banners in rebellion.”

“Are you quite certain, Your Grace? House Grandison blazons its own banners with lions also.” He smiled a little. “Either way, they should present little trouble to us. Lord Narbert is eighty if he is a day, and a sleeping lion is no match for a roaring one.”

“Do not jest so, Imp,” said Lord Connington, “If you rouse it from slumber, you could find some fight in the Grandison lion.”

“Then we would do well not to wake it. And if it comes to fight, what of it? I hear that our noble Hand of the King will be riding south on this undertaking to see the fortresses placated.”

This was news to Dany, but she would sooner save the matter until afterwards. And if Connington is leaving the capital behind, what of it? She had neither need of the man nor any love for him. “Is that all of the rebels?” she asked.

“I do hope so,” said Lannister, “the sooner I am returned to King’s Landing, the better. I find that ruling in this city suits my talents particularly well.”

“Estermont will likely surrender as soon as we mount up on our horses,” Jon Connington said, “if not, I see no harm in dispatching the royal fleet to encircle the island. The War of the Five Kings saw the loss of most of the army Greenstone once commanded, and we will have no trouble in taking it back.”

Lannister fiddled with a ring on his finger. “Might I ask what provisions I am supposed to offer these rebel lords?”

“We can talk about that on the road,” Jon Connington said gruffly.

_I’ll not have you bargaining away my realm without my leave like some costermonger_, Dany thought. “Surely there is no harm in letting Lord Tyrion know presently; he might well have a few suggestions of his own to add.”

Lannister nodded his head in her direction. “Great minds think alike, Your Grace.” He turned to face Aegon and Lord Connington. “And what offer has the gracious Hand of the King come up with, may I ask?”

“Watch your tongue, Imp,” Connington said in an almost bored voice. “You need not presume to think.”

“No. But our queen does.”

Dany was adamant. “Tell him.”

Connington ducked his head. “Your Grace.” His hand gripped the arm of Aegon’s chair. “There is not much to tell, frankly,” he said slowly, as though explaining something to a stupid child. “We dare
not broker anything more than the most lenient peace with these bannermen. We may need their allegiance more than ever in the wars to come."

“They rebelled against my rule,” Dany said flatly. “Our rule. Don’t you think that some sort of retribution is necessary?”

Tyrion Lannister stepped in then and immediately lost any favour Dany had been willing to give him. “I agree with Lord Connington, Your Grace,” he said. “I do seem to recall something my father once told my repugnant nephew when Joff still sat the Iron Throne: “When your enemies defy you, you must serve them steel and fire. When they go to their knees, however, you must help them back to their feet. Elsewise no man will bend the knee to you.” My father was full of these snippets of wisdom. A shame that it wasn’t enough to prevent him from dying.” It must have been sarcasm in his words, for there was nothing even resembling sadness on his face. He grinned. “Should I have a horse saddled for myself, Your Graces?”

Aegon gestured vaguely in his direction, the half-cape flapping around him like the wings of a black and red bird. “As you will.” He rose from his seat. “We shall be leaving briefly to mingle among the courtiers, my lady, but I will return by the time the joust resumes.”

He went, with Connington following close behind. Tyrion Lannister lingered a moment on the steps. “You might do well to wish me good fortune, Your Grace,” he said. “I have not left King’s Landing in a very long time, and I daresay I am not as well acquainted with the world outside this city as I once was.”

“I am sure you will perform your task satisfactorily,” Dany replied coolly. “Good day to you, Lord Lannister.”

They parted ways there. Yet even as he disappeared from her sight beneath the platform, Dany could not help but feel that he was watching her all the way. She still did not know what to make of him, where his loyalties lie, whether or not he could be trusted. I must ask Lord Varys what he thinks of the Imp. Her fingers curled softly around the arm of the chair, causing the wood to strain between her fingers. That is a problem for another day.

The commons and the nobles alike were milling out across the tourney fields now, going between the lists and the market stands and back again. Dany and her entourage waited on the platform for a time. The king and his Hand were talking with Lady Thorne across the way, but Dany did not feel that she had the strength to occupy herself with the fawning of courtiers today. “You may mingle with the rest of the crowd,” she told her advisors. “Marwyn, accompany me on my walk, if you would be so kind.”

The footfalls from Dany’s sandals and his boots were muffled by the long grass. “The time will come when I must decide upon a Queen’s Hand to stand beside me,” she told him, “have you any counsel as to whom I might choose?”

“Not me.” The Mage chuckled. “I would advocate for the good Ser Barristan, but in his absence… well, I dare say that Your Grace knows your councillors better than I do.”

“None of my sellswords would make a reliable Hand, so that rules out the Tattered Prince, Brown Ben… and Daario. I cannot bring myself to rely upon Moqorro, for fear that he might burn the city to ash to cleanse it of unbelievers. I could always recall Reznak mo Reznak from Meereen, but that would leave the Shavepate to rule the city, and he would take a good few months getting here. And since you have already ruled yourself out so quickly…”

Marwyn chuckled. “Well, it would seem that I am a slightly more desirable option when compared to
some of those. But you might do well to wait for your white knight to return and keep the Handship to yourself for the time being.”

“Has a king ruled without a Hand before?”

“No, Dany thought, I am not. “Your Grace,” said a soft voice at her elbow. “Might I have a moment?”

She turned to look, but she already knew who the voice belonged to. “Lord Varys. I thought that you were staying at the Red Keep?”

“I was. But I could not bear to be so far from the festivities, though spiders are rarely welcomed at such a party.”

“It is not really a party,” Marwyn interjected, with a small grin. “I could tell you stories of such foolishness and drunken debauchery that they would make you squeal like a little girl, Lord Varys.”

“Oh!” The eunuch pressed powdered hands to his eyes in jest. “I have a but a delicate heart, Archmaester; I don’t think I’d be able to stomach-”

“Yes,” Marwyn said, a little sourly this time. “Delicate indeed.” He bobbed his head. “I beg pardon, Your Grace, but I need to go see a man about a horse.”

And thus Dany was left along with Varys. “It is about Ser Barristan Selmy,” he said, wasting no time. “My little birds tell me that your good knight has reappeared in Dorne.”

“And?”

Varys gave her a mournful look. “Prince Doran has had him detained… as a temporary measure, I’m sure you can understand.” He swallowed. “I do seem to recall that Prince Oberyn promised to check with his brother as to the knight’s whereabouts…”

“And yet he has reported nothing back.”

The eunuch folded his arms. “It pains me to say so, Your Grace. Doubtless they will release your knight in time, or so I hope… though one must question why Prince Doran did not send a raven notifying us of this matter.”

“Curious indeed, Dany thought. Another reason why I must be wary of the Dornishmen. But she could not afford to make enemies on such light grounds. “Mayhaps his raven was lost on the journey.”

“Mayhaps,” Varys said sweetly, “or mayhaps there was no raven at all, Your Grace.” His fingers brushed against her palm. “I fear that this city does not love its new monarchs with the passion that I had hoped a Targaryen reign would bring. The Tyrells have cut their supply carts to the capital, and we are receiving nothing from the Riverlands or the West… which means that there will be a grain shortage soon, unless we can find friends with a sizable amount of arable land… and with winter coming too…” He purred softly.

“How long can we sustain the population of King’s Landing?” Dany asked. She felt her eyes harden. “Answer me truthfully.”

Varys looked as though he might start to cry. “Before, when Highgarden was still sending us its
supplies, I might have said three years. But now that the Tyrells are keeping their grain stocks close
to themselves, I must admit that our granary stocks are running low. A year, mayhaps two if we are
lucky enough to have a final harvest, and if we remain careful with our rationing. Perhaps… if I may
be so bold, we could look to our friends across the Narrow Sea for sustenance.”

“I will not rely on the Free Cities to support the realm,” Dany told him.

“Of course not, Your Grace, but given the necessity of things, we might have no choice. Our mutual
acquaintance Magister Illyrio might be able to spare us some of his trade.”

_Some of his pity, you mean._ “I will lay this matter before the small council the next time we meet,”
Dany said. “This is a matter of great urgency, I understand that. When Meereen was besieged, the
people rose in revolt against me. We are having some small luck in that the Unsullied and the City
Watch are managing to keep the peace for now.” The gold cloaks were eight thousand men – the
strongest they had been in years, Aegon said – and roughly three-fifths of that was comprised of men
from the city who had taken up spears and swords and shields to defend and help their families
through hard times. The remaining two-fifths were former sellswords and freeriders who had taken
up temporary posts after following Dany and Aegon across the narrow sea.

Varys spoke softly. “Your Grace, I have heard more whispers from underneath the streets. These
secrets are… troubling, I must say.”

Dany sighed. While she was grateful for Varys’s counsel, the eunuch was altogether too secretive for
her liking, more so than even Skahaz Shavepate and his Brazen Beasts. “What ails you, my lord?”
she asked wearily.

“It is the matter of these sparrows, Your Grace, these impoverished beggars and misguided children.
They dwell in the sewers under the city and among the crowded alleys of Flea Bottom, but they
preach their words in the squares and the streets for all to hear.”

“Their words mean me no harm, and I do not think they do either,” Dany said. “Just this morning
they shouted blessings upon me as we rode-”

“That was but one group of them,” said Varys. “Religious fanatics come in all shapes and sizes. We
must be careful not to tar them all with the same brush, but some choose violence where others
would turn to peaceful means, raising arms against those who disagree with them. Several rulers of
years past have made the mistake of growing too close to the Faith, to their detriment.”

“And what would you have me do?” she asked. “I cannot very well march into my city and have
these men arrested without cause-”

The eunuch narrowed his already thin lips. “I would have you remain vigilant, Your Grace. Nothing
more than that.” He pressed his hands together lightly. “But now, I believe the tourney is resuming.
Fighting, even in mock combat, has never been something that has amused me – truth be told, I
mislike it greatly – but it would not do to be seen scurrying off now, would it?”

Dany did have to wonder why someone like Varys would be overly concerned with their already
tarnished reputation in the slightest. She took her seat on the dais and waited for the return of Aegon
and Lord Connington. The four remaining knights were lining up at opposite ends of the field; the
threadbare hedge knight on his aged-looking warhorse, Ser Rolly of the Kingsguard all in white, the
knight of Rosby and Ser Tristan of the Golden Company.

“Now they ride,” said Aegon.
Ser Rolly broke three lances against Ser Myles before unhorsing the young knight. The fallen man
took his defeat gracefully, at least; the same could not be said for Ser Tristan Rivers, who threw his
gauntlets at his squire in a rage after he was knocked down on the first pass. “Rivers is a proud man,”
Lord Connington told them, “he does not seem pleased at being unhorsed by some hedge knight.”

“And yet now some hedge knight will be among the final two,” said Aegon, rubbing his chin and
sighing in exasperation. “What was the man’s name again?”

“Ser Morm.” Connington’s mouth had set in a hard line. “Best if Rolly unhorses him,” he continued.
Dany understood why; hedge knights scoring major victories in tourneys like these would suggest
weaknesses among the royal court, and a lack of knightly chivalry. That was Ser Barristan had been
so keen to unmask the mystery knight at the tourney of Storm’s End, as he’d told her, and why King
Aerys had commanded her brother Rhaegar to reveal the truth behind the Knight of the Laughing
Tree.

“Have no fear, my lady,” said Aegon, “Rolly is good with a lance.”

Yes, Dany thought. But he will not win, not if my suspicions are correct.

They were.

The knights rode a first thundering pass down the length of the lists, but their lances only scraped off
each other’s armour in passing, the shriek of steel echoing across the stands, loudest around where
Dany sat. Ser Rolly Duckfield’s enamelled plate was dinted, the light gleaming off the scratches as
he made his second pass.

The tourney knight Ser Morm lowered his lance and struck Ser Rolly hard in the chest, spilling him
from the saddle all at once. Dany saw Aegon’s face creasing with discontent, then worry as Ser
Rolly remained unmoving for a moment. He was on the verge of rising to his feet, she saw, when the
knight stood at last and walked towards his opponent with his gauntlet outstretched. Duckfield had
chosen to follow his earlier opponent Ser Myles’s example, shaking the knight’s hand with grace and
hoisting the victorious arm into the air. Then he retreated away from the lists and the mystery knight
was left alone before the dais.

Following the initial clash, the crowd had erupted into clapping – as was to be expected – but now a
hush had fallen, and Dany could only her quiet. Slowly, carefully, her eyes met Daario Naharis. Is he
thinking the same? she wondered, as she rose.

“Good ser,” she called down to the knight. “You have won the tournament of King’s Landing to
celebrate the royal coronation. You may ask a boon of us, and if it is within our means to grant, you
may have it.” Of course, she already knew what he wanted.

He removed his helm slowly, unbuckling the straps and lifting it from his head. A swarthy face, dark
eyes, balding, older than most knights. My bear so fair. Dany heard a sharp intake of breath, then
realised that it was her own. “Ser… Ser Jorah, why have you returned to me, after…” After I
banished you and said that I would kill you if you ever returned. Dany saw that Daario’s hand was at
the hilt of his arakh, and the Unsullied were gripping their spears with fierce determination.

“I have travelled across the world, Khaleesi,” Ser Jorah told her, “and there is nothing in the world
that is worth fighting for as much as you. I have…” He broke off. “You said that you would kill me
if I ever returned to seek you out. Hear my words or have my head, I do not care. But I will not leave
you again. Not ever.”
I have to admit that I do enjoy writing Dany chapters, though I'm not really sure why. I think it's probably because she's in Westeros, which automatically makes me like her character more. Part of the whole purpose of this fic was to take Dany out of the endless Meereenese Loop that she's been going through. While I hated her in ACOK an ADWD, I thought she had some of the best chapters of AGOT, and she was pretty good (though admittedly fairly low-ranking compared to the other storylines) in ASOS.

Might be that I'll actually like her by the end of *The Sunset Kingdoms*, but who knows...

Dany chose a dress of pale cream... with a deep cut and an airy cloak of moonstone colouring as well. Her crown was a slim silver coronet.

Today [Aegon] wore a doublet of red leather over black shirt, black breeches, with golden dragons duelling across the breast. At his belt, the Valyrian steel sword Blackfyre hid inside its ruby-encrusted scabbard. Her nephew’s crown was a new one of his own commission, a slender band of gold, the centrepiece a dragon’s head at the front set with onyx eyes.

Clothing is something that you can afford to get descriptive with as a writer, and a lot of it is about symbolism. Note that throughout this chapter, Daenerys is represented by the colour silver (representing the new, interestingly) and Aegon by gold (representing the old). Even the tourney pavilion declares its allegiance:

...one of two carved wooden thrones edged with gold. Dragon banners fluttered black and red on either side of the dais, and the pillars that supported the canopy were topped by golden dragon figures.

[Tyrion] wore a red undershirt and black doublet with golden lions worked upon the buttons.

Tyrion wears Targaryen colours but Lannister accents, representing the duality of his loyalties. He is trying to blend in with the Targaryen court, but cannot help but state his own familial allegiance.

...a hedge knight in battered armour by the name of Ser Morm. He bore a winged black heart on his shield. “Those are the arms of House Toyne,” Aegon told her.

The words of House Toyne are *Fly High, Fly Far*. Ser Morm has certainly come a long way to meet up with Daenerys.

“You shall be my ladies-in-waiting.” - Dany, to Irri and Jhiqui

Irri and Jhiqui don’t even know what ladies-in-waiting are, but Dany gives them the position anyway, instead of awarding it to ladies of the court as her mother Rhaella did. This shows how she evaluates her allies and compatriots on their worth to her, not because of the names they bear. While this is a laudable trait for a ruler, she does not
realise that this will bode poorly for her in a society such as Westeros.
The Wars to Come

Chapter Summary

“I wish you good fortune in the wars to come.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAVOS

King Stannis was in a dark mood. “This lot makes far too much noise for my liking,” he muttered as Bryen Farring did up the straps of his breastplate. “Robert might have permitted his men to loudly blunder their way through the countryside without a care in the world, but I will not have my men raping and pillaging as they please. When we make camp for the night, I will be sure to remind my captains what the punishment is for disobedience.”

By the time he had finished Devan had come back into the room, leading seven or eight knights behind him. Their armour shone with a new gleam in the half-light of the tower room. Devan made the introductions. “Your Grace, here are Ser Patrek Mallister, Ser Brynden Blackwood, Ser Marq Piper, Ser—”

“No need to recite all the names, Devan,” the king said, scowling as he turned to face the aforementioned knights. “Say what you have to say, and say it quickly.”

Ser Patrek had an easy smile and an affable wit, Davos knew. Neither of which would serve him well here. “The baggage train is prepared, my lord. We will depart when you are ready.”

If the king was pleased, he did not show it. “Send word to Lord Bracken. Tell him that he may sound the first march. Play the drums loud enough for me to hear them from up here. I want every man in time.”

The Mallister knight frowned. “Already? You… you are not coming, Your Grace?”

Stannis snorted. “Of course I am. But I will not be ready for some time, I fear. Until then, I see no point in waiting. The sooner we leave…” He left the rest unspoken, and Ser Patrek had the foresight to see that the king’s orders were swiftly obeyed.

As the knights clattered down the tower stairs, the king turned back to his map table. He waved a hand over part of the map. “Look to the west, Davos.”

The lion markers were sparse beyond the mountains, far fewer than Davos had expected. “It seems
that there are not many armies there, Your Grace,” he said.

“A fool could have told us that,” said Ser Clayton Suggs. He was one of those who had always looked down upon Davos, a cruel man with a cruel mouth. “I do not understand why—”

“Because Ser Davos sees things as they are, and tells them truer than anyone else would dare. Tell me, Ser Clayton, what do you see?”

Suggs stared down at the map with his watery eyes. “I… there are not many armies, Your Grace.”

“Would that it were true, ser. I know not what lies in wait for us beyond those mountains. I am not above using spies to find my enemy’s secrets… but any informer of ours will have trouble getting through that way as well.”

“By all means, a scouting party ought suffice,” began Ser Godry Farring, “but—”

“There are a number of difficult passes and secret ways through the mountains, but only two ways for an army of this size to invade the Westerlands from the east.”

“By the goldroad, through Deep Den,” said Ser Godry. “Surely that route would be—”

“Or by the river road, through the Golden Tooth,” Ser Richard Horpe finished. “Both fortresses are near as formidable as Winterfell. If the Lannisters can raise an army even half our size, they will hold us at either, and once winter comes our march will be impossible.”

“Then we must march quickly,” said Ser Clayton.

“You have an impressive talent for stating the obvious, Suggs,” Ser Richard said.

“You are both failing to see what is obvious,” Godry the Giantslayer said. “The Lannisters cannot protect both castles, can they? The wise thing to do would be to send half our army to attack one and the other half to attack another.” He turned to the king. “Rest assured, Your Grace, that I am capable of leading—”

“I can think of no worse idea,” said Horpe. “You can prattle on about slaying the damned giant all you want, but leading an army and fighting one duel are very different things, ser.”

King Stannis looked at them with a mixture of boredom of contempt. “Quite right,” he said, “though by that logic, Ser Davos ought to lead the army. He understands men, while you three have a tendency to alienate every man under your command.”

Ser Clayton protested. “Your Grace—”

“Silence, Suggs. I will not be giving Ser Davos these responsibilities, as he has tasks of his own to carry out. But there are men in my army who are far more capable than the three of you put together. Tytos Blackwood, to name but one. But I cannot say that I trust him wholeheartedly, which is why Ser Clayton and Ser Richard will be going southwest through Deep Den with him. Ser Godry will ride with me.”

Ser Richard Horpe sucked in a breath. “Of course, Your Grace,” he said flatly. “Eleven thousand on each road, I suppose. And we will regroup when at the gates of Lannisport?”

“No,” said the Giantslayer. “The sooner our armies regroup, the better. The Lannisters will outnumber us inside the Westerlands—”
“If we can take Lannister strongholds we will endear the Westerlords to our cause. That task will be accomplished quicker if we fight as two armies.”

“The Lannisters will split us in two and destroy the both of us, Your Grace,” Ser Godry said.

Stannis signalled for silence. “This kind of bickering is exactly why I am hesitant about sharing my plans with any of you. I mean to send Tytos Blackwood and his Riverlands army south to Deep Den, seven thousand men, while conserving a larger force for my own march on the Golden Tooth. They’ll march up the goldroad and come to our aid if we get held up, and then we’ll march on Lannisport together.”

Davos nodded. “It sounds like a good plan, Your Grace.”

Stannis tapped the tabletop. “Some lords think that I need to earn their respect, and my own legitimacy. I already have all the legitimacy I need. And the Westermen will realise this. The Lannisters will cave once we get past the mountains, and within three weeks we’ll be at Lannisport, ready to lay siege to the Rock.” He turned to his knights. “You may leave. Mount up on your horses and put the men into order.”

Only once they were gone did the king continue. “Tywin Lannister is dead. Ser Kevan and the bastard boy are all that hold the Westerlands together, and Ser Kevan does not command nearly as great an authority as his brother once did.” Stannis scowled. “I didn’t like Tywin Lannister. But he knew how to command his men, and he knew how to wield authority. The Westermen may still retain some semblance of loyalty to Tywin.”

“The Westermen will be looking for a strong leader like Tywin,” Davos said. “You will give them one.” He looked down at the map. “Petyr Baelish will not be able to hold Harrenhal,” he pointed out.

“To take the castle I will need four or five thousand men. And time. If we hole up behind the walls of Harrenhal, we will not be leaving again until the thaw.” The king scowled. “That was always a lost cause.”

The wind picked up outside, skirling, whistling. On the table, cups and map markers set to rattling. Then the air abruptly warmed, and in the hearth flames climbed and danced like lovers. Davos did not hear or see Melisandre footsteps, but everything else spoke to her presence. And then, long after the first signs of her arrival had come, she appeared. The ruby at her throat burned the colour of sunrise. Instinctively Davos’s hands went to the pouch of fingerbones at his own throat, and found only empty air.

For the longest time she said nothing. Her gaze was fixed firmly upon the king, and his upon her. Davos decided it was better not to let this fester. “My lady,” he said, stepping between the pair and bowing.

“What ails you, woman?” the king said suddenly. As though the spell holding him in place had been broken.

Melisandre sidled into the tower room, red silks flapping about her ankles like tongues of flame. The fire roared behind her. “You seem distressed, my king.”

Stannis glared at her. “Of course I am. We’re at war.”

Quite suddenly she reached out and took Stannis’s hand in hers, stroking her pale fingers across the king’s palm. Davos coughed. “Your Grace, I’ll...”

Melisandre turned to stare at him, though she kept hold of Stannis’s hand. “Do stay, by all means,”
she said. “As it happens, Ser Davos, I have seen the pair of us sharing a rather fruitful partnership. A rather intimate partnership.”

Davos scowled. “Are you mocking me? I am married—”

She laughed, sweet as summerwine. “Of course I’m mocking you, ser.”

He scowled some more. “I prefer it when the truth is laid before me, plain and simple.”

“R’hllor has laid the truth before you many times,” Melisandre said. “Plain and simple - just how you like it. Yet you willingly ignore it.” She advanced slowly towards him, closer and closer and closer, until he could feel the queer heat radiating from her body, and the air turned hazy. All the while Stannis did not move.

“The truth..” said Melisandre of Asshai, “is fire and light and love.”

The king ground his teeth. “Have the pair of you finished your bickering yet?”

“I fear that the bickering will never cease, Your Grace,” Davos said.

“I disagree,” Melisandre replied. “We need each other, Ser Davos—”

“Why are you here?” Stannis asked.

“I saw a truth in the flames,” Melisandre said, “and I thought you might want to hear it.”

The king was not amused. “As Ser Davos would say, the truth is generally best spoken.”

“Then I will show you what I saw.” Melisandre guided the king to the hearth and laid a hand on his shoulder. The pair of them stared into the flames, their shadows growing larger and larger against the walls. “Do you see what I see?” the red woman asked.

“That depends on what you see.”

“I see the pathway cleared for your ascension,” Melisandre said softly. “The snow will melt around your feet, and the three champions of the god will follow your lead as you climb to the mountain of stars. And there is the Iron Throne too. It is yours by right, Stannis Baratheon. All you have to do is choose.” She whispered something to him that Davos could not hear.

The king pulled away from the brazier suddenly, as though he had been stung. “The choice?” he asked.

Melisandre smiled. “The Great Choice. I see it laid before you. The Great Choice that will make you a king or—” She faltered and turned away from the fire.

“Or what, woman?” Stannis pressed. “Or what?”

She straightened up. “I have every faith that you will make the right decision.”

“I would still like to know what I am choosing between,” said the king.

“The choice is simple,” the red woman said. “You must choose between the choice that will save the world, or the choice with which you will doom yourself. One is a path of light, the other is a path of darkness. Light and darkness. Life and death. Love and—”

Stannis dismissed her. Doubtless he had heard this tale a thousand times before. Davos certainly had.
“Yes, very good.” The king turned back to his map table.

“You may require guidance—”

The king gave a humourless snort. “I think that if there is a choice between saving the world and doom ing myself, I’ll know which one to pick. Do you have anything else to share with me besides vague prophecies?”

The red woman’s eyes flashed in the low light. “I worry about the whims and wishes of your daughter’s heart,” she said. “If she is to wed this Northern boy, then she will be forced to give up R’llor’s light and take false ones—”

“Shireen has never accepted your gods,” the king said icily. “Nor will she. The child is stubborn.”

“Our gods,” Melisandre said. “And she will, in time. I have attempted to encourage her—”

_Not Shireen. She will not have Shireen._ “Shireen is a princess,” Davos told her. “She will worship whichever gods she pleases.”

“There was a time when I warned my onion knight against speaking out of turn,” said Stannis. “Now he seems to speak my words for me.”

Davos bowed his head. “I humbly beg your pardon, Your Grace.”

Stannis grunted. “For what? You have committed no crime.” He turned to Melisandre. “I reward those who are useful to me, woman. And unless you have come up with some new strategy, then you are not being useful.”

“No. My king.” Melisandre bowed her head. “I shall leave you alone with Ser Davos to discuss these matters of war. I know that I am of little help to you here.” She folded her arms inside her robe. “This may be the last time that we speak before your departure. If that is so, then I bid you farewell, until the time comes for us to meet again, be it in Casterly Rock or elsewhere.” She swept from the room. The door clicked shut behind her, and the warmth fled.

Stannis remained staring at the closed door long after Melisandre had gone. Then his mouth and brow sat in hard stone lines and his eyes fell back across Davos, grey and turbulent like the storm on white-capped waves. “Are you afraid of that woman?”

Once again, Davos’s fingers went absently to the place where he had kept his fingerbones. “Lady Melisandre?”

“Aye.”

“She is a curious woman. I…” He hesitated. “I do not like to speak about the lady behind her back, Your Grace.”

“Perhaps not, but you will all the same. And you needn’t worry about secrecy. I don’t doubt that she’s listening to us even now.” Stannis scoffed. “I would be lying if I said that I have no doubts in her ways. I see Selyse in her, sometimes. My wife is a zealous fool, ruled by emotion and jealousy and scorn, and I cannot help but wonder if Melisandre is the same.”

This was the first time that the king had spoken his concerns with such fervour, as far as Davos knew. Words failed him for a long moment. “She gave you that sword, Your Grace.” That was the only thing he could think to say.
“Lightbringer.” Stannis scowled. “It glows with pretty colours at night. Sometimes you can feel the heat off it, and sometimes you cannot. Sometimes she whispers a few words to it and it appears to burn. That does not make it a magic sword, Davos. Some cheap conjurer’s trick, I think… yet we cannot deny that the Red God has some power, more than I have ever known the Seven to have.” He stared blankly into the brazier flame and grimaced. “Renly. Ser Cortnay Penrose. Our road to Winterfell from the Wall was weathered by storm and snow, so much so that we were trapped in a blizzard for days without end. Yet as the same chill raged to the north, we found the way south unhindered by snow after Melisandre lit her nightfires. I do not like it, Ser Davos. I do not trust it either.”

“But you have no choice.”

“Aye, I have no choice. I am a king, yet faith holds me prisoner. My knights are so enthralled by her magic, by her, that they seem to worship me alongside the Lord of Light. I never asked for that Ser Davos. A crown, yes, but I am no demigod.”

The red light from the hearth glowed in his eyes. Stannis rose from his seat and walked to the brazier, clutching something in his hand, then threw it into the flames. *One of the map markers,* Davos realised, *in the shape of a stag.* He could see the antlers curling up and charring, the ebon-wood turning blacker and blacker still as the flames stole the life from it.

The king straightened up. “I did not call you here to discuss these things that we have spoken of a thousand times before, though.” From his desk he produced a letter, sealed by a careful smudge of pinkish-red wax. “From the Mootons. Your wife has arrived in Maidenpool this week past. It seemed apt to inform you. Maester Gulian wrote me by proxy, though doubtless it would have been easier to write to you directly.”

*Marya is in Maidenpool. And Steffon and Stannis.* The news brought less elation than Davos had expected, though. All he said was, “Not many people know that I can read, Your Grace.”

“Then you must tell them, Davos. Spread the word far and wide, and let them know that the onion knight is not just a lowborn smuggler.”

“Well… I will always be lowborn, Your Grace.”

“But not always a smuggler. Your current position is a testament to that. You have risen high in the world, my loyal onion knight.”

“I could not have done it without you, Your Grace.”

At that Stannis looked as though he might smile. “Quite right. You could not have been King’s Hand without a king to serve. Your son would not be my squire. Devan is a diligent lad. By now he ought to have saddled my horse.”

“Aye, he ought to, but—”

“His mind is prone to wandering from time to time. He is a curious boy. I would expect little different.” The king rose from his chair and waved a hand towards the stairs. “Come, Ser Davos.” Their boots echoed on the wood as they went down.

The king stopped at a high merlon and glanced over the side. In the distance, the faint sound of trumpets could be heard. Banners of every colour waved as the men Jonos Bracken had set to marching made their slow way across the grey-green landscape. “Wait one moment, Davos.”

“Your Grace?”
“Do you ever feel that the choices - the choices which you have agonized over for years and years - do not seem to matter? It was no easy thing to take up arms against Joffrey and the Lannisters. My family would be imprisoned or slaughtered if we failed, and that danger still remains. And there is danger to you, and to your family, and to countless others. Was it truly the right thing to do, or was that only what I told myself to stop my nightmares? My brother is dead, Davos. I killed him, and Renly’s shade will haunt me to the end of my days. Storm’s End and Dragonstone are lost. How many thousands of men have died on all sides of this conflict, and for what? The world is unchanged, or so it seems to me. I am the forgotten son, the one who stands at the edge of something, but is never truly a part of it. The Lannisters have all but forgotten my claim, and the Targaryens do not seem to care. Are the wars to come truly worth their cost?”

Stannis reached for the sword at his hip, his fingers curling and uncurling around the hilt in his frustration. “Were we different men, you would not be privy to this conversation, nor to the responsibilities I am about to give you. I daresay your life would be a lot safer that way, but a lot less rewarding. Perhaps I would have died during that siege. Or perhaps by some miracle I would have survived, only to capture the smuggler Davos Shorthand. I would have taken his head instead of just his fingers, and I doubt that I would have felt any remorse.” He shook his head. “Tell me true now, what do you live for, Davos Seaworth? Why bring me those onions, though to many that would have been the most foolish thing you could have done? You did not know me, did not have any feelings towards me, did not—”

Davos scarcely hesitated. “For my family, Your Grace. We were starving, and I thought—”

“That was the only reason?”

“The only reason.”

“I suppose our families mean different things to all of us.” Stannis considered that for a long moment, then turned away and walked down the stairs. Davos followed him into the courtyard. “Selyse has meant little to me for a long time now,” the king admitted as they walked among the horses. “We have not shared a bed in years.”

“Neither have my wife and I—”

“You have been absent from Lady Marya for two years. I did not expect you to sail the four hundred miles from Dragonstone to the Rainwood every night just to warm her bed. But I think that you might have done so were it more convenient.”

“I—”

“I have no interests in your sleeping habits, Davos. And anyway, it is not Selyse I am talking to you about, but Shireen.”

“Your Grace?”

King Stannis glanced around. Knights saluted as they walked, but the king did not return the courtesy. “Shireen is my only heir, the only true heir of House Baratheon and the Iron Throne,” Stannis said. “Should it happen that I fall in battle, Ser Davos, I have given my knights orders to follow my daughter and to help her through the turbulent times ahead of her… but I do not trust them as I trust you. Should the worst come to the worst… I would choose the girl over… you will need to keep her safe through whatever means you can.” He stopped abruptly. “Promise me, Ser Davos.”

“I promise.”
Stannis stared at him for an age. His eyes were the colour of the sky, and they were troubled. And it was not fury in them, but storminess, dark and deep enough for a man to drown in. “But now you must leave, Ser Davos. And so must I.”

Devan appeared, leading the king’s mount by the bridle. A magnificent stallion with a glossy dark coat, caparisoned with black leather and golden wool. Stannis looked displeased at all the ornamentation. He flung his cloak over his shoulder and mounted up. He was a big man, but the horse stood tall in spite of his weight. Devan passed the reins to the king.

“I wish you good fortune, Ser Davos,” King Stannis said.

“And I you, Your Grace.” He felt a strange weight pulling at his heart. “Farewell… my friend.”

Stannis stirred awkwardly atop his mount. “Farewell,” he said slowly, “aye, farewell, Davos.” Then the king jerked the reins and the horse went, and he was headed towards the gate.

“I should get to my own mount, Father,” Devan said. “I… I…” He stood tall and proud, and the wisps of beard on his chin lent him a man’s look, but Davos could hear the boy in him.

“King Stannis will not mind if you are a little late,” he said. “Come.” He beckoned Devan towards one of the stables, and found a stone bench for them to sit on.

“I remember when you were born,” Davos told him. “I remember the way you came out of your mother kicking and wailing, red in the face and bawling. We had thought that perhaps it was time for us to have a daughter, even going so far to choose out names – Cassana, perhaps, after Lord Stannis’s mother…

“But it matters not. Your mother and I were happier than ever when we saw you especially, because you were the first son we had that would not grow up wanting. Our pride and our joy, Devan.” His son was colouring with embarrassment, but Davos pretended not to notice. “And you still are. It was never meant to be like this, but you’ll go home as an example to your siblings, a squire and hopefully a knight when all this is done. King Stannis says he’s very pleased with your service.”

Devan smiled. “You taught me to always tell the truth, Father. Now you’re lying yourself.”

That made Davos laugh. “I taught you too well, it seems. Stannis Baratheon might not be one for compliments, aye, but when you have known a man for so many years it’s easy to read the truth in his expressions. Rest assured, if he didn’t like your service, we’d know.” He patted his son’s shoulder. “Listen here.” He leaned in close. “No matter what you do, where you go, know that I am proud of you. Always.” He brought the boy close and embraced him tightly, hearing their hearts in time.

And they went their separate ways. Devan to join the other squires beneath the king’s flapping banners, Davos to join the watchers standing on the ramparts around the courtyard. Princess Shireen was there, beside her betrothed and his black wolf. Queen Selyse stood behind her, severe as ever, and Lady Melisandre too. Davos felt the red woman’s eyes watching him every step of the way, but she did not say a word. He found himself a place between Lord Rickon and Ser Brynden Tully, at the middle of the crowd.

“Do you know how many times I’ve seen men riding out to war?” Ser Brynden Tully asked, more to himself than anyone else. “You never know who will win or lose,” he continued. “Or which of them will become heroes. There’s only one thing that you can know for certain: some of them never come back.”
Davos nodded. Dale. Allard. Matthis. Maric. All my fallen sons, and thousands more. Why did the Blackwater choose to spew me out, of all of them? Why me?

Perhaps he would never know.

Rickon leaned against the merlon. “King Stannis will win. I know he will.”

“How can you tell that, lad?” asked the Blackfish, amused.

“He scares me,” Rickon affirmed. “No one scares me. Well, almost no one.”

Shireen said, “Fear does not make a king. But Father does his duty, always. As we must do ours.” She patted Shaggydog behind the ears.

*The poor girl is wise beyond her years*, the onion knight thought. “That he does, child.” Davos took her by the hand.

Riverrun’s moat had frozen over a fortnight past, and the sheen of ice was nearly thick enough to ride horses on, but the men still crossed the drawbridge as they departed. The column wound out of the gate, winding like a steel-clad snake. Knights, grooms, horses, squires, and a king. *I wish you good fortune in the wars to come*, Davos thought. As though King Stannis might hear him.

A grey mist grew around the riders as they crested the next hill, and then they were gone for good.

Chapter End Notes

“I wish you good fortune in the wars to come.”

Really, this whole chapter was about Stannis's doubts of the wars to come, and oddly it's more about war itself than any other chapter I've written so far, despite not actually featuring any fighting. Both *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* are extremely realistic when it comes to their depiction of battles. Ser Brynden and Davos both reflect on the losses that occur during wars on all sides. I think Stannis is starting to have doubts and laments about the legitimacy of his own actions. Stannis is frequently forgotten by both the Lannisters and the Targaryens as having a weak, unsupported claim, and he's not sure whether his war is worth it, but he's also too far gone to turn back. Stannis's hesitation is shown frequently by his uncharacteristically hesitant incomplete thoughts during this chapter.

Note that Stannis does not know about how weak the Lannisters are, nor about the fact that their military numbers are not as high as popularly believed.
BRAN

All around him, the world was green. The roots twisted up through the abyss like long arms, reaching out to him with waxen leaves for hands, determined to drag him down into the darkness. No, Bran thought, *I’m not going down with you*. But it was no good, his cripple legs were useless, and the water filled his lungs. The world turned the colour of moss as he descended below, and the sparse shafts of sunlight that remained died a slow death. He could taste blood in his mouth, thick and metallic. Maybe he had bitten his own tongue as they pulled him down?

Then, all at once, he was walking in the forest, as the wind whispered an ancient song above. His feet led him on a well-trodden path between the trunks of trees that stood fifty times as tall as any giant. He clambered over twisted roots as thick as his arm and trudged through quagmires of black, silty mud. Above him the canopy of the trees swallowed the grey sky, leaves in red and gold and green, trunks gnarled and scrawny with age. Underfoot lived a thousand years of humus, sticky and grey and dotted with mushrooms. The ground was wet with thick red sap that glistened as it spread across the forest floor. Like a sea of blood, Bran thought. Pine needles crunched beneath his feet as he walked. The air tasted of lavender stalks growing in the glass gardens on a cool autumn day.

The beast stood in the clearing before him, as it always did. Bran felt a nervous shiver go through him. *I will be fine*, he thought, calming his breathing. *Back then, I did not have my legs*. He took a cautious step forward, advancing. *Here, I can be a knight.*

The beast turned to look at him with eyes that glowed the same orange colour as a dying sun. The forest darkened suddenly, the shadows of the sentinels lengthened, and Bran felt a chill go through him. He could see crystals of ice forming on the hem of his cloak. It was a shadowskin, lush and thick, striped black and white, but he did not remember donning it.

*Here I can be a knight*, he thought again, stalking another step forward, bent low in much the same way Osha the wildling had when she was hunting for prey. He felt braver, stronger, taller. Still the beast watched him, the hackles on its back rising, teeth grinding against one another – Bran could hear that from across the clearing. The beast scratched its hind leg against a tree trunk, then padded...
softly towards him on shadowed feet.

Bran raised the bow reluctantly. He did not remember bringing the longbow with him either, but he knew what he was doing, notching the arrow, bringing it slowly up to his chin, standing sideface, making sure the beast was in his line of sight.

“Relax your bow arm,” a voice said beside him. Robb. He could make the blurry shadow of his brother out on the edge of his vision, but he knew that the figure was not real. You’re dead, Robb. I’m sorry, but you’re dead.

And I’m not really here. I’m not. I’m a cripple, and-

“Never forget what you are,” a man’s voice said. “The rest of the world will not. Yet I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples, bastards and broken things.”

Bran relaxed his bow arm, and shot. The arrow flew straight, higher and higher, striking the beast on one outstretched paw. The bellow rang out across the clearing, a roar of wounded pain and terror that seemed to shake the very trunks of the trees. The world rattled. A snarl, and then the beast was coming forwards, faster, faster, charging him, claws and teeth and everything coming at him. Eighty feet. Seventy. Sixty. The bow was awkward in Bran’s hands, the arrow would not fix to the string, it slipped from between his clammy, nerveless fingers, and so he turned and did the only thing he could. Run.

The wind danced through his hair, wailing past with the howl of a wolf. A gale was picking up, and the trees were gusting and swaying like reeds in the breeze. and all at once there were snowflakes and ice shards in the air, beating viciously at his face. One grazed perilously close to him and cut his cheek. He could feel blood trickling down his face – only it was not blood, he knew, but the sap of the weirwood. The beast was closing on him, but he dared not look back, lest that be his end. What happens if I die in my dream? Bran did not know, and he did not want to find out. He stumbled over a knee-high root, righted himself, scrambled up a bank, scattering leaves in his wake, then jumped for the nearest tree-limb. Mercifully, it held. He clambered up into the branches, going higher and higher. That was the other thing he could do well - climbing. Very soon, then the beast was slipping away beneath him as he went up and up and up, disappearing behind a screen of red and gold leaves.

Bran stopped a moment, taking his time to breathe in the cool air. The ice storm had stopped all of a sudden, and for a moment he felt exhilaration such that he had not experienced in years. I can walk. I can run. I can climb. It might only be a green dream, but-

A hand grabbed him suddenly by the neck and dragged him close. The golden man. Bran felt all the air go out of him at once, and then he was choking, gasping for air, trying to pry those golden fingers loose to no avail. His legs kicked uselessly, but they were his stupid cripple legs, and they just flapped and floundered like a drowning man. He had gone quite purple in the face by the time the golden man spoke, opening one crystal blue eye to watch him, wearing an almost piteous expression. Six words, Bran knew. He had lived this nightmare a hundred times over.

“The things I do for love,” he said, and then Bran was falling, falling, falling, his screams torn away by the savage wind, swallowed by the howling of the beast below…

This time the ground never met him. Instead he felt his lungs fill with black water, salty as anything, and then he was sprawling out onto the surface, thrashing feebly to keep himself from drowning, till eventually he found one of the roots from the weirwood. He sucked in the air and held on for dear life.

When he was recovered, Bran dragged himself up onto the bank and spluttered. Whatever he spat
out was mixed with blood, though it had the cloying smell of the weirwood. “You will gain but little from drowning,” Lord Brynden’s voice said, from where he sat among the twisted fastness of his weirwood throne.

“That wasn’t my choice,” said Bran.

Lord Brynden shook his head. “Of course it was your choice. This was your dream. Did you learn anything new?”

_The beast cannot climb trees._ He shook his head. Lord Brynden knew that he was lying, most like, but he did not press Bran for answers. “Ah, well,” he said, in an ancient and quavering voice. The grey dead leaves that made up his crown rustled, whispering something Bran could not hear. “Do you feel ready to go back?”

“Back there?” His voice broke like a little boy’s. “I’m not frightened,” he added quickly.

“No,” Lord Brynden said, nodding. “I do not think you are.” He beckoned Bran from his throne of roots, holding out his hand. “Come.”

The broken boy struggled up the bank, pulling himself along with his hands. Mud and dirt clung to his skin, and red sap gathered beneath his fingernails, sticky as syrup. Around him, in the hollows of the tree roots and on the cave walls, he could hear a rustling. _The Children are watching,_ he knew. They often were. On occasion they did not even attempt to hide themselves, but most times they hid among shadows, speaking in whispers and sweet nothings, never truly talking but always watching.

“You must be tired, Brandon,” Lord Brynden said when he reached the top of the mound. He held up a hand. “Do not you lie to me.”

Two of the Children detached themselves from the darkness and approached, bearing a bowl. The paste was thick and red, made from mashed up weirwood roots and sap – or so Bran told himself. He was quite certain that there was something else in there, but he didn’t want to dwell upon it.

“Where are we going?” he asked, reaching up towards Lord Brynden. “Winterfell?” That was a hopeful thought, but they had gone back there twice already, once to see his father in the godswood, cleaning his greatsword Ice, and again to see him in the yard with his aunt Lyanna and uncle Benjen. Bran would never admit it, but it made him feel so happy and so sad at the same time that he had shed a tear on the way back up to the cave.

“Home,” said the lord of the weirwood. “My home.”

Bran reached out and took him by the hand. The light flickered and spun, and the black in Lord Brynden’s robe turned to raven-feather, and then they were taking flight, spreading dark wings across a pale white moon.

Snow was falling, thick and velvety soft, blanketing the trees. Beneath a tall weirwood sat a boy, not more than thirteen or fourteen, clad in black and red silk, a doublet with dagged sleeves, and over that a thick black cloak. He had long, spidery fingers, with blue veins webbing their way beneath skin pale as milk. His eyes were purple comets, his hair an untidy fall of thick silvery-gold locks that fell down past his collar. His features had a haughtiness to them that Bran found disconcerting.

“Who is that, hmm?” Lord Brynden asked him. “Do you know, Brandon?”

“He looks like a Targaryen,” said Bran. “They had silver hair, didn’t they?”

“The look of the dragonlords.” Lord Brynden nodded sagely, and mouthed something to himself that
Bran could not here. “It matters not,” he said, “we did not come here to see this prince. We came to understand the past, but not this part.”

“Why did you bring me here, then?”

“To understand its precedent. The past of the past, if you will.”

“Aerys!” a voice was shouting. “It’s your turn now.” Another boy, with green eyes and thick golden hair. He reminded Bran of someone else, someone who seemed familiar, someone he had known growing up.

“Give me a moment, Tywin,” said the boy under the tree. Then he carefully placed down his book, picked up his sword, and ran to join a tall black-haired boy in the middle of the snow-dusted yard.

“Ready,” said Tywin, leaning on the pommel of his own sword. His eyes sparkled with excitement. “Fight!”

The black-haired boy attacked first, a heavy two-handed swing and then another, pressing his opponent back to the edge of the square. Bran could make out a black stag stitched on the his golden mantle. Baratheon.

“Why aren’t you wearing your cloak?” the black-haired one asked Tywin, huffing and puffing red-faced as he beat away Aerys’s lazy blows.

“A cloak slows you down in a fight,” Tywin replied knowingly. “All I need is a sword.”

“And a sheath, mayhaps?” the one with the dragon cape asked. “Just as you’d like to sheath something else inside Lady Joanna, I’d wager.” He snorted.

Tywin reddened, if only a little. “A juvenile insult,” he said. “And at least it’s not my sister-”

“Watch your tongue, Tywin- oof.”

“What’re you talking about?” asked the Baratheon boy, standing over his fallen foe.

“You’re too young to understand, Steffon,” said the fallen Aerys, snarling. “Maybe once you finally grow something down there-”

“I wouldn’t wager on that,” said Tywin, “he’s taller than you, and stronger, and broader. By that standard, you would be smaller than Steffon in most places. And he did just beat you into the ground.”

Steffon looked pleased, but something flashed in Aerys’s eyes. “As you say, Tywin, these are childish games.” He brushed snow off the hem of his cloak, stood up, and walked back across to his book.

Tywin Lannister sighed, and produced his own sword. It was only a practise sword, but gems still sparkled in the hilt. “I’ll give you another bout, Steffon,” he said. “I’ll be glad to spar with someone with some sort of sense-”

“Childhood follies,” said Lord Brynden at Bran’s shoulder. “In time, though, these innocent games will blossom into something more.” He nodded towards the clearing, where Tywin was sparring with Steffon, while Aerys sat sneering at them beneath the tree. “One of those boys will grow up to be the ruler of the Seven Kingdoms, and the other will become Aerys the Mad.”
Bran was confused. “But wasn’t Aerys the king?” He never got to finish, though, because they were already going. The snow spread out and twisted into shapes before them, and weirwoods grew straight and tall out of the ground, melting into great pillars of flame that smoked and crackled as angry snakes.

“Something is burning,” Lord Brynden said.

“That.” Bran pointed to the horizon. Smoke was rising in rings, and a great inferno was burning in the valley below, a sea of red sparks dancing in the autumn air. Through the haze he could see very little, but he could make out were windows, towers, statues. Around them all gouts of flame belched thick clouds of grey dust into the air.

He could hear a baby’s cry mingling with the sound of the firestorm. Worried of what might happen if he left the flames behind him, Bran turned… turned to see a young woman lying back on the ground, deaf to sense, attended by a gaggle of ladies who all but hid her.

“Is she dead?” a man’s voice was calling, horrified, breaking in fear every now and again. “Is she dead… the rest of them… all of them… not Rhaella as well…”

“She lives, my prince,” someone else said. “Give her room, though, if I may.”

Across the clearing, a tiny old woman was rocking back and forth on her knees. Her hair was pale as summer snow, her brow wrinkled like a tree trunk with the age of ten thousand years. “My Jenny,” she was saying softly, tears dripping down her wrinkled cheeks, “my Jenny, my Jenny, my Jenny, oh, my Jenny, no, no…” Some ladies were trying to calm her, but she would not stop.

“Not good for the babe,” Bran heard someone say. He glanced back across, to where the rest of the group were gathered around the young woman. He took a cautious step closer. “What should we call him?” she was saying weakly. In her hands she held a tiny babe… with violet eyes and a few tufts of silvery hair, Bran saw. Another Targaryen, he realised… and when he looked up again and saw the face of Aerys, the boy from the other dream, he was certain.

“Aegon, mayhaps…” The woman seemed almost afraid to suggest it. She was more of a girl, in truth, scarcely older than Bran himself. “… after…”

“No,” said Aerys, “I think… something where he won’t have to live in their shadow. Something new, mayhaps…” He smiled a little. “Rhaegar.”

Bran’s heart thumped at the recognition of the name. He turned around, feeling pleased with himself for working it out. This is Summerhall. He looked up, searching for Lord Brynden… and found the old woman’s eyes. She had stopped crying now, and was staring right at him. Not through him, as the others did, but at him. And then she was advancing towards him… slowly but surely, pointing all the while.

“She can see me,” Bran realised. He did not know how, but… “Green,” the old woman was saying, “Green, green, prince of the green, raven of the crow, blood of the raven, greenseer, the greenseer…”

He felt a hand upon his shoulder, and then he was gone. All that remained was a pool of his own reflection, amidst the murky green waters. “Who was that?” he rasped under his breath, then more loudly. “Who was that? That woman?”

“They call her the ghost of High Heart.” That was not Lord Brynden’s voice, but Leaf’s. The greenseer himself sat high up among the branches of his twisted throne, staring down at Bran like
some great long-necked bird, eyes inquisitive and… was that confusion in his eyes? Surprise, even?

“The ghost of High Heart?” Bran wondered aloud.

“A woods witch,” replied Leaf. “Though some say—”

“Aye.” Lord Brynden gestured to the Child. “Give the boy his soup. Then you may go.”

Leaf did as she was bid, though something in her eyes seemed to suggest that she knew more than that, somehow.

“You said we were going to your home,” Bran said.

“I did not lie to you.” Lord Brynden replied. “Those places were my home once, Brandon. Drink the soup now, and drink deep from the well of your dreams, and come the morrow you, will understand. You will know who I am, and perhaps… I hope… who you are?” Then his fingers seemed to turn to bark, and his hands became leaves, and then the greenseer faded among the vines, disappearing into the dark.

_Come the morrow, you will understand._ Bran could not decipher the cryptic nature of those words, but once again they left him feeling inexplicably unsettled. Because, not for the first time, the strangeness of the situation presented itself before him, and Bran did not know what to think of it all. Was this really the end? Was this what all of this had led up to, this strange, eerie darkness under the hill. He lifted the cup of weirwood soup to his mouth and sniffed at it suspiciously, then dipped one finger into it and stirred it around. It smelled old, some ancient recipe that time had long since forgotten, and it made him feel strangely queasy. _I’m afraid_, he realised. _Can a man be brave when he is afraid?_

For a moment there, he felt a hand brushing softly against his cold cheek, ruffling his hair, and it made him smile. _Yes_, he thought, _that is the only time a man can be brave._

He drank the soup down in a single great gulp, and felt it fill him up inside, fire and ice and greenseer’s magic. Then came the voices, echoing down the tunnel.

“Hodor!”

“Hodor!” Bran called, crawling towards the noise.

“Hodor!” came the echoing, and the darkness came alive with the sound of Hodors.

“Hodor, Hodor, Hodor…” The giant scooped the broken boy up in his arms and together they followed the curvature of the tunnel, Hodor carrying him up into the sanctum above.

Jon sat on a tree stump, sharpening his sword with a smooth flat whetstone; Longclaw, his sword was called, and it was Valyrian steel. The Children did not seem overly fond of it, even though they acknowledged that it could help with killing the Others in their whisperings to Bran.

Meera sat beside the hearthfire nursing Jojen. “You’re not,” she was saying quietly. “None of us are.”

“I am,” Jojen said weakly, “someday we will leave this place, I know it. Sooner than later, I think.”

Bran had not seen that in his green dreams. “Meera,” he said quietly, as Hodor laid him down not far from the Reeds. “I promise—”
“You made a promise last time,” Meera snapped at him. Her green eyes flashed as she watched him, and Bran felt a curious sense of embarrassment when she looked at him like that. He felt strangely flustered. He had gone red, he realised. Stop it, he told himself, stop it, you don’t like her like that, do you?

“I—I’m sorry…” he managed to mutter.

Meera glared at him again, and Bran felt hot and ashamed of himself. “I didn’t mean—

“You never meant anything,” she said angrily. “Of course you didn’t. But here we are, two weeks after you promised us that you’d find out ‘where we needed to go’, and you still know nothing.”

Jon’s hand shivered on Bran’s shoulder. “I’m sure he’s trying,” he told Meera. “If Jojen’s right about the green dreams – it can’t be easy – I mean, warg-

Bran looked between them, surprised. “Has Jojen been teaching you how to warg?” he asked Jon.

“Well,” Meera muttered under her breath, “we had to do something while-

“Aye,” Jon cut her off. “I’m not very good at it, but-

“You’re a Stark,” said Jojen. “You’ll learn in time. The blood of the greenseers has been in your family for generations, Jon – bastard or no.”

“Shit!” Meera cursed loudly, pulling a somewhat blackened squirrel out of the brazier. “It’s burned.”

Jon smiled mildly at her. “It still looks good.”

Meera stood up and paced across the room angrily. “Looks good, aye. It won’t taste good. I’m sorry I couldn’t warg into a squirrel and bring your fresh meat to the fire. I’m sorry I had to hunt the food myself, and I’m sorry that—” She suddenly cut off her words, stood and stormed off towards the place where they had their sleeping quarters.

“Hodor,” Bran said gently, looking back to the other two. “I’ll go-

“No,” said Jon and Jojen at the same time.

“Give her the space she needs,” said Jojen.

“Aye,” Jon added. Ghost padded closer to him and laid down by the fire. “You might want to go and see to Summer.”

“He’s hunting,” Bran said instinctively. He glanced towards the place where Meera had gone.

“Bran,” Jojen said sharply. “Don’t bother yourself.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just, she’s—”

“I know you… want to…” He searched for the word.

Jon chewed on his squirrel skewer. “You want to help her,” he said blandly.

“She’s angry,” said Jojen, “this place does not suit her well. Jon, perhaps on the morrow you should go out hunting-

“I could come,” Bran said stupidly. “No, I couldn’t.” He had gone red all over again. Stupid boy, he
thought, it’s you he’s training, stupid; we didn’t just come to the cave to sit here and mope. And you’re a cripple; how could you hunt, cripple boy?

Jon shook his head. “It will do no good. Sometimes she wants solitude, other times she wants a friend to go with her, but you never know which until you’re there. I don’t want to make her even more unhappy.” His mouth twisted a little. “And she doesn’t like the outside that much anyway. Not here.” He nodded. “There’s a darkness in the air, something I don’t trust…”

“I’m going to bed,” Bran said heavily.

Jon gave him a strange sidelong look, as if to say ‘really?’ but let him go. Hodor carried him across the cavern to the shelf where he made his bed. Meera was already asleep on the shelf below him, or pretending to be asleep, at least. It was colder upon on the shelf, and the tree branches were damp with mildew, but Bran found it to be comfortable enough once he was wrapped up in his furs.

Sleep came quick and early that night. Soon after came the green dreams. He dreamed that he was flying among crows. He dreamed of a witch with long yellow claws, stirring a pot of molten gold and forgotten fortunes. He dreamed of two dragons in a pool of smoke, fighting to free themselves from a web of golden silk. He dreamed of seven swords, seven spears, seven scythes. He dreamed of himself, climbing a twisted tower that seemed to keep going forever, of his hands scrabbling as he tried to reach the top. His hands were sweating, losing grip, losing purchase, falling. The ravens were screaming ‘fly or die’ as they flew in wide circles around him.

“Bloodraven,” he said.

“Aye,” said a voice at his left. He was in Lord Brynden’s cave, with the old man staring above him and the children smiling, giggling, laughing in the darkness all around them.

“You’re Bloodraven?” Bran asked. He knew the stories; Old Nan had told him. How many eyes does Lord Bloodraven have? A thousand eyes and one.

The pale lord nodded. “Once I was Brynden Rivers,” he explained. “spymaster and Hand of the King to Daeron, the brother I loved. Foe and nemesis to Aegor Bittersteel, the brother I hated. Kin and kinslayer to Shiera Seastar, the woman I loved.”

His eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment. “But that was then,” he said in an ancient voice of many thousand years. “And here is now. Today I am Bloodraven, the prince of the green, the three-eyed crow. Just as you will be, Brandon Stark. As you must become.”
The Bear and the Maiden Fair

Chapter Summary

*The bear, the bear, the maiden fair!*

Chapter Notes

I called for a knight, but you're a bear!
A bear, a bear!
All black and brown and covered with hair
She kicked and wailed, the maid so fair,
But he licked the honey from her hair.
Her hair! Her hair!
He licked the honey from her hair!
Then she sighed and squealed and kicked the air!
My bear! She sang. My bear so fair!
And off they went, from here to there,
The bear, the bear, and the maiden fair.

ending lyrics of *The Bear and the Maiden Fair*, a popular song among lords and smallfolk alike, featuring prominently in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**BRIENNE**

On the morning of Lady Sansa’s wedding, Brienne could not sleep. The anticipation of the day would be far worse for the bride than it was for her, to be sure, but something kept her awake all the same, and she could not for the life of her work out what it was.

Across the chamber, Podrick was hopping from one foot to the other like a slightly asinine frog. Brienne frowned. “We should garb ourselves for the celebration,” she decided. “Podrick, fetch my chest of clothes.”

He furrowed his brow. “But wouldn’t you like—”

“Yes, Podrick.”
“Nothing. Nevermind.”

She hated it when he did this. “What is it?”

“Nothing, my lady. It doesn’t matter, my lady. Well, it did. But now it doesn’t. Because it isn’t.”

“What, Podrick?” Sometimes it was hard not to throttle the boy.

“The wedding. I mean, it is the wedding. So you won’t be needing breakfast. Because they’re doing breakfast already. I mean, if it wasn’t the wedding, you would be needing breakfast. And you usually have breakfast before putting your armour on. That’s all. Ser. My lady.”

“Yes.” Brienne waved a dismissive hand at him.

He sounded surprised. “Yes, my lady? You do want breakfast—?”

“No! Go and fetch my garb for the wedding, Podrick.”

He understood that plainly enough. “At once, my lady.” When he was gone, Brienne went out to the balcony and leaned against the stone railing. It was a beautiful day, truly. An early winter breeze brushed her face, soft soft as the hand of the mother that she had never known.

A tilting course had been set up in the courtyard below before an array of viewing stands, all decorated in green and gold. Around it, the tents of landed knights and lords made a second town beneath the walls of Highgarden. The smallfolk milled aimlessly among the tents and stalls. In a show of generosity from the Tyrells, all folk from the castle town had been invited to wedding celebration. Today would be a day of rest, merriment and praise.

But there is falsehood among these roses. Brienne was not so blind as not to realise that. Even now, as Lady Sansa prepared to become one of them, she remained wary of the Tyrells. Most days she would have visited Sansa in person before breakfast, but today the Tyrells had supplied the bride with an ample complement of guardsmen and Brienne knew that she would only get in their way. The wedding would start at midday, but before that, she must needs attend to the bridal breakfast.

Podrick came back dressed in a handsome shade of scarlet that went rather well with the pimple on his nose. “Will you be wanting your armour today, my lady?”

“It’s a wedding, Pod.”

“Sorry, ser. My lady. I forgot.”

Almost everyone agreed that Brienne had terrible taste in fashion, so Podrick picked her clothes out for her, after a lot of changing his mind. Eventually she garbed herself in a simple gown of sober blue - the same colour as Tarth’s waters, she thought – and moon-grey breeches belted with brown leather. It would look untoward for her to bring a sword to a wedding, but Oathkeeper was fine Valyrian steel and she could not bear to lose it, so she stowed it away in the trunk under her bed and locked the box.

“It’s a good day for a wedding, my lady,” said Pod as they went down the steps. “All blue skies and everything. Like it was when King Joffrey got married. Hopefully this wedding will be like that. Except without the bridegroom dying. That would be bad, my lady.”

“Lady Sansa has not been blessed with the best luck when it comes to the matter of weddings,” Brienne said sadly. She wed the Imp at one, and her mother and brother were murdered by Walder Frey at another. Brienne remembered Catelyn Stark as she had been in life, kind, handsome and
strong, and Lady Stoneheart as she had been in death, her skin greying and decayed, with nothing more than hate in her black eyes. *She should have died at the Red Wedding. Mother Merciless, they call her, but it would have been a sweeter mercy for all of us if they had just cut her throat and had done with it.*

Those thoughts went away once they reached the garden. Highgarden did not lack for outside space, and the garden was packed with three hundred guests or more. The Tyrells and the male guests were to dine with Ser Willas elsewhere in the castle, but Sansa’s retinue and the majority of the female wedding guests had come to the Garden of Thorns to break their fast alongside the bride-to-be, who sat in the midst of it all looking thoroughly and entirely out of place.

Brienne approached Lady Sansa with her head bowed. “My lady,” she said, “I wish you good fortune on your wedding day. I fear that I cannot present you with a gift today, but I will give you my blessings, and my oath, and my protection.”

Lady Sansa smiled. “That is all I could ask for, Lady Brienne. Your friendship is beyond value to me.” She leant across the table to kiss Brienne’s cheek, and did the same for Podrick as he stumbled over his own mostly incoherent blessings.

Brienne moved towards one of the empty tables, sneaking glances at the other wedding guests as she went. Victaria Rowan and Alyce Graceford talked over honeycakes and bacon, and little Lady Bulwer laughed along as the fool Butterbumps juggled a dozen oranges and lemons, dropping most of them.

Lady Melessa Tarly was nearby as well, in demure conversation with her three daughters and another woman. Brienne could not help but wonder what her own mother would have been like if she had survived to play any part in Brienne’s upbringing. Lady Valena had been a proper lady in all sense of the word; would she have been ashamed to have given birth to such an ugly, freakish child? Would she have shunned her child, or attempted to hide her shame by dressing Brienne in silks and courtesies? Or would she have relented and handed her mannish daughter over to the caution of Ser Goodwin the master-at-arms, as Lord Selwyn had?

“Woman,” said a voice from behind her. Brienne turned to meet it. Sandor Clegane would never be considered comely, but he looked a good deal less suspicious in his dark leather jerkin than he did in mail and battered plate. He nodded at the dais. “The little bird doesn’t look too happy up there, does she?”

“There is nothing we can do,” Brienne said.

“Bugger that,” Clegane replied, “you haven’t tried anything yet, woman. The little bird saw enough horrors when she was with Joffrey in King’s Landing.” He sniffed the air. “These roses aren’t doing her any favours neither. I’ve half a mind to take her away from all of this.”

“And how do you intend to do that?” she asked. Brienne was still loath to trust Sandor Clegane. *He was a Lannister man through and through, and his brother murdered men as easily as others drink.*

He breathed in her face, smelling of ale and leather. “You’re supposed to be the smart one here, woman, seven Hells.” His eyes flitted from table to table, searching for a spare flagon. “Bugger me with a spear, woman. If you want me, I’ll be well and truly drunk in the back of some hall somewhere—”

A sharp voice cut in suddenly from Brienne’s left. “Do you think she appreciates you calling her ‘woman’? Her name is Brienne of Tarth, man, and she is a highborn lady, of a far better sort than you.”
The Hound glared at the speaker. “Stay out of this, old woman.”

“I am old, yes.” Lady Olenna Tyrell raised a liver-spotted hand. “And I am a woman too. With observational skills like those, I can see why the Lannisters found you so invaluable.”

Clegane spat. “Fuck the Lannisters.”

The Queen of Thorns snorted. “Highgarden really has gone to the dogs when we are admitting Cleganes, if you’ll pardon the jest.” She waved a hand at him. “Away with you, dog. Go find some corner to drink yourself to death in.”

The Hound’s face darkened with anger, but eventually he set his mouth in a hard line and stalked away. Brienne watched him fade into the shadows. “Men like those,” Lady Olenna said, “are the sort that you needn’t associate yourself with, dear.” She gestured to the chair opposite. “Do sit down, child. We have so much to talk about.”

Brienne chanced a look towards Lady Sansa as she seated herself. The Queen of Thorns followed her gaze. “The poor girl does look rather beleaguered and misplaced here,” she said. “Hopefully the day’s festivities will lift her out of her misery.”

“I beg your pardon, my lady,” said Brienne, “but shouldn’t you be at your grandson’s breakfast?”

“Perhaps I should. But I’ve no interest in listening to my family singing a thousand praises of Willas. Oh, yes, I’ll be expected to make an appearance to give him my blessing before the wedding starts, but I do not mean to be present to see my son and his flock drunk beyond sense. And the guests over here are so much more interesting, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh. Yes, my lady.” She felt almost as awkward as Podrick. “What—”

“What do I want with you?” Lady Olenna twiddled her thumbs. “Well, you might just be the most interesting person here, Lady Brienne.”

Brienne did not know if she was being mocked. Most times when people called her ‘interesting’ they were sniggering behind her back a moment later. “Yes,” the old woman said, “most interesting indeed.”

“How so, my lady?”

“The size of you, for a start. I have reached an age where my bones have started to shrink, child, would you believe it? Each passing year leaves me shorter and shorter. But you, well, you must be… six feet? Seven? A giant among men and women alike.”

“Six and five inches,” Brienne said.

“I suppose you must be mocked awfully for that,” Lady Olenna murmured. “You needn’t listen to such cruel words, child. I have heard that you were responsible for knocking my grandson into the dirt during the tourney at Bitterbridge, so I wager that you could beat down most of these men who would make a mockery of you.” She sipped her wine. “Tall women can have a certain elegance, too.”

She must be mocking me, was Brienne’s first thought. But she was not really sure. Don’t listen to them, Renly had told her, as his men sniggered behind her back, they’re vicious little shits, and you’re better than them. Lady Olenna was saying something similar. Brienne set her jaw. “I have never concerned myself with beauty, my lady,” she said. Brienne the Beauty.
“And why would you? Forgive an old woman’s crude thoughts, but you were always fighting a losing battle there.” She sniffed her wine cup, as though suspecting poison. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, some bard told me once. It’s been fifty years and I still haven’t quite figured out what he meant. But I know that some beauty lies within you, Lady Brienne, despite how keen you might be to deny it.” She raised an eyebrow. “What do you say to that?”

“I… I—”

“Dear gods, girl, are you quite certain that you are your father’s daughter? Lord Selwyn never struck me as timid. You have the same eyes, I suppose, but—”

“You knew my father, my lady?”

“Yes, but he was only a boy. He liked to hit things with sticks. Most young idiots do. I knew your grandfather as well, Lord Duncan. He was a good man, but not a patch on his namesake.” She did not explain herself. “The fates of our two houses may well be linked, Lady Brienne. It was Renly who brought us together, was it not?”

“Yes, my lady. I served in his Rainbow Guard after… after I beat Ser Loras in the tourney.” Brienne the Blue.

“You needn’t be so nervous about mentioning that. Defeat is healthy, I told him.”

And I’ve seen my fair share of it, Brienne thought. Renly died on my watch, I failed to save Lady Catelyn, and they captured Lady Sansa. “Aye. My father said that too.”

“Not too much of it, mind. Victory is generally preferred to defeat, but beggars can’t be choosers. I think Renly’s campaign was a lesson to us all. Especially to Renly, considering that he died. He should never have been king.”

“No,” Brienne said. “He shouldn’t have.” She rose. “Pray excuse me, my lady.”

“As you will,” replied Lady Olenna, “best move with haste, though, child. The gift-giving will be soon, and you wouldn’t want to miss that, now, would you?”

Brienne caught a few moments of the ceremony as she crossed the yard. Lady Taena Merryweather had given Sansa some bolts of Myrish cloth and lacy thread, the sort of things that you were supposed to give a lady. Brienne had always been terrible at that sort of thing, cursed with a septa who always looked like she wanted to slap her. And with good reason too. I was never—

Something hit her in the back of the head. Not hard, but she knew at once that it was not an accident. It had been thrown. Nobody else seemed to notice. Their eyes were fixed on the dais. She would not rise to the bait.

It is nothing. Only—

Something else hit her. This time Brienne wheeled round angrily, glaring into the grove of apple trees that fringed the garden. There was no one there, but she felt compelled to look anyway. She moved away from the crowd and went deeper into the grove.

Nothing.

Never mind, she thought, turning back to the trees. I will not let my pride be hurt by—

Again, something hit her in the back of the head. Some fool is playing a game with me. And I am only too willing to play with them. She ducked down, picking up a withered crabapple between her fingers, and saw him.
If he had been attempting to hide, he was poorly dressed for it. That yellow cloak was visible from a mile away. For a moment their eyes met. I know you, Brienne thought in that instant of recognition. Why are you here?

Then he turned away and hurried down the hill.

For a long moment, she hesitated. This is a bad idea, something told her, but in the end she followed him all the same. Down the hillside they went, through the cloisters, along the wallwalk and down into the yard and out onto the great fields that lay on one side of the hedge maze. They never rose above a brisk walk. Brienne was rounding a corner when the man suddenly ducked inside the commoner’s pavilion. Trying to shake her off, no doubt.

The pavilion was much larger than the other tents, in order to accommodate the large numbers of hedge knights and unlanded sons who had no true pavilion to call their own. The place stunk of metal, blood, sweat, and ale, and the air was noisy and thick with warm bodies, men reeking inside their armour and laughing loudly over drunken japes. Brienne found it akin to a war camp, and she hated the place at once. These men were of the sort who had mocked her for her entire life. Brienne the Beauty, they would hiss when they thought that she was not listening, and sometimes when they knew that she was, knowing that if she dared to challenge them she would only make herself seem even more freakish and ungainly.

I am not only freakish and ungainly, though, Brienne of Tarth thought, for I am twice the knight of any of them. And so, with tremendous willpower, she held her head up high, and advanced across the tent.

A burly knight with the arms of House Vyrwel on his breastplate moved in front of her path, perhaps unintentionally, but his eyes seemed to follow her wherever she went. Woman, they said. Freak. Beast.

Brienne felt almost worried, but only for a moment. She had never forgotten what Renly Baratheon had told her when she was but a young girl. And she remembered Lady Olenna’s words too.

She found the man with the yellow cloak leaning against one of the tent poles, sipping from a flagon of ale as though nothing was wrong in the world. Brienne watched him from a distance. And then she that it was definitely him, because she knew that man’s face even if she could not work out why he was here.

The man with the yellow cloak turned and left the tent. Brienne paused, casting a wary look around herself, then followed him out of the closeness of the pavilion and onto the fields below. The grass was still wet and sodden with dew, and the mud squelched underfoot as she walked.

She followed him down the hillside towards where the Mander river came rushing through the woods, past cookfires and campfires and several dozen smaller tents. The elaborate marquees of the Reacher lords disappeared behind them, replaced by the small tents of hedge knights, some with the shield and arms of the resident knight hanging outside displaying his coat of arms, others without any device at all. Then they were climbing back towards the castle on the next hill, up into the main square, not too far from the tourney lists. It was a curious route, turning back on itself more than once, and it made her all the more uncertain. Now they were passing back past Lady Sansa’s breakfast itself, where Lady Rowan was presenting her with wedding gifts.

She longs for home, Brienne knew, watching the girl’s fake courtesies from across the yard. As do I. It had been nearly three years since she had last seen her lord father. For a moment she was lost in memories, and when she looked up, the man with the yellow cloak had vanished. She was among the follies and the merchants, alone and surrounded. She saw a pair of dwarfs fighting each other on
a raised wooden beam with tourney lances made for children. There was a puppeteer’s carnival with a crowd of young children standing round it, a soothsayer’s tent, even a menagerie with a dancing bear. “From there to here, from here to there, all black and brown and covered in hair!” a pair of bards sung noisily outside, “She smelled that bear on the summer air, the bear, the bear, the maiden fair!” And she found herself thinking of the bear pit at Harrenhal, and how—

“Well, isn’t this a happy coincidence?” a man’s voice said.

Brienne smiled. “There’s a dancing bear in a cage next to them. It seems the natural thing to sing a song about.”

“Oh, you are so boring, wench,” he said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Only you, ser.”

Jaime Lannister nodded. He had grown a beard again, matted brown and gold, and his hair was cut short, just as it had been when they had parted for the last time up at Fairmarket. “You aren’t smart enough to come up with a jest like that off the top of your head, Brienne. I bet you’ve been thinking that one up for months, that you’ve spent sleepless nights thinking of a new way to humiliate me, that you’ve—”

Brienne sighed. And now it begins. “Why are you here?”

“A good question, but again, a boring one.” Jaime scratched his head. “We came for the wedding.”

“You and Lem Lemoncloak?”

“Aye. And Greenbeard, and the one who looks like Renly, and about forty more of those outlaws who hate me for my countless crimes against the people of the Riverlands.” He sounded uncharacteristically solemn.

“You found the wench, Kingslayer!” Lem Lemoncloak called out. “At ease, Lady Brienne,” he said, waving a hand. “I mean you no harm. I expect you’ll be wanting to know our purpose here?”

“Aye.”

Lem nodded. “We were supposed to take the Kingslayer to the Targaryens in the capital and trade him for your Lady Sansa, but she’s here, not there. Isn’t she?”

Brienne frowned at him for a long time, trying to work out if there was any maliciousness in those eyes. “Aye,” she said at last. “She is.”

“Good.” Lem nodded. “I assume you’ve worked our purpose, then?”

“To return Lady Stark to…” She paused. “…To the North?”

Lem Lemoncloak cocked his head, as though debating her answer with himself. “You are not wrong, my lady. I suppose there’s no point wasting any time. Will you help us? If you can smuggle Lady Sansa out—”

“How did you get in?” Brienne asked.

“Stole a wagon on the roseroad. Greenbeard here plays the lute, so we were just about able to pass ourselves off as musicians.” He smiled through big yellow teeth. “What say you?”

“I don’t know,” said Brienne. “What will you do if I refuse?”
Lem grinned. “I swore a vow, Lady Brienne. I’ll have no choice but to kidnap the lady.”

“I swore a vow as well. To keep Lady Sansa safe from harm.”

Lem shrugged. “We have no cause to hurt the lady,” he said. “Nevertheless, I’m sure you’ll do your very best to stop me—”

Anguy the Archer appeared beside him. “That she will, I guarantee it.”

“But I have forty men with me, and you are but one woman,” said Lem. “A damned formidable woman, I’ll grant you that, but there’s still only one of you.”

She shook her head. “There are three of us. My squire Podrick—”

“—is a good lad, and a noble one too, I’m sure, but he has sense as well, or so I hope.” Lem looked almost sad. “If he should try and stand in our way, then we may have to incapacitate him along with you.”

Brienne stood tall and said, “And we have the Hound. Sandor Clegane.”

The yellowcloak and the archer exchanged an awkward glance. “Oh,” said Lem. “That may be more of a problem.” His frown suddenly became a grin. “But we’ve caught the Hound before. How did you do it again, Anguy?”

Anguy grinned. “With a flagon of strongwine and an uncommonly large net, Lem. We have the wine, but not the net.”

“Try rope instead, it’ll serve.” He turned to Brienne. “It’s not hard to put a muzzle on a dog once you know what you’re doing.”

“The Tyrells have soldiers too,” she reminded him.

Anguy the Archer began to whistle ‘Six Maids in A Pool’. “It’s a shame you’re such a poor liar, my lady,” Lem said. “Oh yes, they’ll defend their good lady if need be, and if they do, then we’ll never get within a mile of her. But not for one second do I believe that you’ll snitch on us to good Lord Tyrell. Especially when his reaction to your friend Ser Jaime here may be to shorten him by a head.”

“Aye.” The archer nodded.

Brienne glanced at Jaime. Only then did she see that bleariness in his eyes, the raggedness of his cloak, the lack of a right hand, either flesh or gold. “What did you do to him?”

“He’ll tell you that himself – if he ever feels like it. I pity you, my lady. The Kingslayer makes a surprisingly boring travelling companion, I’ve found.”

“What is there to stop me from telling the Tyrells right now?” Brienne asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Lem shrugged. “But would you really like to do that, my lady? We’ll be long gone by the time you come back and find us. Do you really want to thwart what might be your lady’s only chance of making it back to the North as a free woman? Do you really want to break the oath you made to Lady Catelyn?”

“You’ll not speak to me of the oath I made to Lady Catelyn.”

“Why not?” asked Anguy. “As Lem said, we swore an oath as well.”
“No,” Brienne said. “You swore to…” She broke off. Stoneheart is not Lady Catelyn. The woman I knew was warm and kind, not cold and vengeful.

“No, Brienne.” Surprisingly, it was Jaime who had spoken. “They want to help Lady Sansa.” He pointed to Lem and Anguy. “So do you. We all want to get her away from those who would hurt her—”

“And what of Sansa herself? Perhaps she wants to stay here.”

Jaime shook his head. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

No, Brienne thought, but I’ll be damned if I give her up to the Brotherhood without Banners without a fight. “And suppose we do get her away from Highgarden, what will we do then? You said north, but the North is a big place, and I have no guarantee that you won’t just steal her for yourself.”

Lem was growing agitated. “Seven hells, what do you want, wench?”

She would have spoken up, but Jaime got there first. “I think what Brienne is trying to say is this: she’ll help you get Lady Sansa away from Highgarden and back to her family, but it’ll be on her terms.” He smiled. “You wouldn’t have thought she’d be so tactful from the looks of her, but my lady is full of surprises.”

Chapter End Notes

Not my best chapter, I'm afraid. I don't think Brienne is one of my stronger POVs, but I think she had to be the viewpoint character here in order to reunite with Jaime, and I did like her interactions with Sandor and Olenna. On a random note, Olenna should really start a chat show or something.

“I think what Brienne is trying to say is this: she’ll help you get Lady Sansa away from Highgarden and back to her mother, but it’ll be on her terms.”

Notice that Jaime calls her 'Brienne' instead of 'wench' throughout most of this chapter. These two have a newfound respect for each other that we didn't see back in A Coat of Gold.

“I knew your grandfather as well, Lord Duncan. He was a good man, but not a patch on his namesake when it came to the matter of fighting.”

This ties in nicely to the almost-definitely-confirmed theory that Brienne is a descendent of Ser Duncan the Tall, the Lord Commander of Aegon V's Kingsguard.
The Wayward Bride

Chapter Summary

One heart, one flesh, one soul.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SANSA

The sky was a drab shade of grey, darkening with every passing second. Sansa sat by the windowsill and looked out over the castle courtyard and the ramparts. On all sides, green banners flapped in the breezy wind like wings of jade.

“I must say that amethysts suit you far better than they have ever suited me,” Margaery Tyrell said as she fixed the hairnet in Sansa’s hair. Amethysts. She had been surprised to see that, and even more surprised to hear that it was a gift from Lady Olenna, some sort of confirmation that Joffrey’s death was indeed on her hands. A better wedding gift than most of those I have received thus far. Lady Merryweather had given her bolts of Myrish cloth and lace and silk; Lady Rowan a spectacular riding cloak in the Tyrell colours and knee-high leather boots; Lady Tarly a stack of beautifully embroidered tapestries that poor Podrick had nearly collapsed under the weight of.

“There,” Margaery murmured lightly, “you look positively… resplendent.”

“Resplendent,” Alla Tyrell echoed.

A fancy word for a fancy thing, Sansa thought. That did not make it any less false. The Tyrells loved their false courtesy and false flamboyancy. She was reminded of how Sweetrobin would tell her repeatedly that the Eyrie was ‘impregnable’. That doesn’t matter, Lord Petyr had told her, not when the enemy is already inside your walls. As for whom the Lord Protector had been referring to, she was still not quite sure, but she had a hunch. A mockingbird sings so many songs. Lord Baelish had holed up with her cousin behind the walls of Harrenhal and was amassing an army at the castle, from what little she had managed to glean from the courtiers. She did not know who he intended to fight. She did not know anything about Littlefinger, in truth. Keep your enemies confused, and they will never know what to expect.

She did not have much time to think of Littlefinger now, though. For even as the handmaidens bustled around her dressing room, the wedding bells were ringing, and they only meant one thing.

Her gown was an airy confection of ivory samite and pale grey lace, with wide sleeves that covered most of her arms. The cloth was adorned with snowflakes and roses worked in silver thread, so that
they glinted whenever the light fell in a certain way. She had worn a similar garment to marry Tyrion in the capital, but the Lannisters had given her gold in place of all this silver. Gold was more of a bold statement, prideful and powerful, but the silver was more understated, less noticeable - but no less false, and no less fickle.

“You look very beautiful, Lady Sansa,” Margaery Tyrell said brightly. “I am sure you will put the rest of us ladies to shame…”

“The bride ought put us all to shame,” said Mira Forrester with a soft smile. “I remember seeing you at Winterfell, my lady, with all your brothers and sisters… you were by far the most eye-catching of them.”

They should be with me, she thought. Rickon should be with me. Timidly, she had asked Lady Olenna and Ser Willas if the wedding could wait until such a time when Rickon was able to reach Highgarden, but her plea had been met with a staunch refusal.

A little bird in a gilded cage.

“Soon,” her husband-to-be had promised her, as they had sat in the shade of the old oak tree on the edge of Highgarden’s godswood. “Soon, when the war is done, we will ride north and you will see your brother.”

The war will never be done, Sansa thought, so long as they continue to play the game of thrones in every corner of this realm, it will never be over. By the time the war is over, I shall be a prisoner, a mother, even a widow. There were times when she could not remember what had come before the war, before King’s Landing and all the terrors that had come with it. Still a little bird in a gilded cage.

Sansa cleared her throat quietly, as a lady ought. Today most of all, she must not forget her courtesies. “I thank you for your assistance, my ladies,” she said, “but I think there is nothing more to be done.”

Lady Alla persisted. “But-

“You heard Lady Sansa,” Margaery said. “We have all agreed that she looks as beautiful as it is possible to make her, and I dare say we will do her no further good from all this gossiping and fussing.” She urged them towards the door. “Go on.”

The others filed out in a neat and nattering column, but Margaery Tyrell was not so keen to be dismissed. She seated herself daintily upon the velvet stool opposite, poured a cup of Arbor gold into a glass goblet, and handed it to Sansa.

She took it gratefully with both hands, careful not to spill any on her wedding gown. “Thank you.” She fingered the necklace around her neck; silver, at the centre a wolf’s head in pearl with amethysts for eyes.

“You have nothing to thank me for,” Margaery said.

“You heard Lady Sansa,” Margaery said. “We have all agreed that she looks as beautiful as it is possible to make her, and I dare say we will do her no further good from all this gossiping and fussing.” She urged them towards the door. “Go on.”

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“You have nothing to thank me for,” Margaery said.
“Anxious,” Sansa confirmed.

Margaery nodded. “Naturally. I have felt the same nerves you are feeling now. But if I can help you in any way… well… I have a fair bit of experience with weddings.” She smiled, and for a moment Sansa could not help but feel almost sad for her. She was quite convinced now that despite her constant conniving, Margaery Tyrell was – or at least had the capacity to be – a good person at heart.

“My first wedding,” she began. “It was-

Margaery grasped her hand suddenly. “It will not be like that, sweet girl,” she said, not unkindly. “Willas would never hurt you.”

“Tyrion never hurt me either.”

“Mmm…” The Tyrell girl sipped from her own wine-cup. “I daresay we are both in a better position now than we ever were in King’s Landing.” She raised an eyebrow. “With King Joffrey and-”

“Joffrey.” Sansa nodded stiffly. “It doesn’t matter now. Now he’s gone. I can’t really remember him at all, truth be told.” *Would that it were true.*

Margaery’s fingers reached up for the necklace at Sansa’s throat, brushing against the sparkling surface of the amethyst. “Joffrey’s gone. So he is.” She glanced around, as though afraid that someone was listening, opened her mouth to speak a secret, then closed it and rose to her feet. “I am afraid that I must leave you sooner than expected, Lady Sansa. After all, the groom’s brother has arrived, and I have still not chosen my necklace. What do you think, the emeralds or the pearls?”

“The emeralds,” Sansa replied, “they go with your eyes.”

Margaery thought about that for a moment. “Perhaps you are right about the emeralds, Sansa. But my eyes are brown.”

*No,* thought Sansa, *they’re as green and gold as the rest of you.* She watched Margaery Tyrell go. Very quickly she was replaced in the doorway by her brother Ser Loras. “My lady,” the Knight of the Flowers said, ducking inside almost shyly. He looked very handsome today, his chestnut brown curls freshly combed and laundered with lavender scent. He wore Tyrell colours; a doublet of sea green with golden stitching, a single golden rose in his lapel.

Sansa rose. “Ser Loras,” she said. “Are they ready for me?”

“We wait upon the pleasure of the bride,” he replied woodenly, almost as though he were reciting vows himself. He sighed. “If it please my lady, I would be happy to reassure you of any qualms you might have of Willas. He is a good man, a better brother, and-”

“No,” Sansa said. She was somewhat fond of Willas Tyrell, true, but not so besotted that she wanted to hear an awkward appreciation of his person for what must be the thousandth time in a month. “You may withdraw, Ser Loras. I will be ready in a few minutes, but I would be greatly appreciative if you would send in Lady Brienne and Podrick.”

At first the knight looked almost offended and opened his mouth to argue, and then closed it again, visibly relieved as he went out. He returned to guard the door as the lady and her squire came inside. Brienne of Tarth had dressed in knightly raiment specially made for a woman’s frame, a waist-length tunic of sober blue velvet with the arms of Tarth emblazoned but lightly upon her breast, and black breeches underneath. She had not been wearing her sword earlier, but she had strapped it to her swordbelt now, in a jewelled leather scabbard. Podrick Payne wore a doublet of wine red, with dark red hose that verged on purple.
“My lady,” said Brienne, inclining her head. “You look… beautiful.”


Sansa could not help but laugh at the squire’s dumbstruck expression. “Thank you,” she said. A small breeze flittered through the open window and set the chandelier to swaying. “Well, it seems I am to be wed.” Saying the words only confirmed the fact.

Brienne of Tarth looked guilty as she could be, dropping to one knee. “My lady… I am sorry… I said that I would…”

“You promised nothing, Lady Brienne. You promised to protect me, and so I have. I am sure that… I will come to love Ser Willas and Highgarden over time, and maybe… sometime soon… I can be truly happy here.” Sansa hoped that if she said it to herself enough times, it would eventually become true. *It worked when I was a child. I prayed that a handsome prince would come to marry me, to carry me to the most beautiful castle on earth.*

*And he did. His name was Joffrey, and he came from King’s Landing.*

“My lady.” Podrick ducked his head shyly. “Lord Tyrion… I am sure he would be proud.”

Sansa had vowed not to cry on her wedding day, but that of all things brought a tear to her eye. *If Tyrion knows, wherever he is, in King’s Landing as they said or elsewhere… then I pray that he is happy too.* She smiled. “Thank you, Podrick. That was very sweet.”

The squire blushed the same colour as his tunic. Sansa’s eyes flitted to the bed, where her maiden’s cloak awaited. Brienne followed her gaze at once, and then she knew that there was no-one better. “Would you help me with my cloak, my lady?”

Brienne’s big hands were surprisingly gentle as she draped the grey-and-white maiden’s cloak across Sansa’s shoulders. The trim was neither too long nor too short, the cloak neither too frilly nor too ugly. A direwolf’s head was worked across the snow-white fabric in Myrish thread, that danced and changed colour as the sunlight moved, and its scales were inlaid with tiny pieces of jet. White and grey, no other colours. And despite everything else, she could almost forgive the Tyrells for that alone.

“Shall we send for Ser Loras, my lady?” Lady Brienne asked once it was done.

“No,” said Sansa Stark. “I’ll see myself out.”

She met the Knight of the Flowers near the godswood, beneath the twisted fingers of an old springy elm. They walked in silence towards the sept, but Sansa could still hear voices, whispers on the wind, as she walked. *We watch, and we listen, the voices said. We remember. The North Remembers.*

Perhaps, just perhaps, the old gods did stand with her.

The sun seemed to have come out again just for the ceremony, poking out from behind the fat grey clouds. There was a slight breeze, so the leaves parted like a sea as they walked down the path, beneath great arches crowded with tangles of frosted ivy and winter roses, past choirboys who sung like warbling birds as she walked. She saw the wedding pavilion before her, beside the Great Hall, its towering spires white and gleaming against the haze of blue-grey sky.

All thoughts of serenity faded from her mind as the guards drew open the great bronze doors of the sept and conducted them up the stairs. Highgarden’s sept was as large as the Sept of Baelor in the
capital, and it was as crowded today as the Great Sept had been on the day of Joffrey and Margaery’s wedding, which seemed a thousand years ago now.

She knew most of the faces. Stout, red-faced Lord Orton Merryweather and his wife the Myrish beauty Lady Taena, their son Russell in his finest raiment; Ser Guymon of the red-apple Fossoyaws and Ser Jon of the green. Lord Rowan and his wife, beside a small, wizened-looking Lady Arwyn Oakheart. Margaery’s cousins Alla and Elinor, the latter arm in arm with her new husband Alyn Ambrose. Lady Graceford and little Lady Bulwer, standing proud with all of her eleven years; young Lord Hightower and his twin siblings. Then two lords whose faces she did not recognise, but whose arms she knew as Footly and Cockshaw; Maester Lomys with his clinking maester’s chain, and fat Garth the Gross. Every step seemed to last an age with all the eyes on her. Closer to the dais stood Margaery in a sharply cut dress of subdued gold and pale blue fabric, holding the hand of a beaming Lady Olenna Tyrell. Leonette Fossoyaw stood alone, her babes presumably with some wetnurse or other. Then Lord Mace Tyrell, in quilted green velvet, trailing a ridiculous cape that had a trim nearly longer than the bride’s, arm in arm with his wife Lady Alerie, tall and dignified as ever, her silver hair done up exquisitely. And Garlan Tyrell, one step below the dais, holding the folded marriage cloak in his arms. One step above, Willas Tyrell awaited her in his tunic of cloth-of-gold, smiling and blushing all at once. Loras released her arm gently, and then she was there, with her husband-to-be, his brothers, and the septon.

“My lords,” the septon began, squeakily at first then with a voice that carried across the entire sept, echoing off the statues of the Mother and the Father to either side of the altar. “We stand here in the sight of gods and men to witness the union of man and wife. One heart, one flesh, one soul, now and forever.” He turned to Willas. “You may cloak the bride, and bring her under your protection.”

He was gentler than she had expected, sweeping the direwolf cloak away in one motion and placing the Tyrell one over her shoulders in its place. This one was heavier, weighed down with real golden roses and precious emeralds, and Sansa almost fell to her knees under the weight of it.

Willas’s hand touched against hers and Sansa took it instinctively, worrying that she had grabbed it too hard. Did I hurt his hand? She never found out, because the septon was wrapping the strip of golden ribbon around their linked hands, tying it in a knot that seemed tighter than it had been at her other wedding. They mean for this to last.

“Let it be known that Willas of the House Tyrell and Sansa of the House Stark are one heart, one flesh, one soul. Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder.” He took the crystal from the altar and lifted it to above his head, so that rainbow light sparkled through the prism, turning the golden ribbon that linked the hands of bride and groom into a shimmering fabric of a thousand colours. “In the sight of the Seven, I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one for eternity.” The ribbon slipped away from her hands, and there they were.

“Look upon each other and say the words,” the septon commanded.

And so she did. Because she must. “Father, Smith, Warrior. Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger. I am his, and he is mine, from this day, until the end of my days.”

When she looked up, Willas was smiling at her warmly, his eyes sparkling a little, reflecting the light of the crystal. He smiled at her, turned to the crowd. “With this kiss, I pledge my love!”

And so he did. Because he ought. He smelled of cherries and sandalwood, and tasted the same.

The cheering died down eventually, to be replaced by the jubilant ringing of the great wedding bells high up in the towers of the sept. A minstrel was playing the harp in the gallery, and there were
drummers as well, beating a steady bass beat. Sansa gripped Willas’s hand tightly as he led her down the dais. *You must smile, sweetling,* Littlefinger had told her, *you look so much fairer when you are smiling.*

*Smile,* she told herself. *Smile for Willas Tyrell and his family. Smile because this is your wedding day, and it will not last forever. Smile because this may be your only chance to smile.* They led the procession out of the sept, man and wife, bride and groom, up the steps into the courtyard, as the septon shouted seven blessings and ladies and knights wished a fruitful and bounteous marriage for them both. Willas was blushing and grinning like an idiot, laughing at some ribald joke Ser Parmen Crane had told him as they went. “Be happy,” he told Sansa, almost shouting over the sound of the crowd, “Lady Tyrell.”

*Lady Tyrell. I am a Stark no longer.* The choirboys from earlier ran back along the procession hand in hand with several young maidens, sprinkling them with golden rose petals and leaves from their wicker baskets. *Green and gold.* They were giving Sansa her new colours, and she had no choice but to accept them.

The procession led them twice around the castle, among the smallfolk and the high lords alike, and back to Highgarden’s Great Hall, where the rest of them fell away as Willas and Sansa proceeded to the dais. There must have been one or two thousand men on the lower floors in all, maybe more, most of the garrison of Highgarden. The conversation all merged into one endless chattering as she walked between them, men talking about wives and wine, battles and whores, horses and harvests. They ate finely for common soldiers; beef-and-bacon stew with loaves of hot bread, loin of pork with apple sauce, steak-and-kidney pie, cornmeal and oatmeal and cream-of-wheat with orange jam and even a few blackberries, blue smelly cheese and orange nutty cheese and brown smoky cheese, with cheap-smelling summerwine and brown ale to wash it all down. They cheered and clapped as bride and bridegroom made their dignified way along the green velvet carpet up towards the top of the hall.

At the top of the first dais were the musicians and fiddlers. There were about twenty drummers across three bands, with two harps and fifty lutes between them, and they all seemed to be playing different songs: the first group *‘the Bear and the Maiden Fair’,* the second *‘Six Maids in a Pool’,* and the third a strangely joyful renditions of *‘Seasons of My Love.’* Between them landed knights, Tyrell captains, and smallholders sat eating finer fare than the men below, somehow convinced that they had the finest seats in the feast even as the procession passed them by.

She walked right past them, up the steps and through the carved archway where two twisted roses curled into each other, past the great screen that had been erected to keep the lords from the common folk, and emerged in the greatest of great halls. Murals and tapestries beyond counting hung on the walls, and the stained glass windows telling the stories of Garth Greenhand and King Mern – and Leo Longthorn, the greatest Tyrell lord of recent years. On the walls were Tyrell banners yet again, but they were joined by the sigils of other Reachmen; House Redwyne’s thorny grapevine, Lord Cockshaw’s tricolored feathers, the smoky castle of House Hightower, the Fossoways of the red-apple and those of the green, Oakheart’s fan of three leaves, the huntsman of Horn Hill and the golden tree of House Rowan, Ashford’s white sun against orange, the banners of Merryweather and Cordwayner, Dunn and Footly, Leygood and Lowther and Lyberr, Shermer, Peake, Costayne, Meadows, Mullendore, Beesbury, Graceford, Bulver, Roxton, Risley, Sloane, Osgrey and Norcross. Sansa watched as Lady Tarly and her daughters went to go and sit beneath the huntsman of Horn Hill, while she continued with only Willas for an escort, up to the high table.

She could see her husband wincing as they sat; the walk had been a long way and she felt suddenly guilty for not considering how his leg might fare. *I must not forget these things, if I am to be a good and obedient wife.* “Are you in pain, ser?” she asked. “Your leg.”
Willas shook his head. “Willas, my lady. That is my name.” He pulled out her chair and gestured for her to sit. “My lady.” He gave a cursory glance to his own chair, at the head of the table, looking out over the gallery of guests below. “I have always wanted to sit here.” He sounded almost boyish as he took his place.

And thus it began.

They had spared no expense here. Huge green velvet banners hung from every wall, the rose of Tyrell in gold, against fields of vert and jade and and grass, every sort of green there was. The huge windows of the Great Hall were open, so the scents of lavender and bluebell and the roses from the garden drifted inside to greet them.

Lady Alerie had outdone herself with the festivities, as promised. Sansa recognised Galyeon of Cuy, the tall singer who had sung a song with seventy-seven verses at Joffrey’s wedding. Mercifully his tune was not so long this time, but Sansa still found it tedious. Then came a troupe of Volantene jugglers, who tossed flaming balls and rings into the air while Butterbumps ran a raucous course around the hall squawking like a chicken to a merry piper’s tune, chasing Lady Oakheart’s piebald fool on mock horses. Around them dancers played in green-and-gold motley. The greatest laughter rose when Butterbumps raised a fake tourney lance and struck his companion across the brow with it. A lion’s head fell from the fool’s horse and rolled across the floor. They mock the Lannisters in their cups here, Sansa thought. And why should they not? Ever since she had glimpsed the Crown’s ledgers in King’s Landing, she had realised that the throne needed all the coin it could muster – and after that Casterly Rock did not seem so fearsome to her.

The feast started out civil enough, but it was a long wait for the first soup course and by then the young knight Oswald Rowan had two serving girls giggling in his lap, Lord and Lady Cockshaw were snogging with a strange impropriety, and from the way Orton Merryweather was licking his lips he looked ready to eat his wife. Mace Tyrell had gone red, from either drunkenness, anger, or embarrassment, though Sansa could not tell which.

Willas was saying something about his travels in Dorne, mentioning the Sandship and the history of House Fowler. Sansa merely feigned amusement and laughed at the expected times. “My lady,” Willas said eventually, breaking out of his own reverie. “If you would – I can stop, should you wish…”

“Please continue, my lord,” she said emptily.

“Willas, my lady,” he told her again, “My name is Willas and I insist that you call me that.”

She had been so stupid for forgetting that. “Then you must call me Sansa,” she said, for want of something, anything to say. Willas was polite and courteous as she had expected, but it all felt too fake to see direwolf banners mingling among the roses. I was a Stark of Winterfell, she thought, and now not even that.

The cooks at Highgarden certainly had done themselves proud in putting on such a spectacular feast. They started with a sweet pumpkin soup with bread fresh from the ovens, a terrine of duck and goose liver with a sweet orange jelly, a salad with blue cheese, watercress and pine nuts. Then came roasted peacock, the bird’s plumage spread elegantly behind it like a fan of a thousand colours, and snails in a creamy white wine soup, spit-roasted suckling pig with applesauce and crackling that stuck between her teeth. She tried Dornish duck with a sticky sauce of lemons, goose and capon stuffed with mulberries and onions, kidney pie with bacon, fingerfish in breadcrumbs. They had rock crabs cooked with saffron and eastern spices, cod cakes and goose livers, served beside sweetcorn on the cob, stewed onions in gravy and a whole dish of buttered neeps. There were game hens baked in a blood sauce, pork pies with egg, a bread-and-honey pudding covered with wine, raisins and nuts,
topped by a brandy sauce that caught fire when the cook put a light to it. And lastly they brought out mountains of lemon cakes and gingerbread – her favourites, done at Lady Olenna’s request, no doubt, with black cherries in sweet cream, a heavy wintercake with nuts and dried apricots and poached pears to finish.

Sansa only ate a few bites of each dish at first, though, and less as the feast went one. The only reason she ate at all was to seem polite, and so that Willas would not be talking to her all the time. More songs played as they ate, and they were songs of a winter rose, a fair maiden with auburn hair like fire. She pretended not to notice, but Willas kept giving the minstrels coin so that they would play it again. At least he is trying, she thought, but I have been a fool to believe that they would allow me to go as a free maiden.

Growing strong, she thought bitterly, growing far and wide. And thinking on that, she drank all the more.

At the end of the third hour, Margaery was climbing up to the high seat to offer them both her congratulations. “Sansa,” she said, beaming a huge wide-toothed smile. “On behalf of the family, welcome to House Tyrell. And to Highgarden. We should get to know each other finally as sisters; mayhaps tomorrow we might go riding beyond the walls, or take a trip down the Mander.”

“Do you not think that husband and wife should spend the first day together, at least?” Willas asked.

Margaery giggled a little. It was one of the most irritating sounds Sansa had ever heard, the more she thought on it. “But of course,” the other woman said. “I am simply too over-eager to know my new sister. Mayhaps the day after, and the Lady Leonette might come with us also. We Tyrell women stick together, Sansa.” She leant and kissed Sansa’s cheek without invitation.

Willas still could not dance on account of his bad leg, but Sansa was too melancholic to care. To her surprise, it was Lord Mace Tyrell, of all people, who offered her the first turn on the floor.

“Welcome to House Tyrell, my lady,” he said, the thousandth person to say such. “I have gained a new daughter today. Yes, a beautiful Northern daughter.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she said. He might be oafish and on the wrong side of portly, but Lord Mace was a fair dancer, and the others gave them a wide berth for fear of tripping over his cape. Lady Alerie had told her that Mace had once been handsome and strong-looking in his youth, but he had eaten a few too many pies since then, and his best days were behind him. He reminded Sansa of King Robert at Winterfell, bumbling and drunken, though he was a little more courteous than the old king.

“I am your new good-father, Lady Sansa,” he told her, as though it were not blatantly obvious. “We do not need such formalities between us. I must confess that I have never seen a rare Northern beauty like yourself in a while. The last was your aunt Lyanna, at the tourney of Harrenhal. Prince Rhaegar had the right of it, though, for any fool could see that she was among the most beautiful woman there. A maiden worth fighting a tourney for, but not a war.”

“Were you a tourney knight once?” she asked. If she were to be Lady of Highgarden someday, she supposed that she ought to learn the history of the place.

Lord Mace chortled. “Once, my lady, but a very long time ago, and I won little of note, save for placing third in the tourney at Bitterbridge in the summer before Robert’s Rebellion. But Harrenhal, well, the spectacle was so grand that I could not help but compete. Alas, I was nearing thirty then, too old for most tourney knights.”
Sansa had to disagree. Bronze Yohn Royce had to be at least forty, and she had seen him and Lord Jason Mallister at the Hand’s tourney in King’s Landing, back when her father had still been alive. Lord Jason had a head of white hair, yet he had still unhorsed half a dozen younger knights who had doubtless underestimated the man.

“Lady Lyanna was a woman worth fighting a tourney for, aye,” continued Lord Mace. “But not worth provoking a war for. Alas, while we did fight on the side of the Targaryens, I fear that… well, Prince Rhaegar had gone as mad as his father in the end. But other than our victory at the Battle of Ashford…” He stopped for a moment to flaunt his success, then coughed and made to continue-

The music changed then and they switched partners for the first time. And Sansa found herself with Podrick Payne of all people. As they met on the floor, the youth blushed bright red. “M-my lady,” he stammered. He seemed as awkward as she felt, though that was only a small comfort. Pod kept stepping on her toes, but Sansa kept her smile, so as not to embarrass either of them.

“Are you sitting with Lady Brienne?” she asked.

“No, my lady,” he said. “I mean yes. I was. I am. Earlier, but now, no. Because I’m dancing. And she went away to speak with…” He stopped himself. “My lady.”

She could not help but smile a little. “You spoke of Lord Tyrion earlier.”

“Sorry, my lady. I didn’t mean-”

“You caused no offense. I am sure he would be proud of you as well, Podrick. I daresay you have come a long way from the stammering boy I knew in King’s Landing.”

“W-well, my lady,” he said. “I still stammer.” And the dance changed. “I wish you and Ser Willas every happiness,” he said, departing. He turned into Alla Tyrell, blushing again, whereas Sansa found herself facing Ser Loras. The Knight of the Flowers led her through the steps with a sobered expression. “I am the only one of my brothers who can dance today,” he said. “We had hoped that Willas’s leg would be sufficiently recovered, but alas, it is not so.”

“It was a Dornishman who was the cause of that, was it not? Prince Oberyn?” She remembered the Red Viper from her brief time in King’s Landing. He had a trial by combat, Tyrion said. He told everyone that he killed Joffrey. She could not recall how or why that had come about, though.

“Prince Oberyn,” Loras affirmed. “Willas bears him no ill will for the incident, mind. It was the horse that threw him, and no fault of Oberyn’s. Which is a good thing, I suppose, as tensions between Dorne and the Reach have been on edge for years. Perchance you know the tale of Lord Tyrell and the thousand red scorpions, my lady?”

He might have told her, but by then they had switched partners once more, and Loras was gone. She found herself with young Lord Erron Hightower, Willas’s cousin and squire. “I wish you good fortune on your wedding day, Lady Sansa,” he said politely.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“I-I hope that Willas is able to bring you happiness. I know that my cousin has never been much of a fighter… but there is a lot more to him than that. He taught me how to speak High Valyrian, the names of all the Targaryen kings, the sciences of the body, how to play the lute.”

“There have always been good links between Oldtown and Highgarden, have their not?” Sansa said politely.
He nodded in reply. “It was King Uthor of the High Tower who surrendered his crown to King Mern of the Reach, but it was done by peaceful cooperation rather than as a result of war or conquest. Oldtown has thrived because of the ambition of Highgarden, and the same can be said the other way round. Bounty and plentifulness is what makes the Reach thrive.” He smiled at her.

“Will you be returning to Oldtown, my lord?”

Lord Erron looked confused by that. “Lord Tarly is in Oldtown, my lady. He has… he is caretaker of the city following the battle… he…”

Strange, that. Randyll Tarly’s wife and daughters are here, but not the man himself. She was not sure what to make of that.

Next came Edric Ashford and Oswell Rowan, heirs of the Reachman lords she ought to know were she to become lady of Highgarden, and then their fathers themselves. Her next turn around the floor was with Lord Caswell, who inquired after her brother, curiously, not-so-subtly mentioning that he had two daughters of a marriageable age, and then with the Lords Rhysling and Footly, Ser Horas Redwyne and Ser Myles Roxton, gaining her courage all the way, until very soon there were a line of men queuing up to dance with her. But none of them were her lord husband. After a half-hour or so, she left the floor to have her seat next to him, flushed with excitement and a strange sort of happiness, yet knowing that this ecstasy could not last.

“How are you finding all of this?”

“But the wedding?”

The Queen of Thorns snorted. “Of course I’m talking about the wedding, Lady Sansa. Why, were you thinking of something else?”

Home. “No. I… I do beg your pardon, my lady.” For a moment there was quiet. Their eyes went to Margaery Tyrell on the far side of the hall, dancing with her brother Ser Loras. “My grandchildren,” Lady Olenna said. “I’d always vowed to marry off the ones that were marriageable…” She smiled, and looked a little sad. “Is it a triumph or a failure that I have succeeded in marrying Margaery to three different kings? What does it say about my granddaughter, my House, when none of them are good enough for her?” She sighed. “If I had the hindsight I might have married her to this Targaryen boy, but the Dornish have already snapped up that match. All the same, they will see value in an alliance with the Tyrells.”

“You’re… you’re abandoning the Lannisters?”

Lady Olenna laid a speckled hand across Sansa’s. “We’re abandoning the Lannisters, Sansa. We’re family now, and we do not need to keep secrets from each other. I have half a mind to send Loras as an envoy to the capital, but I fear that his wilfulness may get the better of him there. I may have to make one last journey to King’s Landing before the war – and my life, most like – is over. Willas is needed to stay here, so you and he will remain.”

“Happiness and peace,” the Queen of Thorns said. For a moment she did not look like the conniving shrew that Sansa knew her to be, rather just someone’s favourite grandmother. My favourite
grandmother, Sansa thought. Both Lyarra Stark and Minisa Tully had died before her parents had married; odd as it was, Olenna Tyrell was the closest thing she had ever had to a grandmother. “You wouldn’t believe it, but happiness and peace is all I ever wanted,” the old woman said. “Do you remember what I said to you once, Sansa, when we first met?”

“Yes, your ladyship,” Sansa said.

“Once the cow’s been milked, there’s no squirting the cream back up her udder.”

Lady Olenna gave a small mirthless laugh. “Quite right, child. But I also said this: here we are to see things through. We cannot stop halfway with this war. From the moment we swore ourselves to Renly’s kingdom we were in it for the long run. Renly, Joffrey, Tommen… what harm can a fourth king do?”

Sansa rose, smoothing her gown down, and left her there. She crossed the dais and returned to her lord husband’s side.

“She is rather stressed, I fear,” Willas told her, as she poured a cup of wine for herself, “the bards she sent for from Lord Costayne never appeared.” He bit his lip. “I think that we should move to the ceremony quickly, to take her mind away from that.”

Sansa took her wine cup and drained the goblet in one gulp. “We need not waste time, Willas.”

Even he looked shocked at that. “Now? Already?” He coughed and tipped his head. “As my lady commands.”

But not as your lady wants. Willas put a hand on hers. “Are you quite sure, my lady? I daresay we could dispense with the bedding ceremony if you so wish it and sneak off somewhere.”

She ought to take his offer, she knew… but the bedding was one of the last true Northern traditions she could remember, one of the last few memories she had of her family. I must be brave, like Robb and Father and Mother. Oh, old gods, let me be brave.

Afterward, she did not remember how or when it had started. Perhaps Willas had sent up the call himself, or conveyed it through his father. But the next thing she knew the sea of men were rushing towards her, and then she was hoisted into the air, carried high above the tables. Some of them were simply laughing hysterically as they threw her clothes away into the crowd. Sansa was beginning to feel some of her bravado begin to wear off as she and her husband were gradually stripped down.

She was thankful for the first time for Willas’s bad leg; it made a long climb up a winding staircase impossible, so their bedding chambers were mercifully close by. When they had reached the place they tossed her inside playfully in naught save for her shift, shouting ribald suggestions through the door. “Come now,” she heard Ser Loras Tyrell saying, “let us give them a little privacy, I think.”

Willas came in a moment later, breathless and red-faced. They had taken off everything but his smallclothes, and through them she could see the outline of his hard manhood. “Well,” he said embarrassedly. “We have a duty, Lady Sansa.”

“Yes,” she said, and curiously she found herself thinking of her mother then, and of House Tully’s words. Family, duty, honour.

I must do my duty to House Tyrell… but my family is House Stark. Always. Always.

Only when the shouting had died down outside in its entirety, and only when the two of them were
quite alone, did Willas approach her, unsteadily on his wounded leg. He gestured towards the bed. “May-

Sansa nodded. The marriage bed was big enough for four, but for the longest time they sat there at opposite ends, pulling the quilts up over themselves. It only occurred to her then, in that moment, that Willas might be as unwilling in the whole matter as she. *Did they ask him if he would like to marry me, or did they make him?*

In the end it was she who made the first move, hesitant at first, yet curiously more and more assured with every passing second. “We… we must do our duty.”

“Yes,” Willas said softly. “Duty.” And slowly, so slowly, they began to move back across the bed towards the middle, closer and closer together.

“There’s wine,” Willas said in a small voice, as they made themselves comfortable. He cleared his throat and swallowed. “Are you _really_ ready, my lady?” he asked, “I wouldn’t want to rush you, not at all.”

Sansa sat proudly. *I will be brave. I can be brave. I must be brave.*

“‘I’m ready,’” she said, though the words were not really her own.

“Well,” said Willas. “My lady. May I… may I kiss you?”

“You may.” she replied. Their lips met in a chaste kiss, the same kiss that they had shared before gods and men in the sept hours earlier. “You… the rest of it, if…” Her words would not come out properly. “I feel a terrible fool,” she confided.

Willas softly placed a hand on her cheek. “We are both fools here, Sansa,” he told her quietly. “Do you…” He picked up a goblet from the sideboard and took a careful sip. “Should we…”

“We should.” She was unsure whether the fact that she sounded more confident than she felt was a curse or a blessing. Her mother had told her about this back in Winterfell, as she’d prepared to head south to marry Joffrey, the rudimentary basics of the marriage bed and all that was concerned. And that led to one of the thoughts that kept Sansa going. *Better him than Joff. Better anyone than Joff.* And so when Willas Tyrell laid her down onto the bed gently and put his hands around her waist with a careful, nervous precision, she smiled nervously back at him.

He hesitated a moment, as his lips pressed close to hers. “If you- if you want me to stop-

“Go on,” she said gently. _Please._

At first it was kissing, nothing that she had never known before, but then lips gave way to tongues and more than that, and slowly, so, so, slowly, they began to unravel into each other, to relax into one another’s grasp, to entwine. _I hereby seal these two souls, the septon had said, sealing them as one_, but those were words, and words were wind. It was this act that mattered, that bound two souls as one more surely than anything else. His kisses were soft against her lips and her neck and her body, her hands warm caresses on his wherever they touched. _I am yours, and you are mine._

And she hoped that it was true.

“I want you there with me, Sansa,” he said as they lay there together in the lengthening night when it was done, as owls chirped a cacophony outside the tall windows, as the sounds of the revellers below faded and returned. “I do, really I do. Every step of the way. I want you to be my lady of Highgarden.”
Sansa spoke softly, her voice a summer breeze. “Am I a Tyrell now, then?” she asked. “I—I suppose I shall have to find myself some green silk or velvet.”

“My lady, you will look beautiful to me no matter what colour you wear,” he told her.

They lay there for a moment, and Willas sat up in bed, reaching over to his right to pour her another cup of Arbor gold. He gasped a little as he did so.

“Does your leg pain you, s—Willas?”

He grimaced at her. “Only on some mornings when I wake up, and if I do too much strenuous exercise. So not all that often. I have a lot more movement now since they reset it, enough to walk a short ways without my cane and to ride. It… it never stops me travelling, though.”

“Would you like to visit Riverrun?” she asked him hopefully. “Or Winterfell?”

He bit his lip. “Perhaps. Of course. Though probably not now, my lady. We could go to the Citadel in Oldtown, or to Lys or Myr, or see the Titan of Braavos and the Wall. Lomas Longstrider says there are nine wonders of Man, and I intend to see them all before this place is mine. And perhaps you—” He exhaled. “We could go together, mayhaps.” His finger traced the line of her lips. “You look tired,” he observed. “Just as I feel.” His fingers closed on hers. “My lady… if I may… should we…”

She was not sure why, but she leaned back into his embrace. His fingers were playing with her hair, gentle and tender as a mother’s touch, but with a different kind of tenderness. And Sansa found that she did not really mind that either.

She dreamed an unfamiliar dream. She dreamed that she was back in Winterfell, standing in the godswood. The faces of the weirwood trees looked down upon her from all sides, tears of sap trailing paths down their cheeks. Never forget what you are, they said, a Stark of Winterfell. And you need to wake up, sister. You need to wake up.

When she turned, she could see the shadows of the trees against the ground, lengthening, growing wider and darker and clearer. Father? she thought, watching. She could not see his face, but she knew that it was him. Winter is coming, child, he said, and she could almost taste the snowflakes in the air, feel the chill Northern breeze against her lips. Winter is coming, child, and you need to wake up.

She woke all at once, every nerve atingle. And in that instant, that very first moment, Sansa knew that she and her husband were not alone in the room. Willas was fast asleep, having rolled to the other side of the bed, peaceful in his slumber. His chestnut-coloured curls sprawled beneath his head like a pillow, and his chest was rising and falling in an even, slow rhythm… but something did not quite seem right. Sansa reached over tiredly and stretched out a finger, not quite knowing what she was doing.

A hand grabbed her wrist suddenly, and another clamped down over her face, strangling her startled gasp. A shiver went through her all at once, and she did not know, could not know, what in the seven Hells was going on. The shadow turned, throwing a dark grey cloak back over his shoulder. Sansa struggled a moment, kicked, then realised how little good this was doing.

Her attacker lifted her up almost gently, holding her thick auburn hair with one hand and her back with another. “Stay quiet, little bird,” Sandor Clegane told her, his voice a soft growl in the darkness. “You’re safe with me now. You’re safe with me, and going home.”
The longest chapter since 'Blackwater' back in A Coat of Gold. And I have to say, I loved writing this. Some of you will doubtless be angry at me for 500 word descriptions of a feast and clothes, but I think for spectacles of such grandeur you really do have to be exact. I still don't entirely know what samite is, and I'm immensely grateful to the blog at innathecrossroads.com for suggesting so many feast dishes to help with this one.

Next chapter will pick up right where the previous one left off. Highgarden, wedding, et cetera.

Reviews on this behemoth would be appreciated massively.

Gold was more of a bold statement, prideful and powerful, but the silver was more understated, less noticeable - but no less false, and no less fickle. I think this is a very appropriate metaphor for the Tyrells. They hide their thorns, and only bring them out subtly when they are least expected.

*We watch, and we listen*, the voices said. *We remember. The North Remembers.*

Could this be a suggestion that Bran is in fact listening in on the conversation? Mayhaps...

This one was heavier, weighed down with real golden roses and precious emeralds, and Sansa almost fell to her knees under the weight of it.

Just like the weight of Sansa's new responsibilities as Lady of Highgarden.

“You're safe with me now. You're safe with me, and going home.”

This final sentence of the chapter contrasts with the last part of Sansa V in A Storm of Swords, where Littlefinger tells Sansa:

“You're safe with me now. You're safe with me, and sailing home.”
**What Dogs Do To Wolves**

Chapter Summary

*Do you know what dogs do to wolves?*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**THE BROKEN MAN**

“You,” the Stark girl hissed. It was an accusation, blunt and to the point, most unbecoming of the little bird. “I could call for the guards now and they would take you away in an instant.”

“Aye,” Sandor told her, “you could. But you won’t, little bird; we both know that. I’ll explain it to you first, in case you get any foolish ideas.” He lowered his hand from her wrist and watched as she sat there in the darkness, looking thoroughly angered. “This is your Lady Brienne who came up with this plot. There are some cunts here who want to steal you away to their secret hidey-hole, you see.” He spat. “The Brotherhood without Banners, they call themselves.”

Sansa only glared at him.

“We’re saving you from men far worse than me, little bird.”

“And you expect me to believe *that*?”

_Well, a man can hope._ “It’s either that or I’ll have to knock you out and carry you over my shoulder, girl. I know which one I’d choose.”

“I’ll scream,” she told him self-assuredly, sitting up and covering herself with the sheets. Sandor gave Willas Tyrell a cursory glance. _He’s had her, then_, he knew. He’d wanted to try and get the little bird out of there before they’d gone up to the bedding chamber, but Brienne of fucking Tarth had advised against it because of all the guards. _Fuck the guards, and fuck the Tyrells._ He looked back at the sleeping bridegroom. Sandor had taken the precaution of knocking him out already, of course, but she wasn’t to know that. _If you hurt the little bird one bit_, he thought, staring at Willas, _I’ll do to you what Gregor did to me, even if they have to kill me for it._

Better him than Joffrey or some other cunt, Clegane supposed. _You were never going to get the little bird’s maidenhood_, he told himself. That had been a stupid thought all along, something he had barely even dared to daydream. _Fool. You’ll never get so much as a kiss from her._ A low growl rose in his throat. “Coming?” he asked bitterly,
Sansa did not move for a long moment. She sat there on the bed, eyes flitting between him and her lord husband. “You’ll take me back to Riverrun?” she asked.

“Aye.”

“You swear it?”

“Aye. To your uncle Edmure and your brother… the little one, whatever he’s called.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You and Brienne?”

“Aye. And her pimply squire.” Best not to mention the Kingslayer, though. “She’s waiting outside the gates with a horse. We’ll smuggle ourselves out as revellers.” He waved the thick grey cloak in her direction. “The guards will be too drunk or too tired to bother looking at us.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then I’ll get caught and beheaded, and you’ll go back to your pretty husband and your pretty new castle, girl. And they’ll mount your Lady Brienne’s head on a pike alongside mine. You like that?”

She stared at him with those blue, blue eyes, judging, wondering if he could be trusted, or if he was just another one of those who’d lied to her. “I won’t hurt you, little bird,” Sandor told her softly.

She nodded. “I… I can’t go out like this,” she told him, gesturing to her shift.

Sandor gestured to the cloak under his arm, and pulled from within the bundle of stuff that the wench had given him, a half-gown cut high at the knee, with breeches and riding boots. As he stood watching the wall while she dressed, he wondered if the little bird had ever actually troubled herself with anything save for pretty dresses before.

They crossed to the window. Sandor offered her a hand, which she took gingerly. She still won’t look up into my face. “Just take the rope with both hands,” he told her, casting a wary look back to make sure that Willas Tyrell was not waking up. “You go down first, girl. And do it quickly. Those guards won’t stay sleeping forever. Wait for me at the bottom.”

To Sansa’s credit, she did not hesitate for long. She locked both her hands around the rope and descended, gripping it firmly between both hands. Once on the ground in the dark garden below, she pulled the hooded cowl up over her head, hiding her face in shadow. Sandor took one last room around the opulent bedchamber – damn you, Tyrell, he thought – then jumped down after her.

He landed between the two guards he’d knocked out earlier when he’d climbed up to the window. “Take my arm, little bird,” he instructed, turning to face Sansa. “Hey – what in seven Hells are you doing with that?”

She was holding a knife awkwardly in her trembling fingers; the gods alone knew where she’d gotten it. But she wasn’t pointing it towards him, rather towards herself. “We’re leaving, aren’t we?” she said. “They won’t know me anyway if they’re drunk like you said, but it can’t do any harm to cut my hair, can it?”

Sandor sighed heavily. “Do what you want, girl, but do it quickly.”

“I’m a lady,” she told him, “not some girl.” She raised the knife to one of her long auburn tresses and sawed back and forth, sending strands fluttering down to the ground.

“Here,” Sandor told her, gripping the hand with the knife. “You’ll end up stabbing yourself in the
“eye if you keep on going like that.” He took the blade from her, turned his fingers into her hair, and cut slowly but surely away from the girl’s face, sawing off roughly half of its length. She tucked the rest back under her hood and turned to him. “What do we do now?”

“The gate,” he told her, “we go to the gate, then we get out and find the wench.”

The rain was coming down faster and faster with every passing second. It had been only a trickle when Sandor had entered the little bird’s room, but now it was a torrent, pattering off the cobblestones, sending up splashes over his boots and cloak. Through the rain he could make out Tyrell guards standing on the walls, beardless boys drunk on mulled wine and their own pride. *I could fight my way out if I wanted to,* Sandor thought, though he wouldn’t wager on coming away uninjured. “Stay close to me, little bird,” he whispered in Sansa’s ear, “and try and look drunk.”

Sansa muttered some scornful jest that he could not hear. *The little bird is growing up,* Sandor thought. “You see those wagons,” he said, nodding. “We’ll head towards those.” He had chosen the right time to leave, at least. It was an hour or so past midnight, and most of the townsfolk who lived in the shadow of the castle walls were heading home, a rowdy drunken mess. They fell in beside a fat man who smelled of ale and his wife, and shuffled toward the gates in silence. Wagons were rolling through the gatehouse steadily, the guards barely taking a second to check the contents. It was a chilly night, and doubtless they wanted nothing more than to spend their time under the warm roof of the guardhouse instead of in the open.

*Thank the Seven for this rain,* Sandor thought. He had never really seen fit to thank the gods for much else, but they had done him some small good here. They could barely see ten feet ahead of them now. He did spy Lem Lemoncloak in the rain though, leaning against the stone wall with his yellow hood up over his face. The barest look passed between the two of them, and Lem smiled. *I’ll be taking your prize soon, yellowcloak. You can smile all you like then.*

“You remember what I told you about this Brotherhood without Banners, girl?” he asked the little bird.

Sansa thought about it a moment. “Outlaws,” she said, “I heard the name mentioned in the Vale, I think.”

“They’re helping to get you out of here. Bunch of cunts they are, but we have to work with our enemies from time to time, little bird. I thought you should know, beforehand, though.” And so he told her the plan that Brienne of Tarth had told him, of how they would steal the girl away during one of the darkening nights on the northern road, take her away from the outlaws to someplace safer than the hollow hill that they called home.

Then they were at the gatehouse. Highgarden had two concentric walls ringing around the central keep, but this was the only place where you could cross both of them by the same gate. Some old man with a beard of grey fuzz came up close to them, squinting through the rainfall. *This one can’t see past the end of his nose on a good day.*

“The weather’s shit,” Sandor commented dryly.

“Aye.” The man nodded. “My shift’s over in a few minutes, mind. Might be that I’ll be able to get away from all this bloody rain.”

“There’s a storm brewing, I heard a man say.”

“Aye.” A gloomy look crossed the man’s face. “You folk have safe travels on the road.”
And then they were through. He had almost expected the little bird to mess it all up, to sketch a curtsey and throw around courtesies that no common woman would ever speak, but she’d said nothing, and they were through, on the road away from the castle, leaving the great stone gatehouse and the tall marble walls behind them. Sandor gripped the lady by the arm a little tighter. “Don’t run, little bird. Just act normal, if you can. And try not to stand so tall and haughty. You’re supposed to be a peasant woman, not the lady of Traleylaleyday.”

“I’m the lady of Highgarden,” she hissed at him. “We consummated the marriage, and no matter what you say I’m a Tyrell now.”

“By name, aye. Not in your heart, though. No more than you were a Lannister after the Imp married you, I suspect.”

She looked surprised. “You heard about that?”

“Course I did. Your sister and I were going round all the taverns, and you hear bits and pieces of news on the road. Don’t know how much of it was true, though. They said that you’d poisoned Joff, then turned into a monstrous wolf and escaped through the old tunnels.” He laughed, a gruff, low sound. “Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Poison him.”

“No.” She shook her head, denying it fervently. He’d never thought that she had; the little bird was too timid to have had anything to do with it. Whoever murdered Joff did the kingdom a better service than I ever have. Death’s the only cure for being a cunt.

He released his grip on her hand warily as the woods closed around them. “Where are we going?” she asked him.

Sandor did not answer for a long moment. He expected her to panic, but the girl only stood tall and demure as ever. “Aren’t you scared, little girl? A great ugly monster like me, carrying you off into some dark forest.” He eased her off the main road and onto a gloomy path shadowed on both sides by the trees. I could carry you away, and none of them would realise it for hours. Another time, he might have done, as he’d carried the Lady Arya away struggling. Do you know what dogs do to wolves? “You should be afraid.”

“Perhaps I should,” the Stark girl said, “but I’m not. You said it yourself – you’re just a dog.”

That made him laugh again. “Just a dog,” he repeated, “you’re not half-wrong there, girl. Seeing as you’re wondering, we’re finding this place where the wench set up camp.”

“How did Brienne get out of the castle?”

“Fuck me if I know.” Sandor guided her across the ridge, between two tall drunken oaks that stood as tall as Gregor’s shadow. A chill went through him, and he had to straighten the cloak around the little bird’s shoulders to make sure that she wasn’t feeling the cold. “Not far now.”

A slight orange glow rose up from beyond the next ridge. As they crested the hill and went down, they could see flames flickering in the firepit, red and orange and yellow. Fire. He sniffed the air distastefully. Fucking fire. He remembered Gregor’s strength, his horrific smile at the boy Sandor as he’d forced his face against the hot coals, the screams he’d let out and the feeling of the flames, burning his body, his heart, his soul. And a girl’s voice, his sister’s voice, screaming over and over. Gregor, stop, stop, stop!
She’d never been able to stop Gregor, though. No one ever had.

The Stark girl was tugging on his arm. “Is that the place?” she asked, pointing to the firepit burning on the forest floor below.

“Aye,” he said, letting him lead her down the hill. It was only when they had nearly reached the bottom that the realization came to him. Too many. Shit.

He grabbed the girl’s arm suddenly. “Back,” he hissed at her, “back now, get behind me, quiet-”

“Who are you?” a voice asked.

Someone was standing up from beside the firepit. Tyrells, Sandor thought. There were six of them; dressed in a motley mixture of mail and plate and leather, laughing around the firepit. The one who had spoken was bald, with a brutal look in his eyes. “I say again, who are you?”

Sandor did not lower his hood. “Friends,” he said, “we’re just coming away from the wedding, aye-”

“Who’s the lady?” the leader asked. “That is a lady under there, isn’t it?”

“Aye. And we’re going.” He reached for Sansa’s cloak. “No need for anything between us. Good morrow to-”

The other five were slowly standing up. “You can’t bring a lady to the proceedings and not share her, eh.” His hand went to the hilt of his sword. Sandor mirrored his movements. The light caught his foe’s breastplate, and he saw that it was not the golden rose printed there, after all. *Sellswords and hedge knights. Always unwelcome guests at any wedding.* “We’ll be going now,” Sandor told them.

“Oh no,” said the leader among them, drawing his steel another half-inch from the scabbard. He nodded towards Lady Sansa. “It’s been a while since we’ve last had a proper woman, and-”

He never finished his sentence. Sandor had his knife drawn before the big bald one even thought to react. He’d known that no negotiation of any sort would take place with these six, and it would result in either kill them all or have the lady raped. He’d never had any doubts as to which one would make the better choice.

And in confrontations like these, Sandor had found that it was always better to have the element of surprise… which was precisely why the leader of the party was now under him with a dagger in his throat and blood pouring out of his mouth, jerking in his death throes.

They were so shocked by the sudden action that he’d got to the second one before the man had even drawn his sword properly. Sandor lunged down with the dagger, breaking the man’s clumsy guard, and pivoted on his left foot, slicing his blade through his foe’s middle and letting the guts spill out as he collapsed.

The other four backed away slowly. He’d taken out the only one wearing plate armour first, so he needn’t trouble himself with that. The rest of them wore mail and leather, same as Sandor himself. He shrugged off his heavy cloak and advanced in a circle. Two of them had drawn swords.

“Arnolf, go get the little lady,” the senior among them said. He was a tall man with a bushy black
beard that covered the lower half of his face, broad like an ox, with the marks of many battles on his armour. The other three were pig fodder, but this one would present a problem. And-

One of them had run. At first Sandor thought he was fleeing, but then he saw that the man was headed for the Lady Sansa. Quickly, he reached for the dagger he’d sheathed in the second man’s guts, flipped it in his hand and threw it at the foe. The spinning blade struck the man in the midriff and he toppled. Sandor drew his longsword from his belt, took three steps forward, and buried the sword in his foe’s throat, spraying blood in the rain.

Lady Sansa stood there motionless. “Go, little bird!” he growled at her. “Go!”

He’d have to do this quickly. If the fight went on too long, it would only be a matter of time before Tyrell guards noticed them and intervened. Normally he’d wait for a foe to come at him, but this time he advanced first, swinging a wide blow from his left. The competent-looking one met the blade with his own strike and they wound a path back across the clearing, steel jumping, sparks flying.

The fire was still roaring behind him, and Sandor struggled not to scald his arse on it. One of the others had joined now, but his companion had gone running off into the trees. Fucking craven. Best hope he doesn’t get back to the roses. For now he had other problems to deal with. He blocked a sorry excuse for a downcut from the less-than-competent one, pivoted inside him, and spun the man back round so that his companion’s own blade bit through his chest. Blood spurted in every direction. Sandor kicked the man away and stabbed the sword through his back as he went to ground, leaving him with only the competent one to fight.

His foe came at him first, cutting left, left, then right. A longsword whistled past his cheek, came down again, checking blows, one, two, three. The vibrations rang around the clearing. Where the fuck has the little bird gotten to, and that other cunt?

That other cunt had a bow, Sandor realised then.

He moved aside suddenly, and an arrow whistled into the ground right where he had been standing. Fuck this. He blocked his foe’s slash, spun, and crushed a fist into the man’s face. There came a loud crack, and blood and spittle rained across the ground. Fuck you. The other one had dropped his sword. Sandor beat his lazy parry aside, then thrust it through the man’s neck.

An arrow whistled into the ground beside him. Now the bow-wielding cunt. He ran up the bank of the hill. The archer was raising an arrow to his bow. He’d always hated bows. Knowing that it would only slow him, he dropped the sword beneath him and hurtled onwards faster. Worry was showing on the archer’s face now, the bow unsteady in his hands, the arrow faltering as he raised it, the bowstring wobbling, young face lit up with fear.

Sandor met him like a rolling boulder, smashing him into the air. Bow and arrow both attained temporary flight across the clearing. He sat astride his opponent. He has a dagger. The boy went for his blade – a boy, he was not much more than that, only six-and-ten or so from the looks of him, maybe even younger. Sandor grabbed his hands and twisted it back viciously till a crack could be heard. The knife dropped, the boy screamed, and made a whimpering noise. “Mercy-

“I’ll give you mercy.” Sandor brought the blade swiftly across his throat. Six dead men. True, only one of them had given him trouble, but he hadn’t expected it to go that well.

“Clegane!” The shout came from above him. He turned to see the wench coming into the clearing, her sword drawn, raindrops glistening off her blue plate. The bloody Kingslayer was there as well, looking ragged as always, as well as the archer from the Brotherhood and his friend with the green beard. He walked towards them, feeling the raindrops on his face – or maybe that was blood – and
sheathed his sword in his belt. “Where’s my horse? You didn’t leave my fucking horse alone in the forest, did you?”

Brienne of Tarth sighed. “He’s with Lem and Podrick and the others, along with Lady Sansa. She told us to come quick, because you were fighting.”

“Yes,” the Kingslayer said sceptically, “but I see you’ve finished.”

“A lot of fucking good you lot would do.” Sandor spat. “The wench’s the only one out of the lot of you who can fight.”

The Kingslayer shrugged. “Can’t argue with that, Clegane,” he said sardonically. “All dead?” He prodded one of the dead man with his toe.

“Aye.”

“Always efficient, my sister said.” The Kingslayer smiled. “Well, now that the niceties are done, can we hasten back to the Lady Sansa and get the hell out of here?”

“Aye.” Sandor stomped away from them and set off down the way they had come. They would follow, in time. The rain was falling faster still, shining off the steel links of his ringmail so that for a moment they looked like silver, brightened by the waterfall of tears from above. But the gods did not weep for Laena, so why would they weep for me?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who helped to make the last chapter the most-commented-upon yet; Defiant_furball, Ithy_truth_is_wono, yyzEthan, VVSIGNOFTHECROSS, Ducks_Go_Eyup, Iuvenal, Tommyginger and DanyelN (so far).

I'd love it if we could break that record so soon after setting it!

Sandor's POV was just as unexpected for me as it probably was for you as readers, because I'd never intended to write it. I doubt that we'll see his POV again, but it did fit really well here. qqueenofhades, who authored the fantastic 'The North Remembers' has some really good Sandor POV chapters from a non-romantic SanSan perspective. The obvious elephant in the room in a chapter containing both Sandor and Sansa is the possibly sexual nature of the relationship between them. I have no doubt that tagging this fic with Sandor/Sansa would bring me a fair few more readers, but that would be lying, so...

You were never going to get the little bird’s maidenhood, he told himself.
That had been a stupid thought all along, something he had barely even dared to daydream.

We can see here that Clegane feels some (semi-canonical) romantic attraction to Sansa, but I don't think he believes that it's a realistic prospect (much like SanSan, in my opinion...)

He’d known that no negotiation of any sort would take place with these six,
and it would result in either kill them all or have the lady raped. He’d never had any doubts as to which one would make the better choice.

Can Sandor Clegane take down six men single-handedly? ASOIAF has always been very realistic when it comes to these sorts of fights; even the greatest fighters can be taken down by 'grunt' characters, just as Clegane was in canon during A Storm of Swords. But I think in this case his opponents were likely drunk and sluggish throughout the fight.

And I am of the opinion that Sandor Clegane is the best fighter in single combat in all of ASOIAF, rivalled with a sword only by the likes of Brienne or maybe Garlan (who is wounded at this point).

The rain was falling faster still, shining off the steel links of his ringmail so that for a moment they looked like silver, brightened by the waterfall of tears from above. But the gods did not weep for Laena, so why would they weep for me?

If you don't know who Laena is, the appendix may be of some help to you.
Mothers and Cubs

Chapter Summary

You are a lion, my son. You mustn't be afraid.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CERSEI

The king forced one pasty arm into the sleeve of the garment, shrugging silk and velvet over his shoulder. *He is paler than Joff was,* Queen Cersei observed, *though not so tall.* “This is not your colour,” she said.

Tommen forced his other arm into the sleeve. “Today would have been Father’s nameday,” he said, “it seems only proper to wear the Baratheon colours.” He reached for the cloak he had slung over the chair, a midnight blue so dark it was nearly black, decorated with a scattering of silvery stars. The cloak was clasped by a pair of antlers.

*Lies and yet more lies,* Cersei thought. “I’m sure your father would appreciate the gesture,” she said, “Robert would be… eight-and-thirty today, I think, or thereabouts. She smoothed down her son’s golden curls. “Age becomes less and less important as you grow older. You had best make the most of your youth while you still have it.” She thought of Joffrey, clawing at his neck as the wine ran purple and red down his throat, of so many years cruelly taken away.

“My crown, Mother,” Tommen said.

The king’s new crown was a heavy golden circlet similar to Joff’s, but lions stood sentinel between the antlers, rubies glowing in their eyes. It was heavier than Joffrey’s crown, too. Her son winced when she placed it upon his brow.

Cersei took Tommen’s hand and led him to the window. The rain lashed down in a thunderous torrent. Stormclouds swirled and lightning flashed, out over the Sunset Sea. “Dark clouds mean dark times ahead,” Tommen told her with the wisdom of his fourteen years.

“A peasant superstition. It means little and less.”

He frowned. “I prefer it when the sun is out, or when it rains, or even when it snows.” He twisted one of his rings. “Anything but this.”

“Are you happy now?”
“I-…” Tommen chewed his lip. “I don’t know. There’s… so much to deal with.” He took off his
crown and placed it on the table. “The Companions are occupying enough of my time, and I spend
the rest of it with Maester Creylen and Ser Kevan.”

“I suppose that you would appreciate some time away from your duties, to spend with your friends –
and this Westerling girl whose name seems to be thrown about so often.”

“Eleyna… yes. I don’t…” He sucked in a breath. “The betrothal was Myrcella’s doing, but I am
happy enough to go through with it.”

“Happiness is not love. When I met your father… King Robert… every man in the Seven Kingdoms
wanted to be him and every woman wanted to be with him.” Cersei was thinking not of her black-
bearded king as she spoke, but of Rhaegar Targaryen. Everything she’d ever shared with Robert had
been a lie. Even these sons of ours, Your Grace.

“You are the king,” she told Tommen. “Never forget that.”

Thunder rumbled. She wondered if Robert was somewhere up there in those clouds, watching over
her with displeasure. Storm all you like, my lord, Cersei thought. The walls of Casterly Rock were
strong and proud, like her. My roar is louder than yours.

“The council will not wait on us forever, Mother,” Tommen said, neatly adjusting the crown back on
his brow. He offered her his arm. The halls were draughty at this hour, the windows of the castle under assault by an angry wind and
an angrier rain. The sun had not bothered to rise this morning, so the dawn was glum and joyless.

In the small council chamber, Maester Creylen stood squinting out of the window with one closed
eye. “The storm rages on,” he said gloomily and took his seat. Myrcella stood beside him, holding a
cup of wine. Her uncle Kevan came next, garbed in black velvet, a chain of linked golden hands
around his throat. Behind him trailed Ser Damion Lannister, the lords Farman and Payne and Jast,
and Lady Lefford of the Golden Tooth. The Lord Regent’s lackeys, every one. Addam Marbrand
arrived clad in armour the same coppery colour as his hair. Qyburn sneaked in unnoticed.

The council table was a long plinth of ebony wood with matching chairs cushioned alternately in red
and gold velvet. A heavy chandelier swung to and fro above, throwing up tall rose-gold shadows.
Tommten took a seat at the head of the table, with Ser Kevan at his right hand. Cersei secured a place
at her son’s left, Myrcella beside her. The other councillors had to scramble for seats.

“Shall we begin?” Ser Kevan asked when Ser Harys Swyft finally arrived, his cloak sopping wet as
he laid it over the back of his chair. He filled his wine cup, then the king’s. “Perhaps we might start
with the pressing matter of Stannis’s advance.” The war was the only thing that the council could
agree upon nowadays. “How many men can the City Watch muster?”

“At present, we are three thousand, seven hundred and six,” Ser Addam said, “eight hundred of
those are the men from King’s Landing.” He was a dull, stolid man, but he had served House
Lannister well in recent years. Soon he would be lord of Ashemark, when his aging father passed.

Cersei could see the displeasure writ plain on Ser Kevan’s face. “Three thousand men is not enough
to guard a city of three hundred thousand. And when the time comes for us to march on the Golden
Tooth, the City Watch must make up some part of the army.” He nodded to the far end of the table.
“Maester Creylen, fetch the map, if you would.”

“Careful not to damage the parchment, my lords,” Maester Creylen warned as he brought it out,
“Lord Gerold’s maps are precious few and far between—”

“We ought to have them copied, then,” Qyburn suggested. “If it please my lords, I will be more than capable of the task once my current projects are completed.”

Myrcella put down her wine cup. “Might I inquire as to what my lady mother has been requiring of you, maester?”

“Rest assured, it is all in His Grace’s interests,” Qyburn said.

Ser Kevan spread the parchment before them. The streets, buildings and walls of Lannisport were laid out in red ink. “The Crooked Gate has been sealed up entirely now,” said Maester Creylen, indicating the map, “and Lord Tywin had the main throughfares widened.”

Ser Kevan prodded the map once, twice, thrice. “Here, here and here. We are particularly short at these three garrisons. It seems prudent to find ourselves some more men to man those positions. A generous pension increase for the common soldiers might do it…”

“By a half,” said Ser Damion Lannister, “that ought to be enough. With luck, it should give us another thousand soldiers, mayhaps more. I trust that we have no shortage of weapons to give them?”

Addam Marbrand agreed. “The armoury is almost fully stocked, and our smiths are forging more and more steel every day, pikes and maces and…”

Tommen frowned uneasily. “Won’t that cost more money? Giving them more as a pension—”

“Gold is hardly our concern here in Casterly Rock,” Myrcella said.

“Quite right,” said Ser Kevan. “Here King Robert’s debts are forgotten; I suppose that is a blessing if nothing else.”

“How many men of the City Watch would Your Grace have us commit to the army?” Marbrand asked.

Tommen cast uncertain glances at Ser Kevan and Myrcella. “Around half, I think,” he murmured. “Yes, exactly half. So that would make… two thousand? Two and a half.”

“One thousand, eight hundred and fifty-three, Your Grace,” Maester Creylen said.

Ser Kevan shrugged. “Call it one thousand and eight hundred - at present. If Ser Addam manages to increase the Watch to five thousand, then we can march with two-and-a-half thousand soldiers, and leave the same number behind to garrison the city.”

“How many is that overall?” Cersei asked.

“Seven thousand Lannister soldiers, and another nineteen thousand from our bannermen.”

“Make that nineteen and a half,” remarked Lady Alysanne Lefford, a slender woman with quick brown eyes. *And a snake’s heart.* “Our castellan has raised another five hundred.”

The queen had long since grown tired of this. “If we might divert the course of this conversation from the army to the fleet. I cannot help but wonder about these new dromonds Your Grace has commissioned.”

“It is Ser Kevan and Lord Farman who commissioned them,” Tommen said.
Lord Sebaston Farman was the king’s admiral, a balding man of her uncle’s age who had led the Lannister fleet ever since the Greyjoy Rebellion. “There are sixteen grand dromonds under construction in Lannisport’s shipyards,” he said, “along with fifty-four galleys, galleons, carracks, caravels, and such. The loss of the royal fleet was keenly felt, yes, but since the Redwynes also lost most of their own ships at Oldtown and the Iron Fleet is all but destroyed, no one in the Seven Kingdoms save for the Targaryens can muster a fleet as large. Even then, our sailors are better trained, more practised, more ready.”

"Meaning that we can march on Highgarden at any time convenient to us," Cersei thought, a smile coming unbidden to her lips.

Tommen held up a hand for silence. “I know little of naval warfare, but I remember King Robert’s Hammer, and the warships of the Baratheon fleet. How do these new ships compare?”

“The Lord Tywin is near twice the size of the Hammer, Your Grace,” Lord Farman said proudly, “as are the Fair Cersei and the Princess Myrcella. Ships well befitting the name, if my ladies will pardon me for saying so. There are no names for the other thirteen dromonds yet, Your Grace.”

“Thirteen?” Tommen glanced around the table. “I might do well to name one after all of my loyal counsellors, but I doubt that I would have enough.” Indeed, there were at least ten of them, a full complement of Lord Tywin’s grasping bannermen.

“A pretty jest, brother,” Myrcella said, “but if I may, you might do better to name one for Margaery Tyrell and her family.”

Cersei straightened in her chair. “The Tyrells are traitors, dear.”

“Not yet,” her daughter replied, “they are close to treachery, aye, but they have not yet declared for another king, and their grain is still trickling into Lannisport.”

“Slowly,” Qyburn muttered.

“We will have need of their armies should the war in the south escalate. Naming a ship after their Maid Margaery will no doubt serve to curry favour with Mace Tyrell.”

Tommen sighed. “Pen,” he said, “and parchment.” When the paper was before him the king scrawled down a name. “Sweet Margaery, and Golden Rose. Two should be more than enough.”

Ser Kevan raised an eyebrow. “We might be able to bestow this honour to your other lords.”

“Brave Falcon,” the king said. “That should serve for Lord Arryn, though I am not disposed to name a dromond for Littlefinger, and there is no point in trying to sway the Dornishmen by naming a boat after them.”

“Lady Joanna,” Cersei suggested, “to sail beside the Lord Tywin.”

“Done,” said Tommen, “and the Lord Tyrion shall follow.”

“The smallest of the ships,” Cersei jested to Lord Farman, “if any of them come out poorly made, then—”

She turned to meet the angry stares of Tommen and Myrcella. “Very well, then,” she muttered, “But dispatch the Ser Jaime beside him.”

“It is ill luck to name a ship after a man, Your Grace,” said Lord Farman, “with the exception of one
so grandiose as the Lord Tywin, of course. Might I suggest Halfman and Goldenhand as names instead?

“Goldenhand seems wise,” said Ser Kevan. “But Halfman is almost an insult; we shall keep it as the Lord Tyrion.”

“Ser Kevan,” the king said, pen poised over the parchment, “you have been invaluable in safeguarding the Crown in these difficult times. If it pleases you—”

“I would prefer it if you would call my ship Lady Genna for my late sister, or Lady Dorna for my wife, Your Grace.”

“I shall do both,” Tommen said. He thought a moment longer. “Lawbringer ought to serve, and Brightroar. The new Valyrian sword of House Lannister alongside the old. And…” He blushed. “I must not forget myself, of course. My father had King Robert’s Hammer and Joff had his King Joffrey’s Valour. I would name mine King Tommen’s Honour.”

“Lord Stark,” said Myrcella.

Cersei started. “A traitor’s name—”

“Yet he fostered us for more than a year—”

Ser Kevan came to her side, unexpectedly. “He lost his head to Ilyn Payne at Baelor’s Sept on Joffrey’s orders. Many of our men died fighting the War of Five Kings against Robb Stark’s uprising. I am surprised that you would think of such a foolhardy suggestion, my lady.”

“Fine,” she said, throwing up her arms. “A foolish suggestion, I admit it. Name it Nymeria. For the Rhoynar princess who sailed to Dorne. It will do little to sway the Martells now, but it is worth the effort.”


“You should save that one,” Myrcella told him.

Ser Kevan nodded. “Do not name the last ship just yet.”

No doubt the wife they choose for Tommen will want a ship named after her, Cersei knew. She said nothing. That matter was finished now.

“We talked of Littlefinger last we met,” her uncle said. “I have received another letter from Harrenhal. It seems that Lord Baelish has managed to minimise some of the problems he was experiencing in his regency of the Vale. The Waynwoods have come back onto our side, and the Pryors and the Hunters—”

“Two houses,” Cersei said. “They cannot have more a couple of thousand men between them. Even with his sellswords, that is a measly garrison.”

Ser Kevan continued. “Baelish is hiring more, he writes. The Long Lances and the Mirror Shields. One does have to wonder where he is getting the money, though I have something of an idea.”

“I have heard a rumour in passing that you mean to name Lord Baelish the master of coin.” Cersei turned to Tommen. “If I may, Your Grace, I would advise against this. It seems foolish to give Littlefinger more power than he deserves; the Wardenship of the North was more than enough. Grant him the title of justiciar instead; I would sooner trust in Ser Damion’s judgement when it comes to
keeping the Crown’s finances secure.” Ser Damion Lannister looked surprised to have been mentioned at all. *With enough hard work, I can turn him away from Kevan’s side,* the queen thought.

Tommen frowned. “Thank you for your counsel, Mother,” he said, “but Ser Kevan and I have already decided which position would suit Lord Baelish best. I think Ser Damion has his own talents when it comes to diplomacy.”

Lady Lefford objected. “Forgive me for the interruption, but it would seem that the inconvenience here is not Lord Baelish himself but rather how far away he is. Perhaps we could send an envoy.”

Ser Kevan agreed. “If we can sway not only Baelish but also Robert Arryn—”

“No easy task, I assure you,” the queen said. “The boy is a spoiled brat. The only thing that will sway him is the milk from Lysa Arryn’s breast.” Joff had been on the breast until almost his third nameday, but the Arryn bitch had never bothered to wean her monster until the day some singer had thrown her out of a window.

Tommen spoke up suddenly. “Or a falcon,” he said. His eyes were glazed over. “He was telling me about that at Harrenhal. Surely it cannot be too hard to find him a falcon, and inform that it comes with the compliments of his friend the king.”

Myrcella raised an eyebrow. “Friend?”

“If a lie is kindly meant, what is the harm in it?” Tommen said tiredly.

The princess nodded. “So… we send a trustworthy man to convince Littlefinger of the benefits of an alliance with House Lannister. And a falcon for little Lord Arryn. Then we hope that Baelish agrees and rides back across the Riverlands to take Stannis in the rear.”

“And that will give us the army we need to deal with the Tyrell problem, should it come to war in the south.” *And I hope it does,* Cersei thought. “Who, then?”

Myrcella turned to the chicken lord, of all people. “Ser Harys, I can think of no one better than yourself. A trustworthy man, and loyal.”

Ser Harys Swyft puffed out his chest, the blue chicken on his doublet growing in size. “W-would that I could, but I am already occupied with the negotiation of marriage contracts for your mother.”

*This is going nowhere.* “If I may bring our intention to the matter of the royal wedding,” she said, before they went any further down that thread. “The High Septon has confirmed twice over that the marriage between King Tommen and Lady Margaery Tyrell has been annulled, owing to a lack of consummation. If my lords would like to have a look at the scroll in question—” He reached into the folds of his robe.

“I don’t think this is necessary,” the king said. “We’ve already discussed this.”

“Have we?” Ser Kevan smiled rarely nowadays, but this pleased him. “There are a number of marriage offers that I would be happy to put before Your Grace.” He glanced around the table. “Lady Lefford here is unmarried for a start—”

“To be sure,” said Lady Lefford.

*No,* Cersei thought. “I fear that it was the age gap between Lady Margaery and His Grace that led to this problem in the first place.”
Lady Lefford gave a slow nod, but the frown never left her lips. “Well, I am even older than the Lady Tyrell, and alas, I have my eyes set upon another.” She raised her wine-cup to the king. “Fear not, Your Grace. I am certain that there are plenty of young maidens who would be happy to have you.”

“Well,” Tommen said, “I’m open to suggestions.”

No, you aren’t. It seemed wise to change the subject again. “Speaking of weddings,” Cersei told the table, “does anyone have any more knowledge of Sansa Stark’s nuptials at Highgarden. I have heard conflicting report, but the bride has fled, all agree.” And drowned in a ditch, if the gods are good.

Qyburn said, “My spies seem to implicate some woman from Tarth in the proceedings. She may have kidnapped the girl.”

“Brienne of Tarth,” Cersei said. Now there’s a wonder. “The wench is a sour, shambling freak of a woman, no doubt embittered by jealousy and desperate for acceptance. I cannot help but wonder if this disruption of the wedding and the little dove’s kidnapping is some plot of Stannis’s. The woman served Renly, so why not the other brother?”

“Attempting to disrupt the Highgarden wedding would be incredibly tactless,” Ser Kevan said, “not to mention pointless now that there is a Stark in the Riverlands. A male Stark, one who comes before Lady Sansa in the succession.”

“Rickon,” said Myrcella.

Cersei turned to Ser Kevan. “Do you have intentions to deal with this Northern uprising?”

“Aye,” her uncle replied. “When our envoy has finished with Littlefinger, they will go to Riverrun and treat with this Stark boy and Edmure Tully, independent of Stannis’s war effort. The Rivermen have no real love for Stannis and even less for this war. We will trade our prisoners for theirs and establish a truce between the North and the West. With luck they will desert Stannis, and hunt him down in the mountains.”

“Or we could head to Highgarden,” Tommen suggested. “The Tyrells have not deserted us yet. I… we could see if our alliance can be renegotiated. It would be a lot more convenient for all of us if we came to some sort of settlement with Lord Tyrell.” When he saw Cersei frowning he said, “We need the Reach on our side. I should go and reason with them.”

“You can’t,” Myrcella said.

“Why not?”

“It’s too dangerous. We don’t know who the Tyrells are loyal to. The king should not be leaving Casterly Rock on unnecessarily reckless missions like these. Ser Kevan, why not go south yourself? You have skill in these sorts of diplomatic matters.”

Ser Kevan laughed. “Diplomatic skill, princess? I think not. When it comes to that, I can think of no-one better than yourself.” A pause followed his words. “We should adjourn for the day, I think. There is little else to discuss, and I can see that our time would best be spent at our individual duties.” He glanced around the table. “Does anyone have any concerns?”

Cersei had plenty, but she chose not to voice them. “Let us adjourn,” she agreed.

Tommen rubbed his forehead as he stood, adjusting his crown again. “Maester Creylen, would you accompany me to my chambers, if you please? The rest of you can go.”
Save for two, the council filed out by the king’s lead, Lady Lefford and Ser Addam bringing up the rear. Ser Harys Swyft forgot his cloak and returned to the table after the others had gone to retrieve it, bowing his apologies along the way.

Only Cersei and Myrcella remained. “It’s me he means to send to Harrenhal, you know,” the princess said when the room was silent.

“Yes.”

Her daughter raised an eyebrow. “To marry Robert Arryn.”

“You won’t be marrying Robert Arryn,” Cersei told her.

“You said that you would never be marrying again, and yet Ser Harys is looking for suitors for you —”

“I won’t be marrying them.”

Her daughter frowned. “You can’t guarantee of that.”

“We’re Lannisters, Myrcella. You must not forget that. Our words are hear me roar. I do not intend to bow down without a fight… and neither should you.”

That made her daughter stop with the cup halfway to her lips. “But… but it is my duty, Mother.”

“Your duty to whom? Your brother?”

“To my king.”

“Your king is your brother. We both know that Tommen will not deny you your wishes if you speak to him bluntly. I told him that too much kindness will destroy him…” She placed her hands softly on her daughter’s own. “Nevermind that. Let me worry about your brother. We need to trust each other, Myrcella. Finish these matters of the wedding preparations.”

Myrcella squinted at her. “You agree with me?”

“I see no reason not to. Better this Westerling girl than the grasping Lefford bitch or some other highborn lady of Kevan’s choosing.” That was no lie, though she would sooner not have the Westerling girl either. “The quicker we finish this, the quicker we can consolidate our gains.” Cersei rose from her seat, leaving Myrcella alone in the shallow puddle of morning light that was spilling slowly across the flagstones.

Qyburn met her in the hallway. “Your Grace,” he said bowing, “I fear that we could not speak frankly earlier, before the council, but now…” His head jerked like a puppet’s, towards the gloom at the end of the corridor. “I have something that you may want to see. Someone.”

A smile crossed the queen’s lips. “Lead the way.”

Cersei followed him along the corridor, then down a hidden spiral stair, deeper and deeper into the heart of the Rock. Qyburn took a lantern from a hook and lit it. The world around them flickered in the pale heart of the flame. Cockles and seaweed grew from cracks and crevices in the stone. The falling rain echoed off the stone walls, and thunder boomed from below. “How much deeper is it?” the queen asked.

Qyburn’s head bobbed as he walked. “Not much farther,” he said vaguely. “Another twenty steps,
mayhaps thirty, forty, fifty…”

There was a whistling wind coming through some of the cracks. Something that looked suspiciously like a rat scurried down the stairs ahead of Qyburn, disappearing into an invisible cubby-hole. “It is cold down here,” Cersei said bluntly.

“I can only apologise for that, Your Grace, and advise you to dress warmly when next you visit. A large majority of my experiments do not keep well in the light and warmth.”

“That will not jeopardise this particular project, will it? It would be most inconvenient if the sun were to weaken—”

He smiled. “Oh, no, Your Grace. Oh, not at all.”

They emerged into a cellar that was far roomier than she had expected it to be. Qyburn’s things were strewn across half the room; bits of broken pot, tin pans, a hundred different papers, glass jars full of beetles and ants and fat black leeches, a shelf overflowing with fat, moth-bitten tomes with leather covers. Books did not keep well in the damp. The queen wrinkled her nose and lifted her kerchief to her face. “There is a strange smell down here,” she commented. Cersei could not have described it, but it smelled… old.

Qyburn flashed her a smile. “The smell of science, Your Grace. Outsiders can find it a little… shall we say, unusual?”

“Unusual, yes.” There was one window in the room, looking out over the Sunset Sea. The queen forced it ajar, letting in a welcome stream of fresh air.

“Will you have a seat, Your Grace?” Qyburn gestured to a lonely-looking armchair that might have once been red, but had turned orange in the damp.

Cersei waved away his offer and picked up a Myrish lens instead. “This belonged to my little brother, I believe.”

“Lord Tyrion had a rather impressive collection up in his rooms, Your Grace, and I could not help but borrow some of it.”

“Well, I daresay no one will miss him.” The queen smiled. The dwarf was alive, yes, but he was a captive of the Targaryens, and with a little luck, he would wind up dead one way or another. Just like his little whore, the one I strangled.

Qyburn stirred a cookpot with a long-handled spoon, sniffing the contents. “A moment, Your Grace.” He turned away and scurried through a tiny door hidden behind a tapestry. Cersei would never have noticed it at first glance. Qyburn kept too many secrets for her liking, yet she could think of no-one else in all of Casterly Rock who was so loyal to her, and her alone. Qyburn is mine. And the things he’d done for her…

Moments later he emerged. Cersei tried to peer past him, but all she could glimpse was darkness before the door slammed shut. “My apologies, Your Grace,” he said, “they do not seem all that willing today.”

“Willing? They are supposed to be mindlessly obedient. If I order them to—”

“And you shall have that,” Qyburn said. “In time. But the project is not quite finished, not yet. I find… the human body… a certain measure of, hmm, willingness is needed to get the subconscious to co-operate…” He paused a moment. “It is less important than the science itself, but I did have
something of a realisation when it came to choosing names. Robert, Steffon, Lyonel, Ormund, Orys, and such…

The queen smiled. “An amusing jape, I must say. Robert, for my lord husband; Steffon for his father; Lyonel for his father before him.”

Qyburn shrugged. “It seemed apt, for a Baratheon king.” There was a twinkle in the man’s eyes that Cersei did not like.

“That will do for now, Lord Qyburn. I am sure you have other, ah, experiments which you would do well to occupy yourself with. My son leaves for the Golden Tooth at month’s end. Will you have completed your project by then?”

“Certainly, Your Grace.”

Curiosity overcame her. “Lord Qyburn, to whom do you owe your loyalty?”

He answered without hesitation. “To the king. And to you, Your Grace.”

“Why?” Strangely, she had never thought to ask.

Qyburn picked up a small brass monocle and put it close to his eye, squinting a little. “Come and look here, Your Grace.” He beckoned her over. “I’m working on some sort of… volatile compound, shall we say. A highly delicate powder of sorts. Now, this is very early days, of course, but…” He took a single grain of something from a tiny bowl and added it to a shallow dish of oily liquid. It sank, and then… and then…

“Was something supposed to happen?” she asked.

“Theoretically, it would float,” Qyburn said.

*Pushing the boundaries of science,* Cersei thought. “What does this have to do with… anything?” she asked offhandedly.

“The Citadel was not so fond of my experimentation,” the chainless maester said. “For example, this powder involves bone marrow. Human bone marrow, which I, hmm, borrowed from a prisoner. The grey sheep would not be predisposed to look upon that favourably, hmm… but here, Your Grace, I have everything that I could ever need or want. Weighing scales, flasks and bell jars, and much, much more. All manner of implements, and a healthy supply of castle vermin, yes. I am a man of science, my queen, and House Lannister has been kinder to me in that regard than anyone else I have ever known. And thus, well, I live to serve.”

“It is good to have loyal friends,” Queen Cersei said. “And Tommen thanks you for his loyal service, I’m sure.” She paused. “One last question. Whose head did you use?”

“Your Grace?”

“My father sent Gregor Clegane’s head to Dorne to appease Prince Doran.” The queen stared at her lace kerchief suspiciously. “So whose head did you…” Her eyes fell upon the Kingsguard helm resting on the table. “Whose head?”

Qyburn smiled. “The Crown has no lack of enemies, Your Grace. Plenty of heads lying around spare, heads that would otherwise be wasted rotting on spikes on the castle walls. It would be such a shame to forget their history, don’t you think?”
I liked writing Cersei again. I don't think I really did her justice in A Coat of Gold (by removing her from the story entirely two-thirds of the way in) so I'm willing to give her POV another go.

[Tommen's] new crown was a heavy golden circlet decorated with Baratheon antlers... It was heavy, too. Joffrey’s crown never had this sort of weight.

This is obvious symbolism for the idea that a crown lies uneasily, and there's not really much to be analysed her.

The king forced one pasty arm into the sleeve of the garment, shrugging the silk and velvet down over his shoulder. He is paler than Joff was, Cersei Lannister observed, and fatter than his brother too, though not so tall.

Cersei makes comparisons between her sons at the start of this chapter. We can see that she still feels Joffrey's loss keenly, though oddly she is not motivated by it here. Indeed, Cersei's confused motivations here show how even she does not know what she is doing, as she makes several statements about her plans only to almost immediately contradict them:

And by sending Lady Westerling home, Myrcella’s hopes of making that ‘temporary betrothal’ would be quickly diminished.

followed by...

Better this Westerling girl than the grasping Lefford bitch or some other highborn lady of Kevan’s choosing.

Cersei is to some extent clueless about everything, even her own intentions.

“Which makes me wonder if this disruption of the wedding and the little dove’s kidnapping is in fact some plot of Stannis’s. [Brienne of Tarth] served Renly, so why not the other brother?”

Hahahaha... nope.

Also, following a temporary suspension... *sighs*... CLEGANEBOOWL is back on the menu. If this is the sort of thing that interests you, I would advise that you GET HYPE.
Samwell Tarly glanced up from the letter and looked out of the porthole for the thousandth time. He was distracting himself from the task at hand, he knew, but sometimes it was nice to daydream.

During his boyhood, he’d imagined that mythical beasts roamed the forests that surrounded his father’s castle of Horn Hill, unicorns and sphinxes and manticores all. He’d written stories about brave knights fighting dragons and the fair maidens whose favours they sought. Eventually, they’d invaded his dreams too, but those always turned into nightmares when Lord Randyll hunted the unicorns and skinned them for Sam’s supper.

I have to concentrate, Sam reminded himself. Four of the letters were written and sealed; one for the eyes of Willas Tyrell at Highgarden, two to his mother and his sister Talla, the fourth to Jon Snow at Castle Black. But the last letter left Sam clueless. Gilly. None of Sam’s books could help him understand her. “Women are supposed to be mysteries, Samwell,” Captain Voros had told him, when Sam explained his predicament.

Sam thought about asking Sarella Sand for help, but he knew she’d only laugh at him. He doubted that Sarella knew much about what normal women wanted, anyway. But even if he had wanted to ask her, Sarella was not here. She’d left the Windskater two mornings ago. “I’m going to try and find some of my mother’s old friends,” she told him, “might be that my father knows people in Volantis too.” Sarella’s mother was a ship captain from the Summer Isles, and she had associates far and wide in trading circles all over the world. “A boat to Qarth, I think. Or to Slaver’s Bay.”

“Can’t we just find a ship that goes straight to Asshai?” Sam asked.
Sarella laughed. “You’ll be hard-pressed to find a fool who wants to take you all the way to Asshai this side of Valyria, Sam. Qarth is a reasonable destination for a Volantene merchant, and there are plenty of madmen there who will be willing to take us beyond the Shadow.” But she had not returned in two days, and Sam had heard nothing from her.

He spent her absence writing his letters to Westeros, deciding what to write in his letters to Westeros, and staring at the rail of the boat trying to think of things to write in his letters to Westeros.

Yet the letters to Westeros were still incomplete.

Staring down at the half-filled sheet of parchment, Sam sighed. He’d written four sheets worth for Jon, and a goodly amount for Ser Willas, his mother and sister, but he was lost for words when it came to writing a message for Gilly. What could he write about? What? What?

Sam recalled something that Dolorous Edd had once told him as they’d engaged in the unenviable task of shovelling dung for the campfires at the Fist of the First Men. When you’re faced with fucking an ugly woman, best just get it over and done with. Gilly was no ugly woman, but he supposed that the same principle applied here. He let out a loud, long sigh, and scrawled down the first things that came into his head until two sheets were filled. When he was finished, he felt that he’d be better off crossing it all out and starting again, but he knew that he would never get anything done that way, so he folded the letter into its envelope, shoved it into the folds of his cloak alongside the other five letters, and left the cabin.

Captain Voros was shouting orders at a scullion when Sam came above, but when he saw his favorite passenger he turned and flashed him a big white-toothed smile. “Where you go, Black Sam?” he asked in heavily accented Common Tongue. The captain had been continuing Sam’s studies in High Valyrian in return for tutoring in the Westerosi language.

“To find someplace to send my letters,” Sam told him, stepping down onto the gangway. “I’ll be back shortly.”

The captain flashed him another smile. “See that you are, Black Sam. Else I eat your stew, eh?”

Volantis was home to a number of public ravenries where you could hire a bird to carry your messages and letters to Oldtown, where the maesters would pass them on to wherever you wanted them to go. Since the Citadel had been half-destroyed in the battle on the Honeywine, Sam did not know whether the letters would ever actually reach the city, but it was the best chance he had of getting one final message to his friends and family before he crossed the Summer Sea. It would help calm his mother, hopefully, and it was important that he told Jon Snow as much as he knew before he disappeared from the range of ravens.

The air was sweltering, the remnants of the last ‘warm storms’ that the maesters had promised would sweep across the Known World, conveyed by hot winds from the east. Sam was willing to bet that there were thunderstorms in Westeros right now. After there would come a brief period of unexpected sunshine that would bake the land, and then they would be very quickly plunged into cold and darkness. Winter is coming. The Stark words had once confused Sam, but recently he’d come to the realisation that the Starks of old might have been warning them about the advance of the Others. And that opened up all sorts of interesting possibilities. Had the Starks made provisions to defeat their cold blue foes? Did the North remember the last time the dead had come marching? Were Bran the Builder and his peers just legends, or were they the men who had fought the Others the last time, immortalised in song? There were many questions Sam did not know the answer to.

They had been in Volantis for almost a week now. It was kind of Captain Voros to allow them to keep their berths on the Windskater while he was still in port. The Windskater was a cog that they’d
managed to find on the fifth day of searching in Oldtown’s docks. The captain had only laughed when Sam told him their intentions to travel to Asshai, but he was willing to take them as far as Volantis, and better still, he would not be stopping in Sunspear or the Planky Town on the way. Sarella had feared that if they were caught in Dorne, her uncle Prince Doran would never let them leave again.

Sam was still not entirely sure why she had bothered to come with him. He appreciated her help; without Sarella he would probably have ended up stranded in Volantis for years looking for a ship, but he wasn’t certain why she’d wanted to help him in the first place. For a while he’d been half-expecting her to murder him and throw his corpse overboard, revealing herself to be a servant of the Others, or Euron Greyjoy in disguise. It was not impossible. He still wasn’t sure what he’d done to the ironman, or what had become of the dragon eggs and the Horn of Winter. He was certain now that the dragons he’d seen beneath the water weren’t actually real, and that—

Sam tripped and stumbled, barely righting himself by catching a cart of oranges as he fell. He turned to the man he’d accidentally barged into. “Your pardon, ser,” he squeaked. “Sorry…”

The big man was a Tyroshi from the looks of his beard. “Best watch where you’re headed,” he warned in the Common Tongue, “there are plenty of others around who wouldn’t be nearly so kind to you.”

He was right. Braavosi in particular were quick to anger and quicker to draw their swords, and it was no strange thing to see a man murdered for some small slight in the back alleys of the city, so Sam kept to the main thoroughfares. Here, he could see the Long Bridge of Volantis if he looked out over the bay, and eastern Volantis beyond it, where the Temple of the Lord of Light stood proud in the Plaza of Fire, where the Black Wall hid the manses and palaces of the Old Blood from the view of foreigners and freedmen. Boats struggled along the marshes at the edge of the Rhoyne, while bigger ships streamed into the harbor or out into the vast blue expanse of the Summer Sea.

Trade was rich here. On this street alone there were merchants and peddlers selling Myrish rugs and Lysene oils, spices from Pentos and Lorath and Slaver’s Bay, bronze effigies of bulls, statues of elephants and tigers decorated with mosaic, cyvasse sets in onyx and amber and lapis lazuli, Andalish sour wines, pale greens from Selhorys, pomegranate wine and blackberry liquor, lemons and oranges and limes, figs and prunes. And slaves beyond number, sold among a throng of bidders beneath the awnings of the black markets.

Volantis smelled of prunes and flowers that had gone off, and faintly of fish and nightsoil. Sam was ashamed by it, but he’d taken off his Night’s Watch blacks in favour of a loose silken tunic, because wearing his heavy blacks in this heat was insanity. Even so, he was sweating profusely, the garment stuck to his skin, and he was beginning to feel faint. He went to one of the peddlers and used his rudimentary grasp of bastard Valyrian to purchase a drink of iced lemon water, which, though horrendously sour, succeeded in making him feel a little less nauseous.

“They’re warring in the Disputed Lands again,” said the man beside him, “ever since the Golden Company went over to these Targaryens in the west, the war’s been turning in Tyrosh’s favour.”

“The Lysene have got the Dothraki to worry about,” his companion replied, in an accent that was decidedly Westerosi, “at their gates, and raiding the grasslands outside. I wouldn’t be surprised if they started attacking the city before long—”

“And they claim to be with this Targaryen queen?” The first man scoffed. “She’s lost control of Meereen and now the khalasar is outside Lys; how long can she keep King’s Landing?”

His Westerosi friend was not listening. He waved a hand in front of his face. “Seven Hells, how do
you cope with all this searing heat?"

"Would you rather be on the Wall?"

"Gods, no. The poor bastards are freezing their balls off up there, no doubt. And they don’t even get any half-decent food anymore; the trade has stopped entirely through Eastwatch ever since the Lord Commander died—"

Sam nearly dropped his drink. What? he wondered. What? He took a long look at the two men, feeling queasy as he staggered away. Jon isn’t dead, he thought, producing the letters from his pocket, rummaging through them with sausage fingers. No, no, they must have gotten it wrong. Jon isn’t dead. He choked down a swallow of his drink and fell onto a bench. They’re wrong, Jon wouldn’t die, not now, not now, they’re probably wrong, it’s not been that long since the Old Bear died, they’re probably talking about him. Yes. Yes, that’s right. Jon isn’t—

"Samwell Tarly?"

"Yes," he said without looking up, "W-what?"

A slender hand reached down into his pocket and drew out one of his letters. When Sam followed it up, a woman was standing over him. The sun was a golden halo behind her. Her cloak and dress seemed to shimmer, changing from wine-red to plum-red to ruby, and when she leaned down he saw a heart-shaped face, full lips, thick waves of black hair. A red priestess. Sam gulped a little.

She looked down at his letter and raised an eyebrow. "Yes," she said, more to herself than to him, "I believe that you are the one we looked for."

"M-my lady?"

"I am no true lady, Samwell Tarly. My name is Kinvara, a Priestess of the Red Temple of Volantis, the Maker of the Flame, the Second Servant of the Lord of Light here in this great city. And you are a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch, a black crow of the Wall, Lord Randyll’s son. And you are needed."

Sam could only stare at her, bemused. His lips were dry. "You are… a red priestess?" he asked dumbly.

She offered him her hand. Rings glowed brightly on her fingers, set with garnets and rubies. “Come, Samwell Tarly. The First Servant of the Lord of Light would have words with you.” At his quizzical expression, she said, “You may know him as Benerro.”

That name was more familiar to Sam’s ears, though he had never laid eyes upon this Benerro in person. This Benerro was once a slave, freed in the light of the Lord, yet he still bore his tattoos as a reminder of his humility. Sam took a quick glance to see if this Kinvara bore any slave markings of her own, and found none. She is nobly born, then. Working in the Lord’s Temple was an occupation suited even to those of high birth.

Sam blushed at the crowd that was gathering as she ushered him to his feet, scarlet silks swirling. Men and women gazed at them, goggle-eyed. “You need not worry about them, Samwell,” Kinvara told him quietly, “but it would not hurt for you to know why they stare.” The crowd parted as she walked. “The folk of Volantis are no strangers to the Lord’s message, but it is rare that they lay eyes upon one from the High Temple in person. You will excuse me this one moment, I hope.”

With surprising nimbleness she jumped up onto the back of a merchant’s cart and spread her arms wide. “Sųź idañe hen volantis, nyke ųdragon naejot ao se udra hen drēje perzys, isse se brōzi
hen īlva jaqiarzus Āeksiot Ōño,” she told the crowd. “Gīmigon bisa sir, bona se perzyssy bona blaze isse aōha prūmi glaesagon isseivyvon hae sāyri, se kesi ĭrragon hae mēre skori se jēda māzigon syt se memēbagon. Hae mēre! Syt isse se endia ĭa kaerūnioţma amid lopor se ĭrbar ĭ̃za risen naejot sit se Dēmalion Āegenko, āzma hen ānogar hen zaldrīzes. Ţŷhon brōzi is Daenērys, se drēje perzys is țŷhon, se perzys hen țŷhon prūmīa iksis raqagon ĭa pyrys perzyssy, syt zirī is se viilbāzmiōônō. Ivestragī valar gīmigon ſuha udra! Jagon, jikagon, ezi̓magon se bantis, se ĭvestragī se rhaperzys renigon each se tolvie part hen bisa vys. Āeksiot Ōño, nyke beg ao, tepagon īlva se kustikāne, se se perzys hen jorrāelagon se glaeson, syt bantis zōbrie issa se ossūngnoti lēdys!

“Bantis zōbrie issa se ossūngnoti lēdys!” the crowd shouted back. Sam recognised those words. The night is dark and full of terrors.

They were still chanting as he and Kinvara faded away. When they were out of their sight, Sam tremulously asked her what she had told them.

“I told them that Daenerys Targaryen would bring love and light,” she said, “I told them that she is the promised saviour whose flame burns as brightly as a thousand nightfires. Because it is the truth.” She smiled again.

Daenerys is the saviour, she says. Sam had heard passing little news during the journey between Oldtown and Volantis, so it had been a surprise to find that two Targaryens now reigned in King’s Landing instead of just the one.

“My lady,” he said, feeling small in Kinvara’s wake. She moved as gracefully as anyone Sam had ever seen, and her majesty was not lost on Volantis’s people, who stopped and stared and made way for her as they crossed the Long Bridge. “My lady, I… I met a red priestess at Castle Black, back when I was on the Wall. She arrived when the army of—”

“Stannis Baratheon,” said Kinvara. “Her name was Melisandre of Asshai, correct?” She arched one eyebrow. “Melisandre is a treasured servant of the Lord’s pantheon, and she has proved exceptionally skilled at seeing glimpses of the Lord’s future in the flames. But her youth means that her mind is prone to wandering when it comes to deciphering said visions. Few are skilled at both reading and understanding, Samwell Tarly, hence the reason why many of the Lord’s servants travel in pairs, with one to read the flames and another to understand them.” She placed a hand on his arm. Her skin was pleasantly cool, much as Melisandre’s had been pleasantly warm in the icy shadow of the Wall.

“And which one are you, my lady?” Sam asked.

“I am skilled in the art of understanding the fire, Samwell. That is an ability which requires more time and practise than many of the members of our order are willing to devote. They do not fare so well when it comes to the selection.” Her tone was so mysterious that Sam did not dare to venture any further in the conversation.

Kinvara said, “I trust that Melisandre thought Lord Stannis of Dragonstone was the Lord of Light’s rightful heir, then?”

Sam paused for a moment, unsure whether or not he should continue. I have little choice now. He fiddled with the buttons on his sleeves. “…Yes, but Maester Aemon doubted that. He said that it was Daenerys who—”

“Aemon Targaryen spoke truly,” she said, “whether by intention or by accident.”

“He was the wisest man I knew,” said Sam.
“Perhaps he was, in a certain way.” Kinvara had a mournful smile. “But wisdom comes in many forms, Samwell, and no mortal man can master them all.”

Eventually they reached the Lord of Light’s temple, where acolytes in pale red robes called greetings in the High Valyrian tongue. Kinvara hailed them back, but her eyes were on Sam once again as they climbed the steps. The entrance to the temple was a great arch carved in the shape of a man plunging a flaming sword into a woman’s breast, and the doors were decorated with similar figures. “Azor Ahai and his wife, Nissa Nissa,” Sam said. “Maester Aemon told me the story. And the prophecy.”

“I doubt that, Samwell Tarly. The prophecy is something that is not so easily explained.”

“I… I heard some of the words when I was in Oldtown. I don’t know how it came to me… a vision through the flames, mayhaps, but I saw Summerhall burning, and I learned that it was the Citadel who slayed the last of the dragons—”

She gave him an odd look. “You saw this in the flames?”

“Well… no, it wasn’t the flames as such, but… yes… it was a dream of sorts.”

Kinvara muttered something under her breath; all Sam heard was, “old forces.” The red priestess cleared her throat. “Come. We must go to Benerro.”

The halls of the Red God’s temple sounded far more joyous than any sept. A choir sung songs before the high altar, and no less than twenty priests and priestesses went among the worshippers to help them with their praise and deliver sermons in many different languages that Sam did not know. He recognised Daenerys Targaryen’s name, but little else.

They want her to lead them from the darkness, he thought, and they are set on her being their saviour. Maester Aemon was right when he said that the prince that was promised was not necessarily a man.

Sam knew Benerro at once. He was six feet tall and entirely bald. Snowy grey stubble blanketed his cheeks and a patchwork of red and orange flames coloured his skin. His eyes were pale grey flecked with red. “Samwell Tarly,” Kinvara said, “you stand before Benerro, High Priest of the Temple of the Lord of Light in Volantis, First Servant of the Lord of Light, the Flametruth, the Light of Wisdom.”

Benerro’s robes made a swishing sound when he turned to them. “Kinvara. And Samwell the Slayer. I have been watching you ever since you arrived in this city.”

Sam was not surprised. The red priests could see things that had happened far away, as well as events that had not yet come to pass. “You – you know what they call me?”

“The Slayer. And with good reason. You slew one of the Dark One’s servants, no?”


The red priest nodded. “An evil thing, whatever you choose to call it. But there are ways to defeat those creatures, as you know.”

“Dragonglass,” Sam said. “And… and dragonsteel. Valyrian steel.”

“Yes.” Benerro beckoned Sam towards the window, stopped and pointed to the east. “I presume you recognise the Black Walls of Old Volantis. Now tell me, what are they made of?”
Sam looked, and looked harder, squinting. He had thought it to be ordinary black stone, but the harder he gazed at it the less and less sure he became. “Dragonstone,” he breathed at last.

“Indeed,” said Benerro, “a wall of the purest dragonstone, obsidian mined in the Freehold of Valyria. In the old days the Valyrians built Volantis as their first monument outside of their own great cities, and they spared no expense here. The Black Wall wide enough for four horse-drawn chariots to go abreast, as they do every year to celebrate the city’s founding, but its true purpose relates to the dragons that the Old Blood used to land on them. And now the dragons have returned to the world. Why would they come back after an absence of so long, if not to be our saviours?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I, Samwell. But I know this. Daenerys Targaryen is the prince that was promised, and her dragons are fire made flesh. Soon I will head west, to see these dragons for myself. If you wish to return to Westeros, you would do well to sail with me.”

It was a tempting offer, Sam thought. Gilly was in Westeros, and Jon Snow, and his sisters, and everyone he had ever known. And yet… “I can’t go west yet,” he told Benerro, “I need to travel to Asshai-by-the-Shadow, to… to find knowledge that will help us at the darkening of the world. To find the answers that Maester Aemon told me to find. I… I heard a prophecy, and I have to solve it. The knights of the nightingale. The lady of the phoenix. The prince of the vulture.”

Benerro nodded slowly. “The answers you seek are beyond the Shadow, Samwell Tarly.” His eyes flashed. “And perhaps… perhaps they are the answers we seek as well. Kinvara.” He called for the red priestess.

“My lord,” Sam said, “what do you know about them—?”

“Of the knights I know only what the old books have revealed to me. It is something that the shadowbinders will understand far better than I ever will. Of the prince of the vulture, I can only tell you this: it is a dark thing, a servant of the Dark One whose name we will not speak. Like a vulture, it feeds on carrion, and makes use old sort of blood magic we do not practise. Oh, and I am no lord, Samwell. I was born a slave of the one true Lord, a servant of light, determined to see the Dark One expelled from this world.”

“The Dark One… could you explain… my books are always vague?”

Kinvara said, “In the west they speak of seven gods, but there are only two, Samwell Tarly, a god of light and a god of darkness, the latter whose name must not be spoken by mortal men.”

Benerro nodded. “We will not try to turn you from your faith, but consider this… though we serve different gods, perhaps it is that we serve the same cause.” His eyes glowed red. “So be it. Just as I head west, you must go east, Samwell Tarly. Kinvara will be your guiding light, your star in the sky. The cold winds are rising, and His Grey Grace stirs once again among the smoking ruins of Old Valyria. On the morrow, you will leave Volantis, with an escort of godly men, to learn the truth of phoenix, vulture and nightingale. The Melevol leaves at sunrise.”

Chapter End Notes

Originally, Samwell was only supposed to have one chapter in TSK. He now has about five - so you can get an idea as to why the story is getting longer and longer with every
passing day.

So, Sam is going on something of a voyage through Essos on his way to Asshai. I don't know how long this journey will take, but I'll probably take some liberties with travel speeds in order to get him to the right place at the right time.

For the Valyrian parts in this chapter I used the Valyrian-English translator at lingojam.com, and - to a lesser extent - the High Valyrian vocabulary list created by GOT language specialist David J. Petersen. I doubt that it's that accurate, but if you want you can put Kinvara's speech back into the translator and try making some sense out of it.

The *Melevol*, the ship Sam is going to travel on to Asshai, is a rough transliteration of 'Red Raven', but it could be interpreted as just 'Red Bird' - an appropriate name for a ship sailed by associates of the Lord of Light. And don't worry, Sarella will be going with Sam on the rest of his journey.

While we're on that matter, I decided to introduce Kinvara - who appeared in 6x05 of the show - rather than creating an entirely new red priest character. I was a little disappointed not to see more of her this season of GOT, and the same can be said for Melisandre, who basically disappeared from the show after 6x03. So there are now five red priests in the story: Melisandre, Benerro, Moqorro, Kinvara and Thoros of Myr, all with different roles and differing styles of worship.

Thanks to everyone for reading; special thanks to my recent reviewers: VVSIGNOFTHECROSS, Tommyginger, yyzEthan, DanyelN, 1thy_truth_is_won0, Zireael07, Defiant_furball, Iuvenal, Ducks_Go_Eyup, Mussimm, Bragation, IKnowWhereWhoresGo and aeb.
Debts to Pay

Chapter Summary

“Perhaps we have a destiny; perhaps the gods make our fates when we are born. If so, I am still unsure of mine.”

Chapter Notes

OST:

A Lannister Always Pays His Debts (Season 3)
Atonement (Season 5)
Chaos Is A Ladder (Season 3)
Take Charge of Your Life (Season 4)
The Rains of Castamere (Season 2)
Hear Me Roar (Season 6)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION

Fawn Crag did not particularly seem like the place for an uprising, Tyrion mused. The castle was a ring of stout towers perched on the face of a rocky crag, a tiny fist poking up out of one of many endless hillsides.

A few years ago, Tyrion had travelled to Storm’s End with Robert’s retinue, and gazed upon the crashing waves slamming into those stout black bastions, watched the grey walls shake with the force of the gathering thunder. Fawn Crag was three hundred miles inland, but save for that, it was exactly like a shittier version of Storm’s End. It sat a couple of thousand feet off the ground as well, so it also bore a resemblance to the Eyrie – again, only shittier.

Tyrion had seen far mightier castles in his time, but despite Fawn Crag’s general mediocrity, the army was having a good deal of trouble getting to it. Lord Cafferen’s crossbowmen had positioned themselves nicely on a ridge that overlooked the only road through the craggy vale, and the passes were treacherous enough up here without the threat of quarrels raining down on them. Snow had fallen overnight, crunching underfoot as Tyrion’s palfrey made its slow, measured way upwards. A mule would have suited him better, as it had in the Vale of Arryn, but beggars could rarely be choosers, so the palfrey would have to do. It whickered and whined like a dying old man as he rode.

Ser Morros Fell led the way in leather and mail, waving the peace banner around his head. Tyrion would not be attending to the lords at Fawn Crag alone, of course; he needed a retinue to ensure that he did not engage in some folly of escape or other, though there was plainly nowhere to flee. If
some bout of foolishness seized him he could always ride off the road and chance the grassy verge to his left, but like as not his horse would trip over the tangled gorse during their descent and he would end up as a broken little corpse at the bottom of the hill.

Bronn caught him looking down over the side. “Don’t go riding that way, halfman,” he warned. “I won’t be heading down to find your bones. The storm can have them.”

“Aye.” Tyrion glanced to the north. Dark clouds were rising over the crags of the Stormlands, swirling round and round like some great black whirlwind. The wind made a sound like the fluttering of a raven’s wings.

Dark wings, dark words, he thought.

Ser Bronn of the Blackwater was now Lord Stokeworth in name, wed to his soft Lady Lollys, who remained with the Targaryen court in the capital. Bronn did not seem all that bothered with the matter of ruling his new castle, but war was something that he knew rather well. Tyrion had been surprised to see him on the road at first, and even more surprised when Bronn had chosen to be a part of the retinue escorting him from Connington’s camp at Bronzegate to Fawnton. He almost dared to think that their old alliance might still mean something to Bronn… but while the former sellsword might have a lord’s name, he had a braggart’s black heart. Loyalty was passing rare among hired men.

And speaking of sellswords, Bronn was by no means alone. The Golden Company had come with Lord Connington in force, bound for Summerhall by way of the kingsroad. At Bronzegate they had parted ways beneath the towers of Lord Buckler’s castle; two thousand went under Laswell Peake’s command to besiege Stonedance and Sharp Point on Massey’s Hook, and another army rode to besiege Parchments, the seat of House Penrose. The rest of the Golden Company rode with Ser Harry Strickland, and were currently spending their days hunting and raiding the enemy villages in the woods of the northern Stormlands, while their commander sat in his golden tent, complaining about his blisters to a seemingly pissed-off Jon Connington and muttering under his breath about the weather.

Tyrion was of the opinion that the whole camp - from the Lord Hand and the men of his war council to the lowly squires and potboys whose job it was to fetch water for the company commander – would have been a lot better for it had they left Ser Harry at King’s Landing with Queen Daenerys. But Strickland refused to honour that. Aegon had given him some task in the south, and he meant to accomplish it.

The ‘king’s men’ comprised roughly over half of the royal army, and made up a good three-quarters of the war council. While the queen had relented on dispatching her Unsullied to the Stormlands, she had sent Brown Ben Plumm and the Second Sons in their place, along with the Tattered Prince and some of his Windblown. Tyrion did not blame her; as a rule mercenaries were generally better suited to battle than they were to politics. And dwarfs are generally better suited to performing mummeries, yet here I stand…

They came to the castle sooner than he would have liked. The longer the journey, the more time he would have had to collect his thoughts and prepare some sort of compelling speech, but he supposed that half-broken rambling would have to suffice for the Cafferens and their allies as it had for the Gowers and the Fells up at Wayfair.

He was a traitor to his own family now, for sure. Errol and Mornish and Staedmon were all houses that his father had worked hard to appease and mollify under Lannister authority, and they were now sworn to the Targaryens under the promises made by his son.

Another way to shit on your legacy, my lord.
The Stormlords received them in Fawn Crag’s great hall, at a table beneath a bronze effigy in the shape of ram’s head. Tyrion looked upon it somewhat disdainfully. They had arranged the table so that three men could sit on either side, but only Tyrion was needed, and so he took the middle seat opposite them.

“Come now, friends,” he japed. “I’m not all that frightening, am I?” He flashed them a crooked smile.

“Lord Tyrion,” the middle one said acerbically. “We did not expect to see you.”

“I did not expect to be here. It seems we are both surprised, my lord…”

“I am Lord Cafferen,” the middle man explained. He was portly, with thinning brown hair and a double chin, yet he was the sort of man Tyrion wouldn’t mind sharing a few drinks with. Gregarious, he decided. Lord Cafferen gestured to the florid yellow-haired man at his left. “Lord Medwyck Meadows, of Grassy Vale,” and then to the honey-headed young woman at his right. “And Lady Selmy, of Harvest Hall-

Tyrion smiled at her. “Forgive me, my lady, but I thought the Lord of Harvest Hall was… well, a lord. A man, I mean.”

“My son is Lord Selmy,” she explained, “but he is a boy of ten, and it did not seem prudent to bring him to these sort of negotiations.”

“I would have loved this sort of thing when I was a boy of ten,” Tyrion told her, “you may have deprived Lord Selmy of a wonderful afternoon. All the same, a pleasure to meet you, my lady.” He clapped his hands. “Do we have any wine? Lord Connington won’t let me indulge myself, lest I get myself horribly drunk and start jumping all over the tables and making a general fool of myself.”

“Cups!” Lord Cafferen called.

A cupbearer scurried over with two flagons. “We have a sour Dornish red and an Arbor gold, my lord,” he said.

“An impressive selection of wine for a castle under siege. I’ll take the red.” He stared peculiarly at the boy. “Is your name Cups? I have a squire by the name of Numbers; some people can be very imaginative these days.”

“No,” said the cupbearer as he poured, “m-my name’s Petyr, my lord.”

Tyrion held up a hand. “I knew a Petyr once. We had a very similar outlook on the world, truth be told.” He sipped his wine and turned back to the Stormlords. “Please continue.”

“W-well,” stammered Lord Meadows, “I-we had not expected… you see, King Aegon-

“Let’s talk about kings,” Tyrion suggested. “You claim defiance of the Iron Throne and loyalty to King Tommen, but I didn’t see any of his banners flying from your ramparts. Have you sworn your fealty to House Lannister, or do you mean to start your own rebellion for…” He shrugged. “I don’t know. What are you actually doing here?”

Lord Cafferen shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “We-we were… what do you want of us, my lord?”

A way out of Aegon’s camp. An army to take Casterly Rock from Cersei. A dragon to burn my enemies. The truth, from Jaime’s mouth. Tysha. “I want nothing. It is King Aegon who wants your fealty. If you can give him that, we need not waste our hours with these negotiations. I daresay we all
Lady Selmy was the first to reply. “Our surrender… what will that mean for us?”

“Always thinking about others, I see. How very generous of you. Well, I cannot say that the Iron Throne will be all too pleased with your folly, but our merciful king and queen will not openly seek retribution against you… as far as I know. However, if we need lords and ladies to sell to the Dothraki as bedslaves, you three will be among the first.” He smiled.

Lord Meadows looked horrified; it took him a long moment before he realised Tyrion’s joke. “Oh,” he said stupidly. “We... we are-” He glanced at the others for support.

Lady Selmy turned to look at Tyrion. “No sanctions shall be placed upon the farmers in my son’s lands?” She reminded him, oddly, of Cersei.

“Very considerate of you to remember the smallfolk,” the dwarf said, “I make no promises here, but since impeding Harvest Hall’s ability to harvest – which would make it rather useless, given its name – would be of no benefit to our gracious monarchs, I see no reason why such sanctions would be posed.”

“And…” Lady Selmy took a sip of her cup. “You promise that my son will not be forced into betrothal with some girl he barely knows for the sake of peace?”

“No, my lady. I believe it is traditionally the groom’s family that forces him into betrothals with girls he barely knows. I speak as a firsthand witness.” And may Lady Sansa forgive my words – though given the fact that she has run from two weddings now, I daresay nobody else will think her an easy marriage prospect in the future.

“If I may be so bold, I dare say that the queen’s closeness to her dear Ser Barristan Selmy will prevent Harvest Hall from being overly-affected by all this.”

“Ser Barristan has never met my son, nor any of his brother’s children or grandchildren. He has not visited the family keep since Robert Baratheon was crowned king on the Iron Throne.”

“And yet blood runs thicker than water, or so they tell me.” Tyrion himself was not so sure. Why would Jaime lie to me? he thought, as though wondering about the same thing for the thousandth time would yield a different realisation.

“We are done here, I think,” Lord Cafferen said suddenly, holding out a meaty hand for Tyrion to shake. He raised his voice so the others in the room could hear him. “It was not truly our intention to prolong such a rebellion against the-”

“And yet you did,” said Tyrion, “try and lie a little less poorly next time, my lord of Cafferen. The losers do so rarely like to admit their losses.” He placed his cup back down for Petyr to collect, shrugged his shadowskin back around himself, and turned for the door.

Outside, he mounted his palfrey again, and trotted out ahead of the rest of Aegon’s soldiers. After a time, Bronn rode up beside him. “How long to Bronzegate, do you reckon?”

Tyrion glanced up at the darkening sky. “We won’t get there today, no matter how fast we ride.”

“You haven’t seen how fast I ride,” Bronn said, smirking.

“Quite true, my friend.” Tyrion kicked his heels into the palfrey’s flanks. “Not fast enough to outrun arrows, though, I’d wager.”

“And why should I need to do that?”
You don’t suppose they’ll just let us escape, do you? thought Tyrion. But he said nothing, and Bronn turned his horse away, leaving him to ride the road alone.

It was bordering on full dark by the time they reached their camp at the foot of the next hill. While Tyrion was little more than a glorified prisoner, Lord Connington had for whatever reason seen fit to reward the dwarf with his own pavilion, a tall cone of red tourney silk that had weathered to a rust colour with age. Inside, Tyrion had been afforded every comfort on his journey to the Stormlands; a featherbed with heavy down quilting, a desk of mahogany wood readied with quills and ink, reclining camp chairs beside a stout firepit. And a squire, one that he had stolen from Gorys Edoryen to make his meals and play *cyvasse* with him.

Numbers did not waste time in greeting him. “My lord,” he said as Tyrion waddled inside, “beg pardons, but Brown Ben Plumm sent a message your way. He wants to see you tomorrow, when we arrive at the camp, to take the evening meal.”

Tyrion sighed and settled himself into one of the camp chairs. “I should be honoured to attend,” he said, “Plumm does seem rather fond of me as a guest.” During their ride from the capital to Bronzegate, the sellsword captain had hosted the dwarf three times. “I will be back in short order,” he told his squire, rising. “But first, I believe that I must make a deal with an old friend of mine.”

Bronn was already with two whores when he arrived. The first was dark and pretty in a delicate sort of way, a bedsheet wrapped around herself in an oddly provocative fashion as she lounged on the bed, a sultry expression on her face. The second was red-headed and slim… and *bendy*, Tyrion saw. She seemed to have wrapped herself around the sellsword entirely, her feet kicking up beside his neck, her cunny close to his face in a strange crablike position that was strangely fascinating to watch.

“Would you like to taste me there, m’lord?” she asked.

“I’ve already tasted you there,” Bronn’s muffled voice came from somewhere among the bedclothes. “I think your friend’s getting rather…”

“Oh, she won’t mind,” the redhead said, moaning with much over-exaggerated pleasure as she turned around to lather the knight with kisses. The dark one climbed onto the bed as well, and began to caress both the whore and the knight, wrapping all three of them in the coverlets.

Tyrion coughed.

The dark-skinned one shrieked and rolled off the bed, revealing a fully naked Bronn, straddled by the other prostitute. “Bad dwarf,” she said, “nasty little man.” She took a poker from the fire and jabbed it playfully at Tyrion, then threw it down and went back over to Bronn. The other whore had approached the dwarf now. “I heard his lordship is fond of women too,” she said, “and the women are fond of him.” And without another word of warning she was reaching for his smallclothes, feeling for his cock, and perhaps…

“No,” Tyrion said sharply.

“No?” the redhead asked. “What about this?” She gave his breeches another squeeze.

“Not now. Not at this time in the-”

“It can be whatever time m’lord likes.”

Tyrion withdrew from her very slowly. “I’m not sure that’s entirely true.”
The whore looked equal parts disappointed and surprised. “Well,” she said, oddly haughtily. “So be it.”

“Let the halfman in,” Bronn said from the bed. “You girls have done your job.”

They went, with a couple of contemptuous looks at the dwarf as they did so. “So much for that,” Tyrion told Bronn.

Bonn climbed from the bed and wrapped a robe around himself. “Aye,” he said, grinning. “So much for that.”

Tyrion seated himself on a chair opposite the bed. A light breeze came through the tent flap, tangling his hair about his face. He picked out a strand and inspected it in the light. Gods, am I going grey already? “Lollys will be disappointed if she finds out,” he said.

“Lollys is as dumb as a horse,” replied Bronn.

“And just as comely. But still your wife, by all the laws of gods and men.”

Bonn dressed himself as he spoke. “So, m’lord, why did you find it necessary to disturb my evening’s entertainment?”

“Yes. I have a question for you.”

The sellsword raised an eyebrow. “Are you planning to ask or just sit there awkwardly?”

“Tell me, Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, to whom do you truly owe your loyalty? Not to the king, that much is plain, and not to Queen Daenerys either. And certainly not to me, despite our long-standing friendship…”

Bonn smiled a cheeky grin. “I’d say acquaintance, not friendship, but you’re right. There’s only one man I owe my loyalty to, and that’s Ser Bronn of the Blackwater.” He pulled on his leather tunic, pointing to the green chain embossed on the badge, the colour of wildfire against a black field.

Tyrion picked at his nails. “You’re a learned man… in your own particular field.”

“And what particular field is that?” Bronn asked, picking up a lump of old-looking cheese from a sideboard and swallowing it in one.

“Do you have any wine?”

“Aye, but it’s not for the likes of you.” Bronn smiled at him. “I know what you want, but it’s impossible. This camp is walled on all sides, and guarded by a dozen sentries. How do you propose that I help you escape?”

Brown Ben Plumm is my answer to that, Tyrion thought. But there was only one sellsword he truly trusted. More fool me to be trusting a sellsword, but… “Should the time come… will you help me?”

“A Lannister always pays his debts, doesn’t he?”

“Twice over for you, my friend.”

“Thrice,” said Bronn. “I’m betraying a king here. If you want to buy my loyalty, m’lord, it isn’t going to be cheap.”

“Will a thousand golden dragons do nicely, ser?”
“Five thousand.”

“Two.”

Bronn shook his head. “Little Tyrion Tanner’s got to eat, my lord. And Lollys is fond of food, as you well know.”

“I fear that you will make me a good deal poorer if this goes on any longer.”

“You’re rich. You can afford it. Five thousand.”

“Three.”

“Five.”

“Three and a half.”

“Five.”

“You haggle worse than-

“Than a fisherman’s wife. Aye, I’ve heard that a thousand times. Five.”

“Four thousand, and my eternal gratitude.”

Bronn spat. “Five. Gratitude can’t buy you a horse, m’lord.”

“Four thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine golden dragons.”

“Is that some sort of symbolic victory? I said five, halfman, and I’m not moving.”

Tyrion considered kicking up some sort of fuss, but all he could conjure up was a loud, resigned sigh. “Five, then.”

“Ten.”

“Fuck off.”

Bronn shrugged. “It was worth a try.” He held out his hand. “Done.”

One less debt to pay. Tyrion was whistling as he left the tent. The rain was falling now. The world was thick with heavy black droplets, and a gusty gale picked up every now and again, making him shiver through his cloak. Despite that, the night was unseasonably warm, and he could hear the sounds of summer in the air: the twittering of nighthawks and songbirds, the whispering of a softer wind amid the storm, ruffling the long grass around him with a tender hand. Thunder boomed above with a noise that deafened the world, and then the rain was coming down harder, and Tyrion picked up his pace, mud squelching between his boots. “Imp!” some drunken soldier called from beside a guttering campfire, laughing. “Lord Imp!”

The thunder crackled again, and for a moment it seemed that the storm was laughing at him amidst the bursts. The clouds had moulded themselves into his father’s face, stern and unsmiling. Nothing in the realms of gods or men will ever compel me to let you turn Casterly Rock into your whorehouse.

He slept beneath furs under the shaking canvas of his pavilion, listening to the sounds of the storm outside. He dreamed of his father, reaching out to him with ghostly fingers that glowed like long white tallow candles, and of Tysha, the whore who had been a lie, and of Jaime, the brother who had
been behind all of that. *The things I do for love,* his brother said over and over, his voice echoing all throughout Tyrion’s head before he burst apart in a cloud of black sand and dust and the world was once more reduced to silence.

He awoke to the smell of bacon, finding Numbers at the cookfire just outside the tent, frying their breakfast on a makeshift pan of battered steel. “My lord,” he said, rising. “I’ve made you bacon and eggs for the long ride today.”

“You’d be better served feeding it to the horses; they’re doing the hard work, not me.” Tyrion gave him a weak smile and blearily wiped the sleep from his eyes. “Did you sleep well?”

The boy gave that a moment’s pause. “Aye,” he said at last. “My lord.”

Tyrion laughed. “Well, I daresay I prefer you calling me ‘my lord’ to ‘dwarf’, but I also enjoyed it when we could speak more honestly.”

Numbers had nothing to say to that; instead, he glanced back down at the fire and poked it with a stick. *I have nightmares too,* the dwarf thought, remembering his father, *but mine have all gone to the grave.* He stared at the boy. *I think there is more to you than I first supposed.*

Two hours later they were riding.

The road to Bronzegate was a dull trail, busied by no particular sights. Despite his disposition to talk even when his tongue seemed like to get him killed, Tyrion rode most of the way in silence. Halfway between last night’s camp and the place where Connington had set up his encampment, they came upon a ransacked village, carts overturned in the road, the smell of smoke and blood in the air.

“Bandits?” Tyrion asked.

“Surely not, at least not so close to King’s Landing,” Lord Cafferen said from atop his mount. The three rebel lords from yesterday would be riding with them to Bronzegate to swear their oaths to Lord Connington, the King’s Hand.

“It certainly seems that way. The roads are not safe anymore.”

“They never were,” Lord Cafferen muttered.

They arrived at Connington’s camp as the sun was setting. The royal standard flew high from the palisade walls of the encampment, joined by the banners of the noble lords and sellsword companies who had joined the host on its march south. One of Harry Strickland’s elephants trumpeted their arrival as an attendant washed it with soapy water from a big wooden pail. Men chatted loudly with one another as they sharpened their swords and polished their armour.

Some fool in a higher position in Aegon’s army than he had judged that Tyrion might benefit from being an advisor on the war council. A curious move, he thought, but not one he was about to argue against. It gave him a modicum of respect among the Targaryen courtiers, even if most of those on the council despised him for his place there. Nonetheless, he followed the sellsword captains and the Stormlords obediently when Lord Connington called for a meeting almost immediately after their arrival.

There were eight of them in all, seated beneath a roof of pale red canvas. The Hand of the King sat at the head, coppery beard bristling. There were two sellswords, a stout maester, two lords of the Stormlands and one lady, and lastly the dwarf, Tyrion Lannister, the Imp of Casterly Rock. The chairs were dark wood too, carved with ivory faces, their sorrowful features weeping tears the colour of midnight. Seven bronze cups sat on the table for seven esteameable personages (as the Tattered
Prince did not partake). Brown Ben Plumm had drained his already, but the other seven remained untouched, brimming with a summerwine dark and red as Myrish ink.

A pair of flies were humming around the lip of Lord Errol’s cup, and another colony had made their nest atop Lord Connington’s banner of counterchanged griffins. It was uncomfortably hot, and fat Lord Estermont was sweating through his silks as he complained over his situation, damp patches blooming under his arms. “Winter is coming, they said. And all the gods see fit to give us is more of this damned heat.”

Tyrion could not help but agree. The heatwave had come so suddenly that the maesters had not predicted it, yet all agreed that it was the last. “Fear not, my good lord,” Lord Errol murmured, “there is a storm coming; you can smell it in the air.”

“Alas, all I can smell is Lord Estermont,” said the Tattered Prince, provoking a round of laughter. He sniffed the air. “They call these the Stormlands, and yet the worst I have seen so far is a mild rain.”

Lady Penrose shrugged. “I have lived here for but a few years, but the storms come and go as they will.”

“And I have lived here all my life,” said Lord Errol, “unlike you, I am Stormlander born and bred, not just a glorified lady consort-

“My sister was Queen Consort,” Tyrion offered, “and I daresay she knew the ways and whims of King’s Landing better than any Flea Bottom tramp, and better than many of its courtiers. They might have been one and the same, come to think of it; one sometimes has difficulty discerning between the tramps and the courtiers.”

Lord Estermont gave him a most ungracious glare and turned to Jon Connington. “What is he doing here?” he hissed.

“By all means, look in my direction when you speak.” Aemon Estermont was a thickset man of fifty or more, broad-chested with a ruddy face, flaxen blond hair and a perpetual scowl. He had waited the better part of thirty years for his father to die, and now that he had come into his lordship he was unused to having his authority challenged… least of all by a dwarf.

Estermont refused to meet his gaze, looking to the other lords for support and finding none. Lord Errol rolled his eyes as if he had seen this a thousand times before, and Lady Selmy glanced down blandly into the surface of her garnet ring. “He was on King Tommen’s council,” the lord of Greenstone blurted out. “He served a false king-

Tyrion grinned. “The hypocrisy here is admirable, truly. I have only ever served two houses, whereas Greenstone has been sworn to four.” He counted on his fingers. “The Estermonts have said their oaths to Renly, to Stannis, to Joffrey, and now to King Aegon. I would advise, my dear lord, that you of all people do not speak of fickle loyalties.”

That silenced him, and a warning look from Jon Connington acted only as insurance. The King’s Hand sat at the head of the table, a red cloak clasped with silver griffins over his plated shoulders. “Now that the pair of you have concluded your quarrel…” he muttered, “might we turn to the important matters of the evening?”

“Pray, please do,” Brown Ben said, “though there is a certain amusement in watching the dwarf and the pig in silk spar with one another. Come to think of it, I do seem to recall seeing a dwarf riding a pig once in the Free Cities… anyway-
“I assure you, Plumm, I do not mean to ride Lord Estermont. Not now, at least.” That brought fresh laughter from the table.

Jon Connington was not smiling, though. “We are at war,” he said tersely.

“I had noticed.” Brown Ben nodded. “So, then.”

The lord of Griffin’s Roost unrolled a roll of parchment and spread it across the desk. A map of much of Westeros, with King’s Landing at Lord Errol’s elbow, Highgarden under Lord Estermont’s meaty fist, and Summerhall beneath his gaze. “The Dornish army-” he began.

Estermont interrupted. “My lord Hand,” he said without a breath, “I do not think letting the dwarf see our plans-”

Connington rounded on him. “Shut up,” he said, calm as still water, “or get out.”

Predictably, Lord Estermont chose the latter and sat back, shame-faced. Tyrion gave him a half-hearted smile.

“Prince Doran is amassing a host of sixteen thousand at Sunspear,” Jon Connington told them. “Of course, it will be the Red Viper who leads the march.”

Lady Penrose sat up, folding her arms across her lap. “Will the Princess Arianne be marching with them?”

“No. The prince writes that he intends to send his daughter across the Sea of Dorne to dock in the Weeping Town or mayhaps at Storm’s End, if that is easier. They will then march due north – of course, her ladyship will require a suitable escort for her station.” He glanced about the table. “Lord Estermont, I think you ought suffice.”

Estermont started. “The war-

“Is an important assignment, yes. As is the princess’s safe arrival in King’s Landing. With luck, you may gain some valuable favour with our future queen.”

Brown Ben smirked. “Princess Arianne has always wanted a pet hog, I hear.” That brought a quiet tirade of laughter among the sellswords.

Connington rounded on him. “You will behave like a lord, Plumm, not an insolent child.”

“Your pardons, my lord,” Plumm said, winking at Tyrion. “I was never much of a lord to begin with myself, and I am unfamiliar with all these courtesies. Might we divert the conversation to something that my friends and I may have more expertise in? The matter of this war, for example. You said that the Dornish are amassing an army?”

“Aye. Like as not, they will split their force, half to take Nightsong and Blackhaven and the strategic castles of the Prince’s Pass that still hold out for House Lannister-”

Tyrion held up a hand. “Forgive my interruption, but is that not why you have me, to placate these Lannister holdouts? Sometimes one dwarf can yield a better result than eight thousand men. I secured Fawn Crag for you without bloodshed, and the Grassy Vale, and Bywater.”

“His Grace believes that your talents would better suit the king’s small council. You will return to King’s Landing on the morrow, my lord of Lannister, and serve as the king – and the queen – see fit.”
Ah. Tyrion bit his lip. *Well, that has rendered my plans for escape quite pointless, and now I am five thousand dragons poorer for it.* If Connington sent him back to the capital with even a small escort, Tyrion would not be escaping from their grasp. He smiled thinly. “If I may be so blunt… you hardly have any need of me at this war council, do you? Lord Estermont is almost bursting out of his clothes in his urgency to evict me from the council, and I dare say we would all rather not see that.”

That got a laugh out of Brown Ben. “The dwarf is a funny man, but he has about as much liking for matters of war as I do for politics. We would all benefit from seeing him away from here.”

Connington waved a lazy hand. “As you will.”

Tyrion downed his wine cup and rose from the seat. “Good day to you all,” he said flatly, sketching a bow in the Lord Hand’s direction, and left the tent. He crossed the camp, whistling a merry tune to suit his mood.

Rather than return to the tents at once, Tyrion went over to the stabling pens and watched several of the animal tamers as they attempted to calm a rampant elephant. His uncle Gerion had first spoken to him of these creatures, mentioning the Volantene war elephants among the most breathtaking sights he had seen during his travels in Essos and the Disputed Lands. While they were no dragons, Tyrion Lannister could not deny their majesty and grandeur, and watching them made him feel so much smaller than he already was.

“Enjoying the view, Halfman?” a voice called out from behind him. Harry Strickland arrived without fanfare and alone, though Tyrion noted that he wore both sword and dirk at his belt, and chainmail and plate for protection.

“I expected you at the council, ser,” Tyrion called.

“I have had enough of Connington for one day,” said the captain-general, with a narrow smirk. He nodded to the elephants. “Quite a view, aye.”

“Indeed,” the dwarf lord replied. “They are quite a sight.”

“They are kings in their own right, Lord Tyrion. On the plains east of Rhoyne, elephants rule the land as far as the eye can see. From horseback, a man can be king of the battlefield, but from an elephant’s back, he can be king of the world.”

A loud trumpeting filled the air, following by the desperate stampeding of feet. “But I daresay elephants are not so easy to tame-

“I do not presume to tame them, at least not fully. I find that a beast makes a much better companion in battle when it retains some of its wildness.”

*You are strangely daring in this regard, ser,* thought Tyrion, *for a man who spends most of his days sitting in his tent.* “Aye,” he murmured. “Wild beasts do not well in captivity, I suppose. There are lions underneath Casterly Rock, did you know?”

“Tame lions, I should think. Else they would bite the heads off any visitors, wouldn’t they?”

“My father was fond of throwing escaped prisoners in the lion pit,” Tyrion said. “Or so he said. My father did not make empty threats, but the spectacle of feeding men to animals seems a bit out of place for him. He was the sort of man who preferred to take heads and be done with it.”

Harry Strickland nodded slowly. “I daresay no one escaped the lions.”
“You would be correct.” Tyrion smiled at the memory. “When I was a child I sometimes used to go down to the pit and stare at them through the bars of the cage, but I must have been even uglier than I am now, because they shied away and refused to come near me.”

“It might be that they were fond of you. Beasts sometimes behave like that around their masters.” He nodded towards one of the great elephants, now drinking from a huge basin of water.

“I pity any lion so humble that it feels the need to cower before an Imp,” Tyrion said. “I am terrifying, just like them, though not quite in the same way.” He nodded to Ser Harry, and turned away, waddling back to his tent. On his way back he spotted Brown Ben Plumm sitting outside his pavilion, shouting orders to three dark-skinned squires as he sipped wine from a wide-rimmed copper cup. Clearly he had given up on the council as well. Tyrion nodded at him as he went past. Perhaps if he could convince Plumm to return to the city with him… he would not be able to escape King’s Landing alone, but with an army of sellswords…

Of course, that came with the risk of royally pissing off the queen. Something told Tyrion that Daenerys and Aegon did not intend to share the crown for much longer. So many thoughts, and not enough time. Tyrion decided to abandon any thoughts of the conflict between king and queen for now. He wandered over to Numbers, who was squatting outside his tent poking the fire. “Squire.”

The boy stood. “Yes, m’lord.”

“Is my supper ready?”

“Yes, m’lord.” The boy stared down at his feet, not meeting Tyrion’s gaze.

“Squire,” he said sharply. “Look up when you speak to your lord - or down; I am quite short. But at least look at me.”

Numbers met his gaze sullenly. “Do you have need of me, m’lord?”

“Tell me, squire. Do you resent me? For removing you from the Golden Company? I thought you happy at first, but… I suppose you must have had friends there?” He smiled a little. “Just say the word, and I’ll speak to Ser Harry-

“No,” the boy said quickly. “It’s fine, m’lord. But…”

“I daresay you might have wanted adventure. Something more than this-

“No.” The squire’s mouth became a thin line, unwavering with anger. His face reddened. “My lord.” He picked himself up off the ground and moved to go.

“Tell me, squire. You seem a well-learned young person, not unlike myself at your age, and I daresay smarter. I know the names of all the Targaryen dragons, but I could not tell you what I had for supper two days ago-

“Breast of partridge,” Numbers said in a bored voice, “with pease and buttered parsnips from the wagon.”

“Oh, yes. The partridge was a little overdone, but you’re a reasonable cook, boy.” He continued, “But what do you know of the Targaryen dragons? Of the Westerosi history?”

The boy bowed his head. “Little, my lord. But I know some-

“How did you learn?”
Numbers did not speak. He bit his lip. “I taught myself to read,” he said. “Stole books from the tents of the officers while they were sleeping. I’m small, and I can sneak places where others can’t. But I don’t think they ever read the books anyway. They hardly ever noticed.”

_Hardly ever is not never_, Tyrion thought. Perhaps he would need to ask Ser Harry more about that. There was definitely more to Numbers than he thought.

“Let me tell you a story, squire, to ease you through your mourning. A story of the Golden Company. Aegor Rivers, whom they named Bittersteel, formed it following his brother Daemon’s failed rebellion. Daemon was the black dragon, the wielder of Aegon the Conqueror’s ancestral sword, Blackfyre, with which he was knighted at the age of thirteen. _Thirteen!_ And by that age, he was able to beat most of the Kingsguard in single combat. He was handsome as well, clever, and headstrong - not unlike our own king now. His father’s favourite son, naturally.

“And upon Aegon the Unworthy’s death, he started his little rebellion. I say little, but half the lords of the realm were involved in it, and it was the bloodiest dance Westeros had seen in a hundred years. I will not go into the details here, but it culminated in a battle upon the Redgrass Field, where the bastard sorcerer Bloodraven slew Daemon and two of his twin sons, and henceforth King Daeron the Second reigned.

“Daemon lost everything. His homeland, his sons, the sword that was his only birthright, the one that remained lost until our King Aegon plucked it from nowhere. But why, I say? Why risk everything, even knowing what the cost of losing would be?”

Numbers nodded slowly. Then he said, “Because he believed in something.”

“Aye,” said Tyrion. “That he did. And when one believes in something, often nothing can divert them from their ultimate course. Perhaps we have a destiny; perhaps the gods make our fates when we are born. If so, I am still unsure of mine. But know this. The Golden Company is not your fate. You are more than I think you are, more than you think you are, and your life has some worth, however small. Doesn’t it? _Doesn’t it?”_

Numbers nodded, and a tiny smile came to his face. “Yes, my lord.”

“That it does. Now go and put on your sword. At least then you can look like a squire riding to war - and hold your head up high. You serve the Halfman now. If nothing else, you will always stand taller than me.”

Chapter End Notes

I will freely admit that this is probably the worst-written chapter of _The Sunset Kingdoms_ so far. This is because Tyrion was supposed to have two chapters in the Stormlands, but the second was essentially boring filler and brought nothing to the story, so I had to condense two chapters into one here, and they ended up in a bit of a jumble. Tyrion's conversation with Numbers was sort of tacked-on at the end.

I love this world that GRRM has created, and I love writing in it, but I've been forced to make cuts here and there because _The Sunset Kingdoms_ is stupidly long, at 108 chapters and growing. The chapters are getting longer too; back in _A Coat of Gold_ I would be happy with 4K words, now I think that 5K is nearer the mark. I don't see this getting finished in anything under than 600 000 words, and then there's a sequel to follow that
(though admittedly it is a good deal shorter). If I was GRRM writing, this would be the sort of book I'd split in half, but it's fanfic, so I'll just keep going anyway and see if we can break the 600K barrier. *shrugs*

So, this chapter as a whole... similar to Cersei in Chapter 25, Tyrion doesn't really know what he wants. He makes plans and never completes them, starts council meetings and doesn't finish them, and generally wanders around pointlessly, somewhat lost within his own camp. The next chapter is going to put him back in King's Landing for a time - so we'll get the good old Tyrion politicking you might have come to expect.

Question for reviewers: would you like to see Tyrion's chapters continuing with:
A) King's Landing politics, as we saw in A Coat of Gold
or B) something new and exciting that would get him out of KL, at least temporarily
I'm leaning towards option B at the moment, but I'd be interested to hear what you think.
“You would counsel patience, here and now, when the wildlings have invaded Castle Black, the tides of scum are rising...”

THEON

The Wall was weeping.

Beneath the sight of its silver-blue majesty, the black towers of Castle Black huddled like carrion crows about a fresh corpse. The vows that the black brothers had sworn long ago made it so that the Night’s Watch could mount no defence against southron armies. The Watch existed purely to preserve the Wall, and its brothers were forbidden from involving themselves in the wars of lords and kings in the south. As such, neither palisades nor stone walls could be raised in the shadow of the great ice fortification that reigned above them, and thus the Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch were powerless to act as Mance Rayder’s motley host advanced up the kingsroad and into the courtyard of Castle Black.

Theon had heard in passing that they numbered nine thousand fighting men now, with nearly twice times that as part of the trailing retinue. Wives and children and turncloaks lagged behind, seated among the wayns of the baggage train, among carts of salt pork and wheels of cheese and storages of barley bread. He would happily have stayed there with the rest of them, but Asha managed to force him to his feet and usher him down into the snow.

Back when he’d been the Prince of Winterfell, with Ser Rodrik Cassel’s army of Northmen at his gates, Maester Luwin had urged Theon to head to Castle Black to join the Night’s Watch. He’d refused the old maester’s offer, thinking it foolish at the time, but there had been more wisdom in that than in Theon’s senseless attempt to hold onto the castle. I could have been a black brother, he knew, but back then I deserved to be a feast for the crows, not one of the crows themselves.

The Northmen pressed close around them as they went into Castle Black’s bailey. Qarl and Roggon pushed them away, and step by step, they forced their way through the press towards the platform where the black brothers were congregating.

“W-who?” Theon’s fingers were shivering, as were his teeth. “Who leads the Watch now?” At Winterfell, he had heard that Jon Snow had become Lord Commander, but along the northern road many were heard to say that Lord Snow had died on a ranging north of the Wall, disappeared among his fellows in the icy wilderness beyond the great sheet of sky-blue.
“I don’t know,” Asha said, “we shall have to see. But I daresay he will be more amenable to you than Jon Snow ever would be.”

Yes, thought Theon, and he shivered again. Doubtless, if Jon was still alive, he would not hesitate to have his former friend’s head lopped off for the treasons he had committed at Winterfell. *Forgive me,* he told Castle Black’s hulking towers, praying that one of them would hear him. In a high tower window, a crow in black leathers regarded him with a suspicious eye. *They know my name.*

He had no time for lamentations, though. The crowd was pressing them from behind, shoving closer and closer towards the platform, filling the courtyard of Castle Black to bursting. Banners flapped over the heads of the Northmen as they shouted curses upon the wildlings and each other alike. The Umber giant swayed with the winds, and it seemed to be straining to break free of its chains. House Karstark’s sunburst burned as brightly as the true sun above, though it did not fly nearly so high. The standards of Forrester and Glenmore and Hornwood warred for space in the crowded yard.

A warhorn blared through the bailey, trumpeting once, twice, thrice. Growling, rumbling, slow as anything, a hush grew over the crowd. Theon could not see much over Grimtongue’s stooped shoulder, but he could make out the shouts clear enough. *To the Shieldhall!* someone was shouting, one of the black brothers, he supposed, *go to the Shieldhall! Lords and chiefs and riders only! Women and children to the back!*

All at once the rumbling rose again and they were being forced forwards by half of the press and back by the rest of them. Somehow, slowly, they managed to make their way through. Theon felt a weight of fear pressing down on his heart as they moved, feeling claustrophobic among the crush of soldiers all around him. He could see the black brothers standing before narrow holes in the tower wall with crossbows newly round, and at the doors of the Shieldhall, bulky wildlings were pushing away those they deemed unfit to enter for reasons of their birth or else.

Theon was certain that they would not let him through, being the turncloak that he was, and Asha neither due to her being a woman, but somehow they made it past the guards and inside the hall even as others were being pulled up short outside the doors. Their protestations were lost as they went inside the hall.

“There are only a few shields,” Asha observed, taking note of the bare walls of black stone where only a few knights’ blazons hung now, “and fewer hearths.” She rubbed her woollen gloves together and clasped Theon’s hands between her own. “Come on, best find a seat before all the warm fires are gone.” They found a table at the side of the Shieldhall, close to the dais but not too close, a few feet away from one of the crackling fires. Asha let Theon have the warmest part of the bench, though there was no point. No fire would ever warm his cold bones. The chill in him was something deep-rooted, something evil.

The feast hall was not as vast as the one at Winterfell, but it was more than large enough for the lot of them… or so Theon thought, until all the benches were filled and still the tide of Northmen and wildlings kept coming through, shoving into the spaces between the benches and pressing up tight against the walls. Theon started to recognise a few of the face as they entered. Mors and Hother Umber were easily recognisable, of course, and he would not forget either Asher Forrester or Alys Karstark, both of whom had come to Winterfell for a time when they were young. The huge fat chieftain with the grey moustache was called the Great Walrus, who had ridden with them to the Dreadfort to find Ramsay, and Theon knew Harle the Handsome and Devyn Sealskinner by their faces as well as their reputations. The red-haired man with the bristling moustache must be Lord Flint’s eldest son Donnel, and the young man of sixteen or so with the moose pelt around his shoulders must be Lord Larence Hornwood, who had been a bastard until his recent legitimisation by King Stannis’s decree. The southron king’s presence was limited to a couple of knights with names
like Wylde and Peasebury and Bar Emmon, who looked as out of place in the frozen North as Theon felt among all these warriors.

Lord Commander Bowen Marsh – if that was indeed who he was – was unimpressive, even in Theon’s impressive. He was round in stature and had a huge fat belly and fatter red cheeks, and his black was ill-fitting. His eyes were droopy and glazed with suspicion. Beside the lean Mance Rayder in his furs, he looked like a fat black dog. He rose from his chair and strode to the front of the stage, but Mance got there first. “Begging your pardons, Lord Commander,” he said, with a sprightly step, “you won’t be needing to make a speech. Go and sit down in your chair.” That brought smiles from the Northmen and laughter from the wildlings.

Marsh hesitated, as if he meant to return to his chair, then turned back. “I think not,” he said to the crowd, “I am the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, and-”

Mance tipped his head, making a performance out of his words. “Might I ask how it is so? The last time I was at Castle Black, Jon Snow was the Lord Commander.”

Marsh drew up haughtily. “Jon Snow is dead,” he proclaimed to the assembled crowd. “Killed mysteriously on a ranging in the wintry lands beyond the Wall.”

That drew another whispery hush over the crowd. Dead? Theon gave Asha a sidelong glance. That was what they had both heard, but the confirmation of it changed things. The broken man felt his heart begin to beat faster in his tortured chest. At the other tables, Northmen were glancing at each other in a mixture of discontent and disbelief.

Mance nodded at Bowen Marsh. “And now you are Lord Commander, then?”

Marsh gave a haughty nod. “The Ruling Council has ordained me as the 999th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch to replace him.”

“The Ruling Council?” asked the King-beyond-the-Wall. “Perhaps the practice has changed in recent years, but I seem to recall that the Night’s Watch elected their own Lord Commander.”

“We held elections, aye,” said Marsh, “but could not come to a conclusion. In such dark times as these we realised that we could not be without a Lord Commander, though, so the Ruling Council – consisting of the Watch’s most senior officers, including First Builder Yarwyck-,” He gestured to the bearded man sitting stony-faced behind him, “and good Septon Cellador argued-”

“You gave this septon a place on your council!” Mors Umber shouted, “but did the old gods have a say in this as well?”

Marsh turned coolly to face him. “The Night’s Watch has its traditions.”

“Such as a free and fair election,” said the Big Liddle. A rumble of approval rolled over the crowd.

Marsh averted his eyes from them and turned to Mance. “We could not be without a Lord Commander.”

“And did all of your brothers support your rise to power?” asked Mance. He spread his arms. “We free folk are an open-minded people, that is all.”

“Your concern is… touching,” said Bowen Marsh, “but unfounded.” He turned to the commanders sitting behind him and raised an eyebrow. This was met with several unconvincing nods.

“The man is no fool,” said Tris Botley. “I’ll wager anything that those men there are his cronies.”
“Aye,” Asha replied, “and the better men disputing him have been barred from the hall, most like. I have just as much distaste for southern politics as the next man. I did not expect to find it here on the Wall.”

On the dais, Mance had turned to face Marsh. “Forgive me, Acting Lord Commander Marsh, but- Bowen Marsh reddened. “Lord Commander. I am not in an acting role, Rayder. I have said it once and I will say it again.” He turned to the crowd, puffing out his chest and took a deep breath. “Jon Snow is dead.”

It did not have quite the same effect that Marsh had probably hoped for, no sharp intakes of breath or astonished gasp. Only quiet, until Old Halleck spoke up and asked, “You burn his body?”

That gave Marsh pause. He took a few quick glances around at his fellow black brothers on the stage. “Aye, we-”

Then came the sound of shouting from across the room, and through the crowd came pushing and shoving, until a boy managed to force his way to the front. For a moment, Theon almost thought that he was Jon, from his dark hair and dark eyes, but this boy seemed younger and far less restrained than Jon Snow had ever been in Theon’s memory. “His body was never found!” he shouted.

That made Bowen Marsh turn red and curl his lip. “Shut your mouth, Brother Satin, and consider yourself fortunate that-”

Mance gave Marsh a warning look. “Let him speak.” He turned to Satin and spoke quietly, but the crowd still heard him. “Tell it truly, lad. Were you on the ranging?”

Satin pushed the last few steps through the crowd to stand at the foot of the dais, before Marsh’s scowling fury. “No, but I heard it back from Leathers and Mully when they returned to Castle Black.” Another brother pushed through beside him and continued the tale. “‘Tis true, m’lord. We never saw Lord Snow’s body, never heard anything but these lies the Old Pomegranate-”

“Silence, man!” Marsh all but screamed. He cast an uneasy glance between his supporters sitting beside him and the crowd below. “You-you need not listen to these… to these… upstarts.”

A rumbling rose, and men were kicking their benches in discontent and banging their cups on the table, though none seemed willing to stand… until Asha rose to her feet and her voice carried over the rabble. “Bowen Marsh, I name you liar.”

“What are you doing? Theon wanted to ask, but he dared not speak. Everyone had heard Asha, and all eyes flickered between the ironborn woman and the purpling Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. At long last, when he had gone almost the colour of a blackberry, Marsh spluttered out a few words. “Who are you to say such… you woman.”

Asha smiled at him. “Aye. Me. I am a woman. I am of the weak and feeble sex, to be sure, which makes it all the more embarrassing for you that every man, woman and child in this room knows that you are lying, man.”

The colour in Marsh’s cheeks flared again. “You… you…”

“I see now why they name you the Old Pomegranate, old man. If you get any redder, I fear you’ll choke yourself.”

“Why… I’ll…”
Mance nodded for Asha to sit. “Patience, my friend,” he told the Lord Commander.

Marsh was having none of that. “Patience!” he roared, rising to his feet. Spittle sprayed from his mouth over the front rows in the hall. “You would counsel patience, here and now, when the wildlings have invaded Castle Black, the tides of scum are rising, and—”

A wooden cup flew over the heads of those at the front and struck Marsh firmly in the brow, but they did not stop his words. He blustered, took a moment’s breath, then launched into another tirade. “Murderers, rapists… women, at Castle Black; we should have you all thrown back on the other side, and that fool Jon Snow be damned! In times like these, we need a Lord Commander who can lead his brothers, guide them, protect them, not some arrogant upstart fool bastard boy who never learned his place in the world! The boy was a wildling, gods be damned!” Theon could see that Marsh’s cronies were nodding throughout, while Satin and his fellow fought against the Northmen who were holding them back for their own good.

Mors Umber rose from his bench. “Pray, do show us this fabled Lord Commander,” he directed at Marsh. “All I see is a pig sweating through his leathers.”

Marsh was fuming now. Mance placed a hand on his shoulder, ignoring the Lord Commander’s disgusted look. “Have you not mounted a ranging to see what has become of Lord Snow and the black brothers that went with him beyond the Wall?”

The crowd quietened almost at once. Marsh composed himself, strode to the front of the stage, glaring daggers down at those in the Shieldhall below him. “They have been trickling back south on their horses, telling stories of a great massacre up on Storrold’s Point, where Tormund Giantsbane and all his followers were killed by the Others, the late Lord Commander among them. Yesterday, it was Kedge Whiteye who returned to us, but his wound festered and he died before he could tell the whole story—”

“Liar!” came a yell from the front. Satin had somehow wriggled free of those holding him back and was now pointing a trembling finger at Marsh’s fat nose. “You liar! You killed him before he could tell the whole story to the rest of us!”

“Enough!” screamed Marsh. “I will not have lies yelled at me by a boy-whore!” In a strangled tone, he said, “You saw his body burning the courtyard just as the rest of us did.”

Satin looked as though he wanted to kill Marsh with his bare hands, but his voice trembled with a note of fear. “Then where’s Jon Snow’s body, you, you… traitor!”

Marsh glanced back to one of his supporters with a cool air about him. “ Escort the boy out, if you would.” His eyes returned to the crowd. “Lord Snow—”

This time, it was Devyn Sealskinner who stood up, a wildling chieftain with shoulders to rival an ox’s and a great grey beard. “Where is his body?” he asked. “Did you see him burning, Lord Marsh? Did you see the black brothers and wildlings cut down by the white walkers?”

“Well, no, but—”

Mance Rayder cut him off before he could say any more. He went to the edge of the dais and jumped down to the floor. “Then we have no proof that Jon Snow is dead or doomed,” he told the crowd and began to walk between the tables. Before Morna o’ the White Mask he stopped and said, “We have no proof that the six thousand free folk Tormund led to Storrold’s Point truly perished.” He paused before Satin and nodded his acknowledgement. “No true way of knowing that the brave Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch are not simply trapped beyond the Wall, rather than being
dead.” For a moment his eyes fell upon Theon, then they were gone, looking to each and every man in the room, as he spoke with pure, undisguised charisma. “There are widows in the Gift waiting for news of their children; sons and daughters who do not know if their mothers and fathers will ever return. Perhaps, this way, we can give them some peace of mind!”

From atop his dais, Bowen Marsh had gone white as snow. “You propose another ranging? B-but Lord Snow… he is…”

“I do not expect you to come with us, Lord Commander, much as that would be amusing.”

Marsh blanched even further, his skin having turned pallid and sweaty. He sucked back a breath and blinked. “Very well,” he said, at long last, his eyes going to the floor. “I will allow you passage through the Wall to look for Lord Snow, his brothers and their wildling compatriots. But it will be on your own head, Mance Rayder.”

Mance turned, his eyes meeting the supporters all around him. “I never intended anything else,” he told Bowen Marsh. A smile had come to his lips. “And yet, I very much doubt that I shall go north alone.”
A Thousand Eyes And One

Chapter Summary

The past is already written. The ink is dry.

Chapter Notes

OST:

- Heir to Winterfell (Season 3)
- Kill the Boy (Season 5)
- Three-Eyed Raven (Season 4)
- You Know Nothing (Season 3)
- The Tower (Season 6)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JON

Above, the world was a void of starry darkness, stretching on as far as the eye could see. Below him on both sides of the path, there was an abyss, as dark and thick as treacle. The roots of the trees twisted around Jon’s feet like snaking tendrils, embracing him as he walked.

Jon wandered among them in a state of curious half-delirium, pausing every few seconds to admire the intricate patterns scratched into the walls that the tree sap had made. They were spirals and helixes and corkscrews, nothing particular; neither markings nor glyphs that he knew. They had a certain shimmering aspect to them; they glowed when he stared at them, and Jon found it difficult to look away.

He had never been this far under the hill before. Leaf had met him in the bleakness of dusk – (though it might well have been dawn for all Jon knew; the dim dark down here never changed) and led him into the first of several tunnels that ran down from the atrium into the places beneath the earth where the children whispered and watched and sang forgotten songs in forgotten tongues. Some time into their journey, Leaf had disappeared without a trace, and Jon was left to make his way down alone. He was too far down to turn back now, and he did not know the way back up through the web of tunnels to the surface, so there was nothing to do but keep going.

Most men might have feared to find themselves in such a situation, but Jon did not feel anything at
The whispers grew louder as he descended. At first they were so insignificant that Jon thought them little more than the echoes of his own breath, but then they became more and more insistent, until he began to recognise the barest suggestions of their voices. Snow, they said, snow, Lord Snow, blood snow, cold snow, fire and snow, snow, snow.

He had long since lost count of how many days, weeks and months they had spent inside the cave now. Sunrises and sunsets passed by unnoticed, and it was a lost cause to bother to count them. Most of the time he spent in long, useless lessons with Jojen, who was teaching him how to warg intentionally – with little success. “It is in your Stark blood,” the Reed boy told him a thousand times every day. He waved his hand over the flames, the embers circled, flapping round and round, like a thousand bats in a storm, glowing red and orange. Then they dissolved into the darkness, and gloom reigned once more. “Soon you must discover the way, for the nights are growing darker,” Jojen had said.

Jon only frowned at him. “How can you tell? It always looks the same down here.”

“Not all darkness is the same,” the Reed boy told him with a wisdom beyond his years. His voice echoed throughout the chasm. “Night is just the reflection of day, Jon, and we know that not all days are cut from the same cloth. Sometimes you feel happiness and elation when you see the rising sun, but other times you sigh, and you think to yourself ‘another day of this?’ and you will it to end. And on occasion you wake with a great sadness in your heart, because you pity all those who can’t see the sunrise, your dead and mine, and you feel sad and sombre, though you ought to be happy. And thus I tell you, Jon. The nights are getting darker, at least for me.” *The nights are getting darker.* Now, descending further into the depths of the cave, Jon wondered more and more about the meaning of those words.

Suddenly he heard the sound of wings behind him. A raven cawed somewhere close by, and he ducked instinctively as a great black bird rose up past his face, feathers fluttering at the edge of his vision. *Dark wings, dark words,* Old Nan always said, whenever Maester Luwin came by with letter in hand, whenever the crows took flight around the castle towers, whenever anything bad happened heralded by the beating of raven wings. *Dark wings, dark words, indeed.*

The raven perched high on a jagged tree limb and opened its mouth slightly to reveal a crimson flap. It turned its head towards Jon and cawed in recognition. That was odd, he thought. It looked almost like Mormont’s raven, come to think of it. But that couldn’t be true because he had left the damnable bird back at Castle Black when he had come on the ranging, in the company of Clydas and-

“Corn,” said the raven. It cocked his head. “Corn?”

That set Jon’s heart to beating a little faster. *How many talking ravens can there be, after all?*

“Corn,” the raven repeated, undeniably clear. “Corn, corn, corn…”

He squinted at it and took a step closer, the bracken cracking underfoot. “How long have you been watching me? How long?” He shivered a little. “Or am I mad, standing here and talking to you?”

“No,” said the bird, “no, no, Lord. Crow. Old, long, Jon. Snow.”

He advanced another step. The raven took flight and crossed the chamber, flying close to Jon’s head and settling itself on another branch. “Night,” it cawed, “Night. Gath-ers.”
“And now my watch begins,” Jon continued the vows. “It shall not end until my death.”

“Death,” the crow agreed, “death, death, death.”

“I shall take no wife. I shall hold no lands. I shall father no children.”


“He calls for you,” Bran said.

Jon turned to see him standing there beneath the branches, a queer look of fascination on his features. Standing. He was about to mention that when the realisation hit him like a slap in the face. Dreaming. He’s standing, and I’m dreaming.

“Where are we?” His words echoed.

Bran smiled. “Under the hill,” he said softly. “Far under the hill, in a place where dreams can seem very real.”

Jon sliced a hand through the air. There was no wind, no resistance, nothing at all. “But this place isn’t real, is it?”

“Perhaps,” his brother said, crossing carefully over fallen logs and branches to stand at the entrance to a dark tunnel that Jon would not have seen were it not pointed out to him. “And perhaps not. I doubt we’ll ever find out.” He beckoned to Jon. “Come. This way.”

The new path seemed like a well of blackness to Jon’s eyes, but when he stepped into it the world brightened and he could see the way curving ahead of him. Wet leaves carpeted the ground, and the walls were slick with the slippery red sap of the weirwood. The air down here was damp and muggy, and saltwater teardrops fell from the stalactites nestling above them.

Bran led the way as though he had been here a thousand times before, sniffing at the air as a wolf would, creeping forward softly on his tiptoes, hunched like a wildling hunter as he went. “Why are you here?” Jon asked him.

“I don’t know.” His brother smiled back at him. “That’s what we have to find out.”

“Did the three-eyed crow send you?”

“Lord Brynden does not have that power, but…”

Of course, Jon thought, no longer listening. Bloodraven. Raven. “Bran,” he said. “Can he – Lord Brynden – did he ever warg into a raven? I was thinking, because-

“Bloodraven,” Bran said thoughtfully. “Perhaps. Most greenseers can warg into more than one animal.”

“I knew a skinchanger who warged six,” said Jon. “Varamyr Sixskins, they called him, for obvious reasons. He perished when Stannis’s army came down upon the Wall. But I knew another warg, Orell, and he only had his eagle-

“Most skinchangers can only warg into one beast,” his brother said. “But for the greenseers, it is different. Once there was a man who warged a thousand beasts for his army, or so Old Nan said.”

He gave a snort. “Old Nan’s stories-”
Bran stared at him with piercing blue eyes. “Stories?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “We thought that the Others and the Children were stories too, Jon. But I dare you to look me in the eye and say that they are.” His voice was oddly hostile. *He has seen just as much as I have seen,* Jon had to remind himself, *and doubtless more.* If anyone knew what awaited them in the rising dark, it was the greenseers.

Jon thought he heard scrabbling above them. He whirled around suddenly and met the gaze of two huge yellow-green eyes. They were wide and slitted like a cat’s, and in them, he could see… *fear?*

Then the thing was creeping away into the darkness, gone from his vision.

“All’s shy,” he observed.

“They have secrets,” Bran said. “I don’t know what they are, and neither does Lord Brynden, I don’t think… Some things must be kept with the Children alone, Jon. Not all knowledge is a good thing.”

*But the unknown is often worse,* Jon thought. He stared into the gloom ahead, listening to the soft padding sound of his own footsteps. *There’s a door,* he said slowly and pointed.

So there was. It was half in ebony and half in weirwood, black and white, and its knocker was in the shape of a weirwood leaf, the red paint chipped away in places to reveal uneven bronze beneath. *A door,* Bran reaffirmed. He grinned back, a boy’s grin that betrayed his youth. *Shall we see what’s behind it?*

Jon was more careful. “Stand back,” he said. His hand went to his belt and found Longclaw – he had kept that in the dream, at least. The steel was smoky in the darkness, the grip supple as he flexed his fingers around its hilt. It felt as real as it did in the waking world.

“Open it,” Bran urged.

He raised Longclaw in his right hand and pushed the door open with his left. The hinges creaked and the bottom of the door caught against the roots underfoot, so it swung open with painful slowness.

For the first few moments, all he could see was another blackness. The world smelled of mystery. Jon was certain that something was hiding down there, a monster like one of those from Old Nan’s more outlandish tales. When he placed his foot down on a branch and it cracked underfoot, he leapt back in fright, almost knocking Bran to the ground.

“All’s shy,” he muttered.

“What’s in there?” Bran hissed impatiently.

“Quiet, and you might find out.”

Jon did not particularly want to find out, but he did not let that deter him. He ventured into the dark, testing the ground carefully before making his move. There was some sort of hard path through the middle of the chamber, and to either side a gloominess, sticky underfoot like treacle - or weirwood sap, he suspected.

“Jon,” whispered Bran, “your sword.”

He glanced down at Longclaw, and his eyes widened from the glare. The sword was *glowing,* bright as a fallen star, and when he raised it in front of his face sunbeams emanated all around the blade, staining the world in an ethereal golden glow. *Lightbringer.* He did not know why he thought that, but Longclaw was bringing light – so it certainly seemed to fit the description.
Using Longclaw like a lantern, he was able to get a good look around him. It was not sap underfoot, but roots, glistening with water; when Jon prodded them with his sword they parted like soft cheese. The walls crawled with ivy, and they were interspersed here and there with what he thought were flowers. They all looked different, but shared a few common features. All of them had two small spots about two-thirds of the way up, one on either side, and beneath that a ridge-

_Not flowers_, Jon realised with a start of horror. “Faces.”

“Faces,” Bran agreed, his mouth agape in a strange sort of wonder. “Look, Jon, they have… that…” He swallowed, and pointed, “that’s Father.”

So it was. To an outsider, Lord Eddard Stark was just one face among hundreds, maybe thousands, but Jon had known those features growing up, had seen them almost every day for seventeen years, and-

“Robb,” he gasped. Beneath Lord Eddard, his brother’s face waited, curly auburn hair growing out around him. And there were others. Sansa, he saw, and also Rickon. Arya’s face was obscured by the gloom, and he could not quite make it out, but she was there too. The woman above her on a level with Lord Eddard must be his aunt Lyanna, and beside them, Jon recognised his uncle Benjen and another man who must be Brandon Stark, the one who had burned. Above them, a severe-looking man with his father’s face and a grey beard streaked with black.

“Bran,” he said uncertainly. “Does this wall only show the dead?” Sansa and Arya and Rickon, are they...

His brother did not answer for a long moment. “It can’t,” he said, “because I can see myself. And you, look, right there.”

“A mausoleum for Starks,” Jon mused. He turned away and walked down the hall, glancing at faces, hundreds and thousands of faces, some with brown hair, some with black and auburn and even a few bordering on blond here and there. Men and women, old men and children, every Stark that had ever lived, as far as Jon could see.

“There’s something down there.” Bran pointed and began to walk towards it. As they went closer, Jon held Longclaw out in front, and he recognised the red leaves and white trunk of a heart tree. The roots of the weirwood descended among the mushiness on either side of the path, whereas the branches disappeared into the walls on either side.

Jon went and stood before it, Bran at his side. “We’re supposed to be here,” he said certainly. “But if this is a dream, then why do I feel like…”

“I’m not sure this is a dream,” said Bran, shakily.

“But you’re standing-

“I know.” He paused and sucked in a breath. “But I don’t understand.”

Jon laid a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Well,” he said heavily, “there must be some reason to bring both of us together. I don’t know what it is… but the old gods have served me well all these years, and…”

“They want us to go in together,” Bran said, offering Jon his left hand and reaching out towards the trunk with his right. “I’ve done this before, but you haven’t. Whatever happens, whatever you see, make sure you hold on to me. The weirwood is usually unbothered by our presence, but…”
The whole situation was so insane part of Jon felt like laughing. Instead, he gripped Bran’s hand tighter still, and forced his other palm into the trunk of the tree.

For a moment there was nothing, and then there was *everything*. Jon felt himself being thrown forwards, spun through an endless blackness, drowning in darkness, swimming through light, flailing. “The things I do for love,” a man’s voice said, and then he and Bran were falling out of the sky, plummeting like rocks dropped off the Wall. The ground rose to meet them…

Only they never met it. With a deafening howl whatever they had fallen into spat them out onto a snow-dappled grassland, beneath the walls of a tall black tower. To his right was another heart tree. A knight knelt praying in front of it.

But it from his left that the man emerged. He was clad all in black and red, and he wore a long cloak of red velvet slashed with gold, decorated with a three-headed dragon. At his side hung a sword decorated with rubies and onyx. The man had long silver hair and a slender, pale face, made all the more startling by his bright purple eyes. “A Targaryen,” Jon said warily.

“Rhaegar Targaryen,” Bran explained. “I saw his birth.”

They watched as Prince Rhaegar crossed towards the knight in the battered steel armour, then waited about ten yards behind him. After a long pause, he spoke. “What do you pray for, ser knight?” His voice echoed around the clearing.

The kneeling knight murmured a few more words, then turned to face Rhaegar. “My prince,” he said.

“I expected to find you here,” said the Targaryen prince. “The sigil on your shield speaks in testament to that. They call you the Knight of the Laughing Tree, did you know?”

“They are so very imaginative,” the knight said. Jon found it odd that he did not remove his helm to speak.

“Yes,” Rhaegar said. He wandered closer to the heart tree and sat down beside the knight. “You have to pity them for their lack of imagination sometimes. Which is certainly not something I can say about you, ser knight.”

“Oh?” The knight sounded a little overconfident, like Robb in the training ground at Winterfell. “And why do you say that?”

Rhaegar shrugged. “You have a sound plan, ser. The Mystery Knight of the great Tourney of Harrenhal. You unhorsed three knights for their lack of chivalry and made a rather rousing declaration to their dishonour. With half the lords of the Seven Kingdoms in attendance, none will forget that quickly. Least of all my father… he has tasked me with finding out who you are, did you know?”

“Oh?” The knight sounded amused, but it was impossible to tell because of his helm. “Feel free to make a guess, my prince.”

“You have to promise to tell me if I get it right.”

The knight waited a moment, then nodded. “Very well.”

“Give me three guesses,” said Rhaegar. “If you would.”

“No.”
He sounded amused. “How very unchivalrous of you, refusing a prince – that seems to contradict your message of courtly honour.”

The knight shrugged, but Prince Rhaegar smiled. “But I insist. Three guesses.”

“No.”

The prince sighed and cracked his knuckles. “I had hoped to at least make a game out of it, Lady Lyanna.”

“You would have just teased me with the first two guesses and made me hopeful.”

Prince Rhaegar bowed his head. “My lady knows me too well.”

“I didn’t say you were right.”

“But I am.”

The Knight of the Laughing Tree shrugged, then removed his helmet. And Jon saw that Rhaegar Targaryen had not been wrong. For a moment, he could have sworn that it was Arya, but this woman was just that—a grown woman, not a girl, beautiful, with dark brown hair in a braid, and deep grey eyes.

*Rhaegar and Lyanna,* Jon thought, and the Tourney of Harrenhal. A breath caught in his throat. *This is where it began. The Rebellion… all of this…*

“I thought so,” Bran murmured beside him. He glanced up at the sky and sighed. “Take my hand, Jon.”

“I want to see—

“As do I. But our time here is over.”

Snow was falling from the sky, a few flakes at first, then a flurry, and then a complete whiteout. The walls of Harrenhal became glaciers, then mountains, then fell again, and for a moment Jon could swear that he glimpsed Val and Tormund Giantsbane, running together as wights swarmed over palisade fences. The giant Wun Wun stood sentinel behind them. *Hardhome?* he wondered. *Did they make it?* He was about to call out to them when the world disappeared again into whiteness, and the giant turned into a twisted black tower, climbing up towards the sky. A wave of blood seemed to wash over the scene, and then it faded into redness, snow became sand, and the moon became an ochre sun, beating down fiercely upon the world.

“I’ve been here before,” Bran murmured. “In a different dream.”

The tower was short and stout, and it did not seem to be part of any sort of castle. “Where are we?” he asked.

Bran shrugged. “It looks like Dorne. That’s what Lord Brynden said, at least.”

The tower grew in size as they went closer to it. Very soon its shadow was all around them, and without the glare of the sun above they were able to get a better look at the world.

Someone had turned the foot of the tower into a killing ground. Jon counted eight dead men. Four of them had died at the base of the tower, two of them in white cloaks. He did not know their faces, but one was stout and tall, with shoulders to rival an ox. Clutched in his hand was a great iron
longsword, and his enamelled white plate was spotted with blood.

Like most every boy, Jon Snow had dreamed of a place in the Kingsguard. After he had announced his intentions to almost everyone in Winterfell, Old Nan had set about sewing a white cloak for ‘the little hero’, telling Jon stories about a great knight she had once known. Ser Rodrik had set up a new training regime that left him half-dead every morning, and Maester Luwin had made him learn the names and deeds of each and every man who had worn the white cloak in the past hundred years.

Then Jon had remembered that he was a bastard and that his dreams would almost certainly never come to pass. But the lessons had stayed with him. Now, looking at the dead man, Jon could say for a certainty that he was Ser Gerold Hightower. “The White Bull.”

Bran was looking over the other corpse in white. “That’s Ser Oswell Whent,” he said, “the White Bat of Harrenhal.” Around them lay two other dead men, dressed in combat in plain brown leather and ringmail, Northern garb. “A Glover,” Bran said, examining one man’s badge, “and a Ryswell.”

It was on the steps that they found four more dead men. One of them was a Kingsguard man, dressed in white. His helm was decorated with stars, inscribed upon the white plate in a golden paint that shimmered as the light changed. Three men lay dead around him, spattered with blood, their faces twisted in agony. By contrast, the Kingsguard knight looked almost serene in death.

“Ser Arthur Dayne,” Jon said.

“The Sword of the Morning,” added Bran. “Father said he was the greatest-” He stopped suddenly. “If Father slew him, then…” He looked up towards the tower. Ser Arthur had died beside an open door leading to a staircase.

“Father is here…” Jon breathed. And all at once, he was running towards the spiral stairs, full knowing the insanity of his task. The steps were dark grey sandstone, spotted with blood on every step. Someone is bleeding, Jon thought. He thought Bran was calling after him, chasing him, but he dared not look back. As he climbed, voices swirled around him, some familiar, others not… “I looked for you on the Trident,” his father’s voice said.

Father, I’m coming, Jon thought.

“We were not there,” a voice replied.

“Woe to the Usurper if we had been,” said a third.

“When King’s Landing fell, Ser Jaime slew your king with a golden sword, and I wondered where you were.”

In the distance, Jon could hear a man screaming, “BURN THEM ALL!” at the top of his voice. He ignored it and kept running. There was a door at the top of his stairs; he could see it now. Seven turns away, six, five…

“The Kingsguard does not flee,” a stern voice said. “Then or now.”

“We swore a vow,” said another.

He heard the scream of steel and leather. The door was three turns away. “And now it begins,” a man said sadly.

“No,” replied Lord Eddard’s voice. “Now it ends.”
And Jon burst through the door. For half a second, he caught a glimpse of rose petals, scattering before him as a cold blue rain, and blood and tears lashing across his face, and then he was falling through the tower, screaming, “Father!”

The air was cold, and Jon could no longer see the tower above him, only the clouds. He plummeted like a stone, freezing, helpless. Bran, where is Bran, where? Beneath him, he could see the sea, swirling and bubbling like a huge cauldron of black blood. Spray danced off the waves, and-

The water hit him so hard that he was certain, for a moment, that he was dead. Everything turned to black, and then Jon made the deepest rasping breath he had ever taken and all he could taste was salt.

His legs and arms were useless, broken in the fall, perhaps, or otherwise. He was sinking through the black water, but he did not feel like he was drowning, curiously. Fingers of seaweed waved at his face. It was the coldest embrace he had ever known, and Jon longed for warmth. And for a moment, he was certain that he could see Ygritte in the depths, her long red hair swimming around her like a fiery snake. Kissed by fire.

Then she was gone. Jon began to see the world more clearly. The blackness was beginning to soften, just a little. He looked, and he watched, and he saw.

A ghost wandering alone through a bleak black hall, as blue flames burned against his silhouette. A king with a crown of frost, standing tall against a woman with white-blond hair, stark against her dark armour. An old woman, gnarled and bent double, tossing black leeches into a red fire. He could hear a boy’s voice, calling for him. It sounded almost like Bran.

*Hold on*, he thought, trying to speak, *I’m here.*

Then the monster rose from the depths. His skin was blue as ice, as cold as an Other, but he had a man’s form. Tentacles sprouted all around him, and his fingers were black and shining like dragonglass. A crow nested on his shoulder. In his left hand, he wielded a curved black warhorn, banded with gold, and in his right he held a sword that burned with an impossibly blue flame. His armour looked like scale, but Jon could see that each scale was in the shape of a human eye, black and brown and green, staring out at him. An eyepatch covered his left eye, but the right burned blue as frost. He reached out towards Jon with fingers of black dragonglass.

Then all at once he was awake, lying on his makeshift bed in the midst of the dark cavern. Someone was shaking him roughly by the shoulders. “What did you see, Jon?” Bran all but yelled at him, “What did you see?”

When he spoke at last, his voice was almost a whisper. “A monster with a thousand eyes and one,” he said, curiously calm, “swimming through a sea of blood.”

Chapter End Notes

Rhaegar and Lyanna, the Tower of Joy, the creepy weirwood-hall-of-Faces and Euron. Plus the Massacre at Hardhome, condensed into two lines.

*[The Door] was half in ebony and half in weirwood, black and white, and its knocker was in the shape of a weirwood leaf, the red paint chipped away in places to reveal uneven bronze beneath.*
Neither Bran nor Jon realise the significance of this: the Children of the Forest do not work in bronze, but there is a notable race who did.

“You have to promise to tell me if I get it right.”

and...

“Promise me, Ned.” - Lyanna Stark, in Eddard’s recollections, A Game of Thrones

His skin was blue as ice, as cold as an Other, but he had a man’s form. Tentacles sprouted all around him, and his fingers were black and shining like dragonglass. A crow nested on his shoulder. In his left hand, he wielded a **curved black warhorn, banded with gold.**

Well... shit.

“A monster with a thousand eyes and one,” he said, curiously calm, “swimming through a sea of blood.”

This last line is notably used by Moqorro at the end of one of Tyrion’s chapters in A Dance with Dragons, and presumably it also refers to Euron. The fact that a priest of R’hllor and a visionary of the old gods have seen the same thing suggests that these gods are linked in more ways than we previously thought.
Their sticks clacked together softly at first. The boy took a few tentative steps forward, no doubt fearing to hit a knight, even one as soiled as the Kingslayer. “You needn’t shy away,” Jaime told his opponent, beckoning with his own stick. The air was warm and humid, so Jaime’s fingers were slippery against the wood.

Podrick turned towards him, gripping the makeshift tourney sword firmly in his right hand. The lad was shorter and smaller than most boys his age, but he had an enthusiasm that the others did not, and Jaime was well aware of how much that sort of determination mattered. He poked a careless stab at Jaime that missed by a half-foot. The one-handed knight stepped back. “Podrick, better to be careful and accurate when you lunge, else I’ll give you a mighty smack around the head. I know that because the wench did the same to me.”

“You’d do well to listen to Ser Jaime,” Brienne told the squire. “He might only have one hand now, but he knows what he’s saying.” She sucked air through her teeth. “Might be I’ll have you spar against me instead-”

“I think the poor lad’s too embarrassed to hit a lady,” Jaime said. “Come then, Podrick. Let us see if you are better than your mute cousin… though I daresay you aren’t nearly as menacing.” Jaime did not know what had become of the king’s executioner, Ser Ilyn Payne, but all things considered, he didn’t really give a shit.

Podrick waved the stick in his general direction. Jaime was not really paying attention, and the attack should have knocked him to the ground, but the boy gave up on it half-heartedly. As promised, Jaime spun around him and whapped him across the head with the flat of his own weapon, sending Pod stumbling into the grass. “Eyes,” he instructed gruffly, swinging again.

“Eyes?” Podrick looked confused, but not so confused that he forgot to block, thankfully, else Jaime might have broken his jaw.

The wench was looking somewhat distressed by the proceedings, her mouth half-open to berate him. He turned towards her, grinning. “Come try me, w-”
Podrick’s stick caught him in the stomach and forced him into retreat. Now Brienne was struggling to contain her laughter. He ducked Podrick’s next attack, struck back at the boy, spun…and found that his stick had dropped to the grass. Pod whacked him hard across the flat of the hand, and Jaime hissed in pain. Then the boy lowered his stick and looked afraid. “S-sorry, s-ser,” he stammered. “I didn’t mean-”

Jaime picked up his weapon and advanced on him with a menacing snarl, holding the stick high, then dropped the pretence and ruffled the lad’s hair instead. “Not bad, young Podrick.” He picked up his stick and turned to Brienne. “Would you care for a turn, wench?”

“I fear you would not last long against me, Ser Jaime,” she said coolly. “And my name is Brienne, must I remind you?”

He was about to jest and refute that but decided against it. A Kingslayer needs all the friends he can get. “My apologies,” he said, lowering his golden hand to his side. “Lady Brienne.” He nodded to Pod, who was busy stacking green wood onto the fire. The embers crackled with white sparks. “You’ve done well with the lad; he’ll make a good knight someday.”

“Like as not, he’ll be a ser sooner than I.” She sounded oddly dispassionate. But she was not wrong, Jaime thought. He could not think of a single occurrence where a woman had been made a knight. Why not start here?

“You know,” he said, laying the practise stick across his knees. “Any knight can make another man – or woman, in your case – into a knight. You need only…” He broke off then, already knowing that Brienne would not accept his offer. She was too bloody prideful for it and honourable to a fault. And who in their right mind would be proud to receive a knighthood from the Kingslayer? It had been a stupid notion to begin with. They sat in silence until Pod returned to take a seat beside them.

“You know, Podrick,” Jaime said, as the squire blew on the ashes to make the fire rise, “I do have some small admiration for you.”

“Ser? My lady? Oh… ser.”

Jaime smirked at the boy’s expense. “You manage to put up with Brienne of Tarth on the road for far longer than I ever did,” he said. “The wench is brave, courteous and honourable to a fault, aye, but she does have an incredibly depressing attitude. Allow me to remedy that by telling you both a story.” He nudged Pod. “Do you think that I can make her laugh?”

“I—I… I wouldn’t like to bet on it, ser.”

“Well, let’s see.” He made a thoughtful face. “I know one or two vulgar japes, lowbrow humour and not of the sort that Lady Brienne is fond of, I should think, but funny nonetheless. My brother told me a story about the time he brought a honeycomb and a jackass into a brothel—”

“Something to do with a sweet ass, my lord,” Podrick said, grinning.

Jaime cuffed the boy around the head jokingly. “And there’s the punchline, Pod… though it did spoil the joke somewhat. What say you, my lady?”

Brienne stared at him with her bright blue eyes, but her gaze was utterly devoid of any emotion. “I have heard all of these japes in my father’s hall, ser. I am no stranger to jokes.”

Of course. Jaime gave her a sad smile, pitying her. Only fools had made mock of him behind his back, partly because most men respected his reputation (ironically), and partly for fear of his father’s wrath. But Brienne must have endured mockery for her entire life, so much so that she had become
ignorant to it. Maybe that was why she had understood his predicament so well when they were travelling from Riverrun to King’s Landing, why she had been able to save him when no one else after they cut off his sword hand. “Podrick,” he said. “Did I tell you about the time when Lady Brienne saved my life? Or when she beat me into the ground during our fight at the bridge over the Trident?”

Podrick might have answered and Brienne might have argued against him, but they were both interrupted by the sound of hoofbeats splashing through water a moment later, and then thumping across the land. A moment later the Hound’s huge courser emerged from the wood, hooves thundering in its wake. Clegane sat in the saddle, Lady Sansa with her hands on his shoulders, between the man himself and the carcass slung over his horse’s back.

Before the fire they dismounted, the Stark girl leading the way while the Hound lugged the dead deer behind him. Jaime rose and went to them. “My lady-” he began.

Clegane silenced him with a look. “Kingslayer,” he said, “the fuck you doing here?”

“I am talking with Lady Brienne, Hound. Must I ask for your permission every time I want to speak to someone?”

A low growl rose in the Hound’s throat. “You stay away from the little bird, Kingslayer,” he said at last. “I don’t trust you with her.”

“Perhaps rightly so.” Jaime tipped his head. “As you will.”

The Stark girl had dismounted now. “Would you care to join us for dinner, Ser Jaime?” she asked, all cold courtesy and with no actual desire for him to join them. Still, the offer surprised him a little, and for a moment he was sorely tempted, but between the frosty stares of Brienne and Sansa and the Hound’s antipathy towards him, he would rather go elsewhere.

“No,” he said. “No, thank you, my lady. I… I will retire early.”

And so he did. The moon was still rising in the sky by the time he fell asleep in his tent. He dreamed a new dream that night. He was in a city of honeycomb, the walls of a beehive pressing down all around him. Tall glass jars of honey stretched along the walls as far as the eye could see, but when Jaime went close and peered into one of them, the substance bubbled thick and hot, green and sticky. At one of the hall, he could feel hot air rushing inside, searing against his face, and at the other end there came shouting… “Burn them all!” someone was screaming. “Burn them all! Burn them all!” When he looked down, Jaime saw that his hand was not golden, nor flesh, but some sort of black stone, that rippled in the light and reflected the surfaces around him, like glass. Obsidian, he realised. How why?

“Burn them all!” the Mad King was shouting, more loudly now. “Burn them all!” Then Jaime saw it, at the far end of the hall. An emerald tide, growing in size as it swirled towards him. Distant, then less so, and less and less.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he turned and ran.

The red heat gave way to the green. “Burn them all!” a madman was screaming. “Burn them all, all, all!” As he ran towards the noise, Jaime saw faces in the walls of the honeycomb. Joffrey stood before him, armoured all in gold, but Jaime knocked him flying into the mist, then his father, who stood snarling at him. You are no son of mine. Lastly came a small creature with a dusty black shadow. Tyrion. But by then it was too late to stop, and his brother was taking flight, thrown into the air. He could taste the flames now, chanced a look back at the fire building around him. There were
faces in the flames, coming closer and closer. Emerald smoke billowed all around him, plumes of it, threatening to choke him.

He found him sitting at the end of the hall, sitting amidst his chair of blades, screaming a thousand curses, “BURN THEM ALL! BURN THEM AAAAAALLLLLLLLLLLL!” The Mad King was unkempt as ever, long nails flickering the colour of flame and fury, black and red and orange and yellow. Jaime could feel the sword slipping into its proper place – in his right hand, his dragonglass hand. He ran faster than ever, as the black and green flames licked at his heels, throwing off his white cloak so as not to trip over it, took Oathkeeper in his hand.

“BURN THEM ALL!” Aerys screamed as Jaime took the steps of the Iron Throne three at a time, and plunged his sword deep into the man’s heart. Then the flames blew away, parting in a great haze of blue-green smoke, and Jaime collapsed beside the chair.

Only Aerys no longer sat in it. Instead, he was met with Cersei’s gaze. When Jaime pulled the blade out, his sister slumped from the throne and began to drown in the throes of death. Her hands were cut to ribbons, black blood pouring down her face and pooling around the hem of her dress. Her green eyes were dead and dull. Her lips made a pitiful sound and then were still.

Jaime could not speak. His mouth was dry, and his twin was dead. When he turned back to the hall to see whose footsteps were approaching him, he found himself staring into a boy’s eyes. These were green, and they saw everything. The broken boy grabbed him by the throat and hoisted him into the air. “The things you did for love,” he said and threw Jaime off the Iron Throne into the fiery smoke below.

He awoke with a start, gasping for breath and not finding it. I pushed him. And he killed me. Brandon Stark, that was the boy’s name.

You swore an oath, a woman’s voice told him.

I swore an oath, Jaime reminded himself. He crawled through the tent flap and emerged into the light. It had rained in the night and the grass was patchy with morning dew. Glimmering fingers of frost had sprouted on the trunks of the trees, growing like icy knives through holes in the bark.

His clothes were beginning to smell, so he went and rifled through one of the baskets of clothing the Brotherhood had stolen. On its own the wine-coloured roughspun made him look half a fool, but with his grey-green traveller’s cloak over the top Jaime was at least presentable. He had abandoned his white cloak long ago.

He went and washed his face and his hair in the stream. Mud and dirt streamed out in silty trails that trickled down his cheeks and then into the water, muddying it. When he was clean again, Jaime crouched over the source and studied his reflection in the water. His hair had grown long and lank, more brown than gold in places, and a beard covered much of the lower part of his face, just as it had when he had been travelling with Brienne in the Riverlands for the first time. “I thought we had grown out of this stupidity,” he told himself.

“I thought the same,” a voice behind him said. “See how far I got?” Lem Lemoncloak was washing his yellow rag in the water. “There was a time when they called me Lemoncloak and spoke truly,” he said, “now it’s more of a…” He shrugged. “More piss-coloured.”

“In the Riverlands, I always thought of you as Pisscloak. Good to see I’m not alone, at least.”

Lem shrugged and wrung the water out of his cloak. “Best you go and saddle your horse, Kingslayer. We’re not staying here for long. I don’t trust this place, and it wouldn’t do to linger too
long on Tyrell lands.”

“How much longer till we leave the Reach?”

“Three days. Maybe four. Then we’ll be in the Westerlands for a short time until we enter the Riverlands near Pinkmaiden.” His gaze remained on Jaime, glazed with mistrust.

“You needn’t worry about me fleeing back to Casterly Rock. I’m half-dead myself, and any of your men could catch me during my flight.”

“I bet they could.” Lem rose and walked off. Jaime turned his golden hand over so that he could get a better look at it. The damned thing was more bronze than gold by now, so he washed it in the stream and attached it back to his stump.

An hour later, they were riding.

As always, there were fewer of them than there had been the day before, for Lem Lemoncloak insisted on leaving false trails for the Tyrell soldiers to follow. Every morning, a different group of men would ride out, led by a seasoned leader such as Puddingfoot or Pello of Tyrosh; they’d travel through as many villages and settlements as possible spreading false news for their pursuers to pick up on. Sometimes they even masqueraded as smallfolk themselves with the intentions of sending the Tyrells in the wrong direction. At Goldengrove, where soldiers in Lord Rowan’s perimeter had set up a ring around their lordship’s lands, Jon o’Nutten had posed as an elderly farmer and told the garrison that he’d seen ‘a great ugly wench and a man with a burned face’ riding down near Red Lake. Frankly, Jaime was surprised that their tactics worked, and he was half-certain that the Tyrells must be catching up with them and their strategies by now. Or perhaps they simply weren’t bothered. That would be rather odd, though. He knew that if a bride had run from a Lannister wedding, his father would have set up checkpoints at every road and every port leaving the Westerlands, and he would have blockaded the mountain paths that bypassed the Tooth and Deep Den on the Riverlands border. All of the Lannister armies would be set to the task of tracking down the runaway bride.

Indeed, there were strangely few guards in the outlying parts of Reach. Jaime remembered that the Tyrells had been gathering an army as well as hosting a wedding, and outside Highgarden and Oldtown the levies of the Reachlords were few and far between. Since leaving the Mander behind, he’d barely seen another soldier. He wondered if things would change once they reached the West.

Lem Lemoncloak straightened up in the saddle. In a loud clear voice he looked to the sky and began to sing:

\[
\begin{align*}
The red rained down all around him, \\
sunbeams starting to still, \\
glinting off the silvered breastplate, \\
bloody from the kill, \\
And blade in hand he leapt across, \\
pale sword into the fray
\end{align*}
\]
Said Darry to him, “beware, my king,”
“else this’ll be our day,”

“Matters not, young Darry,”
replied he who had no fear,
knowing the accursed spell,
told that his end was near.

And swords came shrieking,
The Dornishmen screaming,
Cut down for grievous error,
“Then come, my foes,
then come, then come,”
cried Daeron without terror.

Qorgyle with bow of burnished yew,
brought arrow from his quiver,
When the wind was strong and red,
He loosed it with a shiver,

It caught the king, as he had hoped,
But did not kill in one,
The dragon advanced with Blackfyre bared,
To fight Qorgyle and his son,

Plate cracked beneath hammer blow,
The king went to a knee,
But fight on he did, fight on, fight on,
“A dragon does not flee.”
And swords came shrieking,
*The Dornishmen screaming,*
*Cut down for grievous error,*
"Then come, my foes,
then come, then come,"
cried Daeron without terror.

*Till at last His Grace fell in the dirt,*
*Armour cracked, blood leaking out,*
*Stark red against the earthy mud,*
*Dead but brave, beyond a doubt,*

*And in the months and years hence,*
*‘cross river, field and fen,*
*Men spoke in awe of Daeron the Dragon,*
*King of Andals, Rhoynar and First Men.*

Oddly, by the end of the song, Jaime found himself mouthing the words, as the voices quelled around him. Anguy said, “I never understood what they meant by ‘accursed spell’.”

“Something about a woods witch,” Swampy Meg told him, “she said that Daeron would die far from home in accursed battle, but he would be remembered for centuries thereafter. And so he was.”

*Daeron the Young Dragon was a fool,* Jaime thought. Like so many other highborn boys, he had held the young king among his heroes, until realising the utter naivety of his conquest at his father’s guidance. “Wisdom makes a good king,” Lord Tywin had told his son and heir, during one of Jaime’s more interesting lessons. “Daeron was a skilled commander, aye. For a time. But he was not so much a king as a brave young idiot who disregarded the needs of his own kingdom – still recovering from the Dance of the Dragons – in the hope of attaining glory. A man should not seek glory, Jaime. In time, glory will seek a man, though if wisdom has truly become him, he is not like to be bothered by it.”

But it was his father’s last words that refused to leave his mind. *You are no son of mine.* Even now, long months after the massacre at Riverrun, Jaime wondered whether his father had said those words in spite before dying or because he truly meant them. Truthfully, he was afraid to find out.

A few miles down the road, they came to a small hamlet where they stopped to give their horses
water. Jaime was filling a pail when Edric Dayne came up behind him. “Ser,” he said, rolling up the leg of his breeches to splash his feet from his own pail, “I saw you when we were riding. You looked lost.”

“Is a man not allowed to keep his own thoughts private anymore?” Jaime snapped at him.

“No, ser. I mean, it’s not that, ser, only… do you ever feel like somewhere isn’t your place?”

Jaime went back to his horse, Edric trailing him. “All the time,” he replied. “Sometimes it is due to no fault of my own, most of the time they like to draw attention to the business of kingslaying.”

“They shouldn’t.”

“They should. I killed a king, one that I was sworn to protect.”

“But you did it to save King’s Landing!”

Jaime rounded on him. “You’re an idealist, Edric Dayne. I’ve only ever met one person more inclined to always think the best of people. Regardless of the circumstances I mentioned to you, I broke an oath. And even if we disregard my killing of Aerys, I’ve done things far worse than that, boy.”

Edric raised a blond eyebrow. “Such as?”

*I fucked my sister. I made that monster Joff. I started this damned war. I shoved a sword through my own father’s heart. I lied to my brother about the love of his life. I pushed an innocent child out of a window. “The worst things we do are always the things we do for love, Edric. I am not a good man, and no amount of you trying to convince me otherwise will change that.”*

Dayne’s mouth set in a thin line and his eyebrows arched. “Fine,” he said. “So be it. You are what you say you are, and only you can change that.” He stalked away.

Jaime turned from him and went back to watering his horse, yet the boy’s words still rang true in his head. *Only I can change what I am.*

Lem’s shout rang out across the yard. Jaime climbed back onto his horse and rode to where Sansa, Brienne and Podrick were seated on their own mounts.

“Where’s the Hound?” he asked.

“Somewhere ahead of the column,” Brienne told him. “He wanted to check the way for us.”

“There’s no need,” said Jaime, “we—” He caught Brienne’s stare and quietened himself. “Better safe than sorry, I suppose. And it is certainly safer to let the Hound do as he pleases, at least in my view. Clegane is none too fond of me or my family.”

Brienne spoke sardonically. “You make it sound like no one loves your family.”

Jaime smirked. “That I do, Brienne. Very few people have any liking for House Lannister. You have to be a Lannister to love a…”

He broke off, partly because he realised what he was saying and partly because Brienne had gone on without him. *You have to be a Lannister to love a Lannister. Is that what I told Cersei when she contemplated doing things differently? In nearly forty years, Jaime had never loved anyone the way he loved his sister – well, except maybe Tyrion, but that wasn’t romantic in any way. Sometimes he*
wondered if Cersei would say the same about him. *Did she love Rhaegar the first time she set her eyes upon him? Seven hells, did she ever love Robert?* It was probably better to never ask her.

By mid-afternoon the rain had started up again, at first a slow steady drip and then a downpour. It thundered through the branches and speckled the leaves that littered the road. The way was quieter than Jaime had expected; they saw nary a cart travelling this direction, never mind any Tyrell pursuers. When Brienne voiced those thoughts, he said, “The war has driven the smallfolk away, I think. This land sits midway between Riverrun and Casterly Rock and King’s Landing. If there are to be skirmishes and battles, the villages along the goldroad will suffer the worst from it. When I was with my father’s army, Gregor Clegane sacked the village at the Mummer’s Ford and the holdfasts at Shermer and Tumbler’s Falls.”

From his high horse, Lem Lemoncloak nodded his agreement. “It is always the common folk who suffer worst when the high lords in their castles play the game of thrones.” He nodded round at the Brotherhood. “So many of us have been made into what we are now by these wars.”

“And you?” It was Brienne who had asked.

Lem gave a nod of his big head. “My war came long ago, but I have not forgotten it. Robert’s Rebellion was the conflict which shaped my future.”

“Whose side were you on?” Podrick Payne asked.

Lem did not answer for a moment. “If I were on the winning side, do you think that I would’ve been driven to outlawing?”

Lady Sansa shifted in her saddle. “Might we rest awhile at the next village?” she asked, “I fear that my mare is tiring.”

Lem tipped his head. “As my lady commands.”

It was probably for the best, because the rain was not stopping, and the road was getting muddier and muddier with every passing moment. “There’s a sept up at Colemoor; might be the septons will give us respite there.”

He was right about there being a sept, only they found no septons. The Hound met them on the road as they were riding up towards the seven-sided building, wet mud squelching beneath his stallion’s hooves. “Outlaws,” he said, in a rough, gravelly tone, narrowing his eyes at Lem Lemoncloak. “Worse than you lot. They took the ornaments and the gold and anything of value that they could find, and they took the damn septons as well.”

Lem gave a cynical glance to the overcast sky. Grey clouds were gathering. “Does this sept still have its roof, Clegane?” he asked.

The Hound nodded suspiciously. “Aye. Doesn’t have much else, though.”

“We have need of nothing else. Might be we’ll be able to find some food somewhere, but the Lady Sansa’s mare isn’t the only one that’s tiring.” He patted his horse’s flanks. “Best to wait and rest awhile, I think.” And with that, he steered his horse up the track towards the sept on the hill, and the rest of them followed.

Inside the sept, the walls were bare and the place as poorly furnished as Clegane had promised. All they could find were a few candles that had almost burned down to stubs; Jack-be-Lucky and Merrit o’Moontown lit them before the statues of the Mother and the Father, for all the good that it would do them, and Lady Sansa prayed to the Crone.
“The Hound said that it was outlaws that attacked here,” Lem Lemoncloak said, coming over to the corner where Jaime and Brienne had set up their bedrolls, “might be best to wait awhile, but I wouldn’t like to risk the Tyrells catching up with us.” He glanced back to his companions, clearly wanting a second opinion.

Jaime gave him one. “I wouldn’t really want to take my chances with either of them,” he said, “but the Tyrells have thousands of men and will certainly have our heads if they catch us. I daresay there’s a limit to how many men can form an outlaw brotherhood. The Brotherhood without Banners is the largest group of outlaws I’ve ever seen, and as luck would have it, you are on our side.”

Something twinkled in Lem’s eye. “And what side is that?” he inquired.

“Why, the side of the good and the just, of course. Whereas others…”

“The Brave Companions,” Brienne said suddenly. “They sacked the sept, didn’t they?” She stared into Jaime’s eyes, her lip curling in distaste. “The sacking of septs and such, that sounds like the Goat’s work.”

“The Goat is long dead,” Jaime said, “Ser Gregor Clegane saw to that.”

Lem shook his head. “Would that we could say the same for his men. Biter escaped from Harrenhal, as did Rorge and Shagwell and many others. The Riverlands are filled with broken men, from the Twins to the God’s Eye to all the way down here in the Reach.”

After that he fell silent again, and then he went away, disappearing among the crowded throng on the other side of the hall.

Later that evening Anguy caught a few rabbits, which Melly stewed in a pot with carrots and a few onions. They ate it with the last of the crusty bread that Watty the Miller had bought at the market in Redding. Jaime played dice with Merrit o’Moontown, Ser Melwyn and the twins for a while, then washed his face in the rain and went back to his bedroll to sleep, rolling up under his blankets to keep off the chill coming through cracks in the mortar. Sansa Stark sat very still, watching him from afar, probably thinking that he hadn’t noticed her. In the end, she said nothing, and turned over to lie down between Brienne and the Mother’s altar. Edric Dayne was polishing his boots, talking with Gendry in a hushed voice as the others tried to get to sleep around them. Anguy was checking the arrows in his quiver, and Lem sat scrubbing his yellow cloak in vain, softly singing ‘Six Maids in A Pool’ all the while. The Hound stood guard at the sept doors with Jack-be-Lucky and the Mad Huntsman, drinking ale from a stout cup. Rain softly pattered against the flagstone roof above Jaime’s head, and the carved stone faces of the Seven gods stared down on him from all around. Podrick Payne started to snore.

“Goodnight, Ser Jaime.” The mumbled voice belonged to Brienne, who had taken off her armour to sleep and was now tucked beneath woollen blankets. She looked less ugly than normal, though her hair was unkempt and her eyes struggled to stay open in her tiredness.

Jaime smiled sadly at her. “Goodnight, Lady Brienne,” he said, and slept.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly one of my favourite chapters to write so far. It’s rare in a story where so much is happening that you can give these characters a chance to breathe and develop their
character. My favourite scene of this was the paragraph near the end that starts with:
Later that evening Anguy caught a few rabbits, as you can really get a sense of character from everyone in the scene.

Jaime's interactions on the road with Brienne, Podrick, Edric and Lem Lemoncloak are some of my favourite parts of this story. There wasn't much Sansa or Sandor in this chapter - and almost nothing with Gendry - but since Sansa has the next POV on the road (chapter 38 or thereabouts), we'll get to see the BwB from a different perspective.
Sons of Someone Else

Chapter Summary

“They’re just sons of someone else.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TOMMEN

The storm had not stopped in three days. *Even kings must kneel before the will of the gods*, King Robert had said once, when he was in his cups. King Robert said a lot of things when he was in his cups, though he usually shouted them.

“But what about Durran Godsgrief?” Tommen had asked. “The gods tried to destroy Storm’s End seven times—”

“Lies and lies,” his father replied. “Those tales are so old that the storytellers just make them up as they please. If Durran Godsgrief was real, we wouldn’t be in this mess we’re in today.” He shook his head. “Jon Arryn dead of some evil ailment, Ned’s boy crippled, Stannis brooding on Dragonstone. And Joffrey… someday Joff will sit that ugly iron chair after me. Count yourself lucky that you’ll never have to wear a crown.”

*How wrong you were.* The irony made Tommen feel ill. *I cannot sign this,* he thought, staring down at the quill in his hand and the parchment on his desk. *I will not sign this.*

“You must sign this,” Ser Kevan Lannister said.

Tommen bit his lip. “No. I will not sell my sister to the Arryns like some broodmare.” But even as he said the words, he knew that he could not keep up this argument. *It makes more sense than waiting here in Casterly Rock, friendless and alone. And if Stannis should send his own envoys to try and convince Robert Arryn of his cause, then our troubles will only deepen. They will mount Myrcella’s head on a spike right beside mine.*

It was warm in the chamber, and his doublet was lined with fur, but a chill went through him all the same. *I must sign this. But I will need wine.* He reached for the flagon, but Ser Kevan moved it out of his reach. “Sign the paper first.”

Tommen picked the parchment and pretended to read the words. “Does it *have* to be Lord Arryn?” he asked. “He isn’t very… well, healthy. He—”
Ser Kevan raised an eyebrow. “Can you think of a better suggestion, Your Grace?” His grey-green eyes were hard as flint.

Tommens bit his lip. “Well... no. But I’m sure I could find her a better marriage, in time. Maybe a bannerman of the Tyrells? Lord Hightower is of an age with her, is he not?”

“We do not have time,” said Ser Kevan. “And Lord Hightower is a ward of House Tyrell in Highgarden. How do you plan to make Mace Tyrell agree to that?”

Tommens let out one last, prolonged sigh, then stood and signed the parchment. “The seal, please.” Though he was a Lannister in name as well as blood now, the royal seal still displayed the stag of Baratheon beside the lion – even if he stamped it into crimson wax instead of yellow. “Done,” he said. “Do you need me for anything else?”

“There are a few matters we must talk about,” said Ser Kevan. “First among them is this Westerling betrothal you and Myrcella seem so keen to complete.”

He no longer had the strength to care. “I thought we’d sorted that out already, my lord. You’ll work towards making the arrangements while I’m at the Golden Tooth, and we’ll announce whatever you’ve decided upon my return.”

“Very good, Your Grace,” Ser Kevan said, still frowning. “If everything goes well, this storm will have passed us by the end of this week, and you will be able to march very soon. Ser Addam already has men stationed at Oxcross and on their way up to the Tooth, and—”

“Yes, yes.” Tommen waved a tired hand in Ser Kevan’s general direction. The hour was growing late, and he’d been doing thankless tasks for most of the day. He coughed. “I beg your pardon, ser, but Maester Creylen has asked to see my leg, to make sure that nothing is amiss. Everything is fine, I think, but he’s bound to be wary if I’m even one minute late.”

Ser Kevan looked displeased, but he nodded and said, “As you will, Your Grace. Good night.”

“Good night, my lord.” Tommen nodded his head as he went out. *Power is power, and not all kings wear crowns.* Ser Kevan was not Lord Tywin, but he still deserved respect. A wise young king would do well to listen to his counsellors.

Ser Arys and Ser Balon Swann met him in the hallway. “I have informed the Kingsguard of your intentions, Your Grace,” Ser Arys said. “Ser Jasper, in particular, is rather eager for the war, though… I fear that vengeance is his true intention.”

“Vengeance?”

“His father was cut down at the Tumblestone battle, Your Grace,” explained Ser Balon. “He seems to think that he will be able to take revenge on the knight responsible.”

“And... does he actually know who this knight is? I will not have my Kingsguard killing indiscriminately.” His thoughts went to Ser Meryn Trant, who had deserted at the Tumblestone when they became trapped between the river and the Blackfish’s archers. Trant had only ever been cruel to him... though he had not been with Joffrey that night. *I’ll hurt you in a new way.*

Ser Arys was Tommen’s favourite Kingsguard, mostly because it was he who had seen him and Myrcella to Winterfell and acted as their only real link to King’s Landing after his uncle Tyrion had ventured back south. *Myrcella.* “Where is my sister?”

“In her solar,” Ser Arys answered. “Would you like me to bring her to your rooms?”
“No,” Tommen said. He’d go there himself once Maester Creylen was done with him. It was surely better to let Myrcella know the news from him in person rather than by word of mouth – her rage could be a fearsome thing if provoked.

Tommen found Maester Creylen already in his chambers when he returned. The maester was a stout fellow of about fifty years with a potbelly and a square head. Once a knight who had once served in the Lannister army, he’d had a change of heart after Robert’s Rebellion and decided to become a maester. “Hmm,” he said, prodding the skin here and there. “There is bruising, but that was to be expected. The corruption is not present, and the stitches have held. You should be fine, Your Grace, so long as you do not engage in anything too strenuous.”

“It’s a war,” Tommen told him. “I can hardly choose—”

The maester looked up at him tiredly. “And as I told you before, you would be better off staying at Casterly Rock.”

*Has Mother paid you to say that?* Tommen wondered. The Rock was so full of spies and sycophants that he didn’t know where the lies began. “I have no choice about this war,” he said.

Creylen still had a thin smile as he rose to his feet. “I can see that I will get nowhere in convincing you of anything. Your lord grandfather was somewhat similar when it came to things that he believed in.”

When that was done, Tommen bid the maester farewell and went to the window. The storm was still raging out on the bay. *I do not fear the Storm God’s fury, he thought, for ours is the fury.* King Robert had never truly loved him, he knew, but perhaps there was some of his father in him. Creylen had called the war unnecessary, but Tommen saw it as the only way forward. He glanced over at the window again, and for a moment he was certain that he saw Joffrey’s reflection in the mirrored glass, his wormlike lips curling into a smirk.

When he squinted at the mirror he saw her standing behind him with a heavy book in her hands. “Myrcella…” Tommen said, holding his hands up. “I—”

The strike was so hard it almost knocked him to the ground. “What have you done?” she all but screamed at him, throwing the book at Tommen’s face. “Robert fucking Arryn?” Myrcella dragged him up by his collar and shoved him towards the desk.

He staggered, caught his breath, tried to get a word in. “I—”

She slapped him, so hard that it sent him tripping over his own feet to the floor. Myrcella glared down at him, barely unchecked wrath in her green eyes, her rage so pure it made Tommen afraid to even look at her.

*I’ll hurt you in a different way, a new way.* After the longest time, she said, “Your nose is bleeding.”

So it was. Tommen could feel the slow trickle coming down over his top lip. He took a handkerchief from the table and shoved it up his nose. “You… you… hurt me.”

“You are so observant, dear brother,” she replied acidly.

Tommen stood there stupidly. “You… you hurt me,” he said again.

“And rightly so.” Myrcella was plainly in no mood to apologise. Her face was pink with rage, while her eyes blazed with green fire. “I am the princess of the Seven Kingdoms, not some dog you can dismiss as you please!”
“Cella, I never meant—”

“But you did. I don’t care what you meant, you poor stupid blind little shit.”

He stopped, agape. She had never sworn at him before. *Never.* “Cella,” he said, taking a few soft steps forward, “I… I…”

Her eyes flared again… and then she seemed to give up all at once, collapsing forward onto his bed, her fingers clenching and unclenching rhythmically, her breathing deep and angry. “I’m your sister,” she spat when Tommen tried to sit beside her. “Your only sister, and you send me away like this. And don’t you go telling me that it’s for the good of the realm; we both know that you don’t care about the good of the realm. You only care about the ones you love, why can’t you see that, little brother? No one understands in quite the same way, no one…” Her voice caught in her throat. “Except you.”

Tommen swallowed, blood thumping in his ears and trickling down his nose. He had so many questions to ask, but only one came to his lips. “What will you do?”

Myrcella’s eyes were red-rimmed. “What can I do?” she asked. “I’ll marry him, for the good of the realm.” She said the words acerbically, but a little less so than earlier. “But I won’t be going quietly. I won’t be the good little lady of the Vale that you and Ser Kevan want me to be.”

“I expected nothing less.”

Myrcella gave him a little smile. “I… I know. You probably don’t understand this, Tommen, but you’re always the best person to scream at.” She swallowed. “I mean, you know what it feels like to be hurt, and… you know the guilt and the shame that comes from hurting other people. More than most. Some… some may see it as a weakness, little brother, but it’s your greatest strength. I only wish that I could have that gift as well.” She rose.

“Stop,” Tommen said, “you… you don’t have to marry him if you don’t want to—”

“We both know that I have no choice,” Myrcella replied. “And you’d do well to convince yourself of the fact.” She put her arms around him and whispered in his ear. “If you spend too long worrying about what other people want, you’ll never get anything done. I’ll… I’ll go back to my chambers, and then I’ll think on all of this. Might be that I won’t see you again until we leave for the Tooth.”

Tommen was not entirely sure what happened after she left. Sleep was the only thing that concerned him. And for all that, he did not rest well that night. The nightmares came early, but this time, they were stranger than normal. This time *he* was Joffrey, beating a helpless boy with a sceptre, smiling despite himself as he shoved a knife under the fawn’s skin and watched it writhing in its death throes. “I’ll try a different way,” he heard himself say, “a new way.”

That was when he woke up, cold sweat clinging to him. The rain was coming down faster still, and somewhere nearby lightning crackled through the night air. *He’s dead,* he thought, *he’s not real, he’s gone.*

*It never happened.*

But it had. Outside, the rain lashed down hard and heavy.

When morning came he was lying in bed again, though he could not remember getting back into it. Willem Frey was in the room, wiping down the chairs with a long-handled brush. When Tommen sat up he turned and bowed his head. “Your Grace.”
The king squinted at him. “Why are you here?”

“I… I’m your squire, my lord.”

“Oh. Yes, you are.” Willem was eleven years old, the brother of Ty Frey, one of the friends Tommen had met in the Riverlands. Ty had been captured after the Battle of the Tumblestone, but his brother remained, and after instating the King’s Companions Tommen had chosen him as his squire. “If you are anything like your brother, then we should have no problems,” he’d said. Unfortunately, Willem was a little over-eager to prove himself better than his older brother, which meant that he had a tendency to do more than was needed – or wanted – of him.

“Will you be wanting your armour today, my lord?” the boy asked keenly, “since you’re visiting the guard posts in Lannisport with the King’s Companions.”

“Aye,” the king said, “and clean my boots as well. Then send for my captains and tell them that they are to meet me at the Lion’s Mouth in an hour. Oh, and bring my breakfast. Please.”

“My lord.” Willem bowed and went.

It was still raining, Tommen saw, though the thunder had quietened and the clouds looked less dark than they had been the day before. He broke his fast on porridge with honey and dates, and boiled eggs with a few of the crispy fried fish they’d caught out on the Sunset Sea, then washed and changed into a dark leather jerkin with a red scarf to keep out the chill.

Ser Arys met him outside and followed him down into the bailey. From there it was only a short walk to the stables where Storm and Breeze were kept. Storm looked apprehensive this morning, as he had ever since the battle at the Tumblestone, where he’d spooked and almost thrown his rider.

Tommen ran his hand along the courser’s mane, stroking him behind the ear. “It’s alright,” he said softly, “you’ll be fine.” He’d taken Breeze out on all of his rides since their arrival at Casterly Rock, but since Storm was best suited as a warhorse, it seemed prudent to take him to the Golden Tooth instead. “Ser Arys,” Tommen said, “fetch me some apples and carrots.” He looked back to the horses. “I shouldn’t give you treats before you’ve done anything, you know, but I need you to be happy.” After their feed, the stableboys came over and led Storm away to be saddled. Tommen stayed with Breeze a while longer, letting the rounsey nip at his palm.

“Your Grace,” came a call from behind him. Eleyna Westerling’s long grey cloak flapped around her feet as she walked through the stalls. Her hair was tied back with a red ribbon, and around her neck she wore a necklace of seed pearls that Tommen recognised as his sister’s. “This is your horse, Your Grace?”

“Obviously.”

“Your Grace,” came a call from behind him. Eleyna Westerling’s long grey cloak flapped around her feet as she walked through the stalls. Her hair was tied back with a red ribbon, and around her neck she wore a necklace of seed pearls that Tommen recognised as his sister’s. “This is your horse, Your Grace?”

“Of course. Yes, my lady, one of them. I call her Breeze. Lord Willas Tyrell sent her to me as a present for my wedding.” She looked downcast at that, and Tommen quickly realised why. “For my previous wedding,” he told her.

“Oh.” The girl straightened up. “You look very handsome today, Your Grace.”

“No, I don’t. I’ve only been awake for half an hour and… oh, you look rather, um, interesting, my lady. A… a good sort of interesting, I think. Nice.”

Ser Balon Swann disguised a snigger as a loud cough. Ser Arys thumped him on the arm. Tommen reddened, then went back to the horse, refusing to meet Eleyna’s eyes. He didn’t like the way that Myrcella had forced her upon him, but at least she had not attempted to manipulate him yet. We could be happy, I suppose.
Happiness is not love, though. His mother’s words rang true in his mind. “My lord,” Eleyna said, “I don’t want to presume, but I heard from my brother that you were planning on riding out with the King’s Companions this morning. To Lannisport.”

“Yes. And Rollam is one of my captains, so…” Lord Rollam had not particularly distinguished himself above the others, but he was the lord of his house, while most of the Companions were heirs and second sons. “If you want, you could come with us.” That was a stupid notion, as Tommen realised as soon as he had spoken.

“Would that I could, Your Grace, but your sister has already asked me to help her entertain some of the court ladies this morning. She means to…” She broke off abruptly.

“She means to do what?”

Eleyna swallowed a breath. “I am sure that she will tell you herself, Your Grace. She said that it will be easier to wait until everything has been sorted out regarding… regarding Harrenhal.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Tommen said in a small voice. “I am sure that I will see Myrcella sometime today. Perhaps… this matter of examining the fortresses will be concluded by midday. We could spend the afternoon together if you like.”

“Well, if you have need of me, well, my brother will probably know where I am…” She curtseyed, and walked past him into the stables.

Tommern turned to look at Ser Arys. “Well,” he said. “That was…”

“Interesting?” suggested Ser Balon. A laugh burst free of his lips as the king walked past them and headed for his rooms.

Willem had brought Tommen’s armour, or at least the parts of it that he would need for the day; breastplate and braces and pauldrons. Under it, he wore a leather jack in Lannister crimson, and his cloak with the antlered clasp. He left his crown on the table. Willem gave him his longsword, which he hooked through his belt, though he declined a shield. Lastly he went to the stable and mounted his newly saddled courser, and took the horse a few gentle turns around the yard before riding to the cavernous entrance of the Lion’s Mouth, where he found four of his most stalwart captains waiting.

Robert Crakehall was the eldest, nearly seventeen and a man grown, with the shoulders and chest of an aurochs, and the startings of a black beard. His weapon of choice was a warhammer like King Robert’s, and his armour was almost too big to fit him. Ser Benedict Broom called him Smallboar in comparison to his elder cousin Lyle, the Strongboar, though it seemed likely that Robert would soon outgrow him. Tyg Sarsfield was the best archer among the Companions, keen-eyed and lanky-limbed. Today he wore a green cloak slashed with red, clasped by silver lions that had probably been a gift from Myrcella, for whom he acted as both squire and advisor. Next came Tymond Vance, heir to Wayfarer’s Rest in the Riverlands. Though technically a hostage of House Lannister privy to his father’s good behaviour, he was among the best swordsmen they had, and he had cut down no fewer than six men in the battle of the Tumblestone. And lastly, there was Lord Rollam Westerling, with seashells embroidered on his cloak and seashells on his plate and seashells on his helmet. There were other captains as well, from places as far and wide as Peckledon and Deep Den and Banefort, but these were the four that Tommen trusted above the rest.

The fivewere not alone, though. Around one hundred squires and pages of noble birth were present as well, a few ahorser but most on foot, along with near twice that number of potboys and grooms and stableboys, the sons of cooks and stewards and guardsmen. The lowest among us are no different from the highest, if you give them a chance and approach them with an open
Tommen was not sure who had told him that, but he was willing to make a good guess that it was Lady Margaery.

“We have a duty to complete,” Tommen told them once they’d greeted him. He looked to the rest of the Companions gathered in the Lion’s Mouth. “How many do we have?” He knew how to count armies, but the Companions were an unruly rabble.

“Should we get them to stand in line?” Rollam asked.

“No need,” said Tyg, “I’ve already counted. Two hundred and seventy-one, including us.”

*These two hundred and seventy-one will go to war, Tommen thought, but how many of them will return?* “We shouldn’t waste any time,” he said, jerking the reins of his horse. “Come on.”

Two hundred and seventy-one King’s Companions filed out of the Lion’s Mouth, crossing the stony bridge towards the city of Lannisport that King Tyrion the First had built out of red stone in the shadow of Casterly Rock. As they rode below the city walls the rain started up again, and by the time they got through the gate and over to the nearest barracks the clouds had turned black and the rain was coming down in sheets. “Maester Hayforth was right about the weather,” Rollam said.

“That’s because he’s supposed to be right,” said Smallboar. “Because he’s a maester.” There was no love lost between these two; Smallboar did not think that Rollam should be made a captain purely on the merit of his high birth.

“Well, let’s hope that the rain clears up before we march,” Rollam said.

“We won’t be marching until the rain clears up. Otherwise, how would we get anywhere?”

Rollam had no answer for that. “Is this the place?” he asked, pointing to the low brick building beside the city wall.

“I don’t know,” Smallboar replied sourly. “It has Lannister banners flying from it and there are men on the roof wearing Lannister armour. Are they Lannister men, do you think?”

The men were down from the roof by the time they dismounted. Their captain came out into the pouring rain, water dripping from the high peak of his helm. He glanced around, as though unsure which of them was the king. Tommen took a couple of steps forward. “You are Captain Forley?” he asked.

“Yes… Your Grace.” The captain bowed his head. “I am honoured to be in your presence.” The look on his face said anything but. “If it please Your Grace, we will show you to the ramparts.” He gestured towards the stairs. “This way, my lord.”

Tommen followed. “How long have you commanded here, Captain Forley?”

“Twelve years, Your Grace.” He was an old gruff soldier with a weathered face and closely cropped grey hair. “And I have served in the Lannister army for one-and-forty.”

_Nearly thrice as long as I have lived,_ Tommen thought. “I… I dare say that you have far more experience in war than I do. The Tumblestone was my first battle I cannot deny that I am no seasoned fighter. A… a green boy, I suppose.”

The captain shrugged. “Everybody has to start somewhere.”

*A wise young king would do well to listen to his counsellors on matters he knows nothing*
Tommen supposed that captains and commanders were his counsellors when it came to war. “Captain,” he said, “you know full well that this city is threatened. Should Stannis Baratheon march through the Golden Tooth and the Deep Den, men like you are all that will stand in his way if he lays siege to Lannisport. House Lannister and I are both very grateful for your service. I want you to understand… no, you deserve to know that.”

The captain gave another noncommittal nod. “We are on the wallwalk now,” he said, as though it were not blatantly obvious. “I think Your Grace will find these battlements are in good order.”

Tommen glanced to his left. A huge trebuchet sat atop the bastion tower, the arm positioned so that its payloads of stone would be launched out over the city walls. “Our catapults are all in good order, aren’t they?”

“They are, Your Grace,” said Captain Forley. “There are more of them on this side of the city. The land slopes upwards outside of the Lion Gate, you see, which would give Stannis a tactical advantage were he to set up camp there.”

“Can’t position our men on that hillrise?” Tommen asked, pointing to a grassy verge about eight hundred yards away, on the edge of the fog.

“Ser Addam and Captain Vylarr both thought it better to keep them inside the city walls should it come to battle,” the captain said, “and I am inclined to agree with them, my lord. It is the most likely place for Stannis to set up his camp, and—”

“There are a lot of trees, though. Won’t he be able to hide his army inside them, and use them to build siege machines?”

“We don’t have enough men to chop them all down, Your Grace.”

“I have nearly seven hundred Companions, and not all of them will be heading to the Golden Tooth. They will be willing to help your men in cutting down those trees.”

“As you say, Your Grace.” The captain turned his gaze away. “It seems a good idea. We could set up traps as well, but not too many, else Stannis might be encouraged to encamp himself somewhere else, and that would likely only confuse us.”

Tommen shrugged. “As I said, doubtless you understand this sort of thing better than I do.” He nodded back to the battlements, “so you will position our archers along here?”

Before Captain Forley could answer, Tyg jumped in. “The walls are near forty feet, I think. A good archer on here would be able to reach men coming down towards the gate from about four hundred yards out, or maybe more.”

The captain sighed. “A shame that we do not have more good archers, then.”

“Why not?” asked Tommen.

“Few men are trained how to use a crossbow well,” the captain explained to him, “and fewer still with longbows.”

“Crossbows are useless,” Tyg said pointedly, “too slow to load, and—”

The captain gave the Sarsfield squire a sharp look. “You are highborn and have no doubt been training with longbows your entire life, boy. A commoner lad of your age who joins the City Watch a week before his first battle likely has neither the strength nor the skill nor the practice to draw a
longbow and fire it accurately. If Stannis attacks the city at night as he did on the Blackwater, then we’ll have cold, nervous, frightened boys loosing more arrows at each other than at the enemy.”

Tyg did not argue. “Crossbows it is, then.”

“We have the advantage of being prepared,” said Tymond Vance. “A dozen oil traps outside the city gates could be used to destroy their rams when they get close, and under the cover of night, they might not even notice it until their siege machines are afire. A flaming arrow-”

“Best never to rely on flaming arrows, boy. Your books will tell you that in a siege they’ll work a treat, but all it takes is for one of your arrows to go astray, and the whole trap is spoiled in an instant. Might be they’ll fire their own arrows ahead to check for your pitch. No, that sort of thing is best boiled and thrown off the walls. Aye, and when the pitch is tipped, you’d best pray that their screams outnumber yours.”

“But how could they drop the pitch on themselves?” asked Tommen.

Captain Forley turned to him. “How many years do you have, Your Grace?”

“Four-and-ten. And a half. And a bit more than that.”

“Four-and-ten,” the captain said, “during any given battle, there are boys half your age among the ranks. Some are older lads determined to help their fathers; some have sneaked in without their mothers’ knowing, hoping for glory; some are orphans who can’t survive any other way. All are grubby children who’ve never seen a castle in their lives, have never eaten a full meal, have no clothes other than the rags on their backs. Some don’t have a place to sleep at night. Most of the time you never notice the urchins, but they’re always there. But one thing never changes: you never know their names. They’re just sons of someone else.

“Before the fighting begins, they shuffle into the armoury with the rest of the men, the terror writ plain upon their faces. Small as they are, they get shoved aside, and they’re left with the worst of the armament. Hauberks with oversized armholes, battered mail, broken pauldrons and greaves that should have been thrown away ten years ago, the occasional bits and pieces of scratched plate, helms they can’t see out of. Their weapons are swords without an edge, maces with the spikes missing, pikes that have rusted down to the handles, longbows with frayed strings that could break at any moment. Lost among the crowd, they head out onto the walls, their arms aching because their things are too heavy, their legs aching because they’ve walked so many miles and done so much hard work already, their stomachs aching because the garrison takes their share of the food. They’re frightened and they’re scared, but they keep going.

“They get pushed to the walls by commanders and captains who don’t care that their armour is falling apart, hard men who don’t care that these little boys are starving and have broken bones from where they’ve been bullied and pushed and beaten by bigger boys and bigger men. They’re scared, and they have tears in their eyes and terror in their hearts and knots of fear in their bowels. But they keep going, because the man who signed them up promised to put money in their pockets and food in their bellies.

“And then it begins. Brutal war, bloody war. They’re cold and shivering, and they’re not strong enough to hold the barrels of pitch, so they spill them all over themselves, and all over the ramparts, and they burn and they scream and they keep on burning and screaming. Their crossbows break and their quarrels splinter and some other boy gets afraid and misfires and his friend gets an arrow through the throat and he lies dying on the rampart with his life’s blood spilling out of him, with no one to comfort him as he slowly bleeds to death. And on the ground, these boys fight among masses of men who want to murder them, without ever having a reason. They get their skulls smashed so
their brains leak from their helms and they get stabbed through the bowels and their guts come spilling out like sausages and they try to shove them back in but they're already dying. Some man on their own side murders them in cold blood because they're getting in the way. Boys of twelve, eleven, ten, nine, they fight on both sides of the battlefield, and they end up killing each other, becoming murderers in their own right. They see men with their legs and their arms cut off and they see their friends dying all around them but they keep on fighting until they can fight no more because King Tommen's noble soldiers said that if they keep fighting, they'll get fed.

“Sometimes they lose. There are men who like to hurt little boys, to cut off fingers and toes and make them scream, and sometimes they like to use them for their pleasure if there are no women about, in terrible ways. Then they cut their throats, because boys aren’t worth their weight as prisoners, and throw them onto the corpse pile. The crows eat their eyes. And sometimes they win, but it isn’t worth it, because their brothers are dead and their best friends are dead and evil men try to hurt them all the same. And at the end of it all they go to their captains and say “you promised me bread, you promise me a bowl of stew, two silvers, just a copper penny”, the captain just says, “Fuck off,” because he didn’t enlist those street urchins. “Why should I help you? You’re just the son of someone else.” And then the boys disperse to their slums and they come back wanting for food and they fight in the next day’s battle and they die fighting, or they die of starvation in some back alley, throwing up their insides. Or they become like broken men themselves, rapists and murderers and cold-hearted killers. There is no hope for them otherwise. No hope.”

He turned to look at them with barely concealed malice in his eyes. “I was one of those boys once,” he said, “and it hardened me. I killed other children, because that was the only way to survive. I rose as high as I could, but I’ll never stand as high as you, Your Grace. So I ask you this; what type of king, what type of god, would allow us to live in a place like that?”

The one we’ve got, Tommen thought. Beyond the walls, the world was grey, and the rain had still not stopped. His heart had stillled, though, and he felt only gut-clenching, sickening horror. Some of those boys died at the Tumblestone. They died under my banner. They died so I could sit on a stupid metal chair. He bit his lip and remembered the Tumblestone, men and women and children hanging from gibbets on the riverbank because Lord Tywin said that a Lannister always paid his debts. But some debts cannot be paid.

They visited three more guard posts that morning, but found nothing quite so distressing, and nothing quite so true. When it was done, they rode back to Casterly Rock in solemn silence, reined their horses up in the stables, and went inside. Tommen had no time for Eleyna Westerling.

In his chambers, Willem was on hand to help Tommen out of his armour. The servants ran him a bath so that he could get the dirt of the road away from his skin. He spent a lot of the afternoon thinking about Myrcella.

You can give up on many people, he thought, but some of them have to stay. The more people you love, the stronger you are. A good king protects his smallfolk and his family. And I have to protect them in whatever way I can.

Then his thoughts drifted to Captain Forley, and what he had said. “I won’t let those broken boys be someone else’s sons,” Tommen told his reflection in the water. “I won’t.” He wasn’t sure how to change that, but surely it was worth trying.

The bathwater was cold by the time he had finished thinking, and the rain had started up again. He donned new garb for the evening, took up paper and pen alongside the royal seal, sat down behind his desk, and started to write. The words flowed easily, but his writing did not, and he had to start twice over before it was legible. His squire came in as he was finishing, bearing a platter of stewed
chicken with buttered greens. Willem craned his neck cautiously to look over the king’s shoulder. “My lord? Why are you writing a letter to—?”

Tommen glared at him. “You will speak not a word of this to anyone,” he said in his king voice, sealing the letter with a blob of crimson sealing wax. He thought about giving it to Willem, but it would be better to see it delivered himself, without even Maester Creylen’s intervention, if possible.

He was readying himself for bed when there came a knock at the door and his mother stepped inside. “Have you spoken with Myrcella?” she asked, approaching.

“I have,” said Tommen. “Yesterday. It is settled.”

Mother’s lips gave an odd little twist, but she did not say anything. “You’re both leaving Casterly Rock, then. I’ll be alone.”

“Only for a short time. I’ll return when the war is done.”

Queen Cersei advanced a few steps into the room. “Do you remember when you were little?” she asked, taking a taper from beside the hearth and poking the coals. “Strange to say, but you were the most difficult. Nearly…” She coughed quietly. “An easy birth, but afterwards I knew that I couldn’t go through it again. Both the physical strain and the emotional…”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She laughed quietly. “You were a baby. My baby. And I love you with all my heart, you know. But…” Mother stopped, took a breath, wandered over to a chair, almost in a daze, and sat. Ser Pounce leapt up into her arms, and she stroked his fur. “He’s getting big, isn’t he?” the queen said. “He was only a kitten when I gave him to you.”

“Yes.” Tommen moved to stand beside her, between the chair and the fire.

“As were you,” his mother said. “But times have changed. The world is full of bitter truths, Tommen. And one of them… you never love anything the way you love your firstborn child.”

“Joffrey.” He could not help but frown. “I’m sorry about him as well.”

“I know you are, sweetling. But sometimes our lament of the past gets in the way of the present. Joffrey… he was a… a bad child, I know that. But I loved him all the same. Is it terrible that love… can cause such blindness?” Queen Cersei put her hand in his. “You’re a good boy, though. You always have been. And… I have to keep you safe. I can’t do that on the battlefield, so…” She nodded to the doorway. “Ser Robert.”

The knight that entered the room was the biggest man Tommen had ever seen. He stood eight feet tall, and his arms and legs were like tree trunks. He wore silvered plate from head to toe, a red scarf wrapped under his gorget, and a massive halfhelm with only the tiniest eye-holes. A massive greatsword hung at his waist, though Tommen reckoned the knight would be able to wield it one-handed.

“Ser Robert Strong,” his mother said, “a little-known knight. He does not speak a word, having sworn a holy vow to not speak until all of Your Grace’s enemies are dead and the evil has been purged from the realm, but his bravery and skill are beyond legend, and he is unfalteringly loyal in his actions. He… he will go with you to the battlefield when you take the war to Stannis Baratheon.”

“The king is protected by his Kingsguard,” Tommen said.
“Of which you have but five. Jaime, Oakheart, Swann, Peckledon… and Loras Tyrell, if we are counting him.” She placed her hands on his shoulders. “Please, my son, in the name of the love you bear me, put Ser Robert in a white cloak before you leave for the Golden Tooth.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was never meant to reach 7000 words in length, but here we are. I have to say that (in my opinion) Captain Forley's monologue is probably the most powerful thing I've written for The Changing of Seasons, or at least up there with Tywin's realisation about Tommen in A Coat of Gold. It's a bit less personal to the major characters than that chapter, but I think that this is the fic's equivalent of Meribald's 'Broken Man' speech.

Sometimes as a fic writer you come across a chapter that you're really looking forward to writing. Sometimes your chapter is born out of necessity. 'Sons of Someone Else' is part of the latter category but I have to be honest and say that I loved it. There's a sort of unnerving humanity to Tommen's POV, and an underlying innocence. His intentions are infinitely good, but unfortunately he has little concept of hindsight, and no ability to carry out his plans. I suppose that in a way, he's the idealist in all of us.

This is our wrap-up chapter for the first part of the Casterly Rock arc. After this, everyone's preparing for war in the West, which is a very different, gritty storyline with some elements of Robb's war from ACOK, only this time we're focusing on the Lannisters instead of the Starks. There are going to be a couple of POV chapters in Stannis's camp as well.

Once again, a massive thanks to all my readers and reviewers. Next up, a major POV character who we've not seen yet in TSK.
Chapter Summary

“Serve. Protect. Obey. Simple vows for a simple man.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THE DUTY-BOUND SON

“My father has sent me to retrieve Ser Barristan,” Quentyn told them.

The guards only looked confused. They do not know me, the prince thought. He had spent so long away from Sunspear that even the oldest members of his father’s household looked upon him as a stranger. If I do not know their faces, why should they know mine?

“Prince Doran has sent me,” he said.

The two men shared a brief look, almost brief enough that Quentyn did not notice it. The older one nodded uncertainly. “My lord prince,” he said. “I beg your pardon.” He stepped away from the door and turned the key in the lock.

Ser Barristan Selmy did not lack for comforts. The room had a featherbed, camp chairs and a cushioned windowseat. A table was laid with a cyvasse board, and a bowl of fruit – blood oranges and peaches. And though there were bars on the windows, they still looked over the palace gardens, beyond the walls, past the shadow city to the sparkling sea.

The old knight stood watching the sunrise. He wore a pale grey tabard and sandy brown breeches, and dark cowhide boots. His smell was that of a guest rather than of a prisoner. It was a few moments before Ser Barristan turned to face Quentyn, fixing him with a piercing blue gaze. “Has Prince Doran sent you to retrieve me?”

“Yes,” Quentyn replied. “I am his son. Prince Quentyn.”

“I know,” Ser Barristan said. “You have your father’s look. And his temperament, from what I have seen.”

He is unimpressed, the prince thought, but why should he be anything else? Quentyn was no true knight; he had fought no battles. “My father requests an audience, ser.”

“Have you any news of my squire, Edric?” Ser Barristan asked. “I hope that the boy has been gently
treated."

Quentyn did not know. “You will have to ask my father.”

Ser Barristan came closer, with cool intelligence in his hawkish gaze. “You are dressed for war,” he observed.

That was true. Quentyn wore a leather breastplate over his padded jacket, with the Martell sun embossed in bronze. Pauldrons shaped like scorpions guarded his stocky shoulders. Around his waist hung a belt of thick red leather, with his trusty longsword hooked through one of the clasps. His tunic hung loosely around his legs, over rust-coloured breeches. “Yes,” he admitted.

“Who are you fighting?” the knight asked.

Quentyn was not sure whether he was supposed to tell Ser Barristan the truth. But he had hesitated too long to lie. “The Reachmen,” he said, “my uncle means to lead a host up the Prince’s Pass towards Nightsong and Blackhaven.”

“Connington has an army?” Ser Barristan raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know. Queen Daenerys told him to root out the Lannisters, I think—"

The old knight’s eyes widened. “Daenerys is queen? What became of Aegon?”

“Oh. You did not know.” Quentyn felt stupid – how could he have known? He has been confined to a tower for all this time.

“King Aegon and Queen Daenerys agreed to sit the Iron Throne and rule together.”

Ser Barristan looked worried, which Quentyn did not understand. The old knight ought to be glad. “You will probably come on the march with us,” he said, “That must be why my father has sent me. And your squire will come too, I suppose. A knight should have a squire.”

“A great many knights would disagree,” Ser Barristan muttered.

Together they walked past the two guards and out through the door. “I haven’t stretched my legs properly in days,” the old knight admitted, “nor have I swung a sword in earnest. If you plan on taking me to war with you, I fear that I would prove quite useless. It would be wiser to return me to King’s Landing. I will be more helpful there.”

“You will have to ask my father,” Quentyn said.

Ser Barristan gave him a pointed look. “Is this your first war?”

Again, there was no use in lying, not to Barristan the Bold. “Yes. I helped expel some bandits from Lord Yronwood’s lands, but I haven’t yet fought in a real battle.” Or killed a man. Or been with a woman. I am no true knight, no true man.

They found his father in the private garden outside his apartments, sitting among the orange trees. A blanket of soft felted wool covered his gout-stricken limbs. To one side stood Areo Hotah, stroking the hilt of his ash-and-iron longaxe. At his father’s other shoulder was Prince Oberyn, dressed similarly to his nephew in leather and light steel, though he wore spear across his back rather than a sword. His armour bore the embellishment of a dozen bronze-and-iron snakes worked into the metal.

The old knight bowed his head before the Prince of Dorne. “My prince. I—”
Prince Doran held up a hand. “No doubt you will beg my pardon and ask that I allow you to travel to King’s Landing to meet with your queen. I am afraid that I must refuse that request. This war is about bringing men together behind the Targaryen king and queen – I am sure Quentyn has told you about the situation – and men will stand united behind heroes such as Barristan the Bold.”

“I am no hero,” said he who was renowned across all Seven Kingdoms as a great hero. “Just one man, a knight of the Queensguard trying to do my duty.”

Prince Doran nodded. “My daughter Arianne leaves Sunspear today,” he said sadly. “She sails to King’s Landing, to wed King Aegon, her cousin, and to bring the realm together. No doubt you would have your uses in King’s Landing too, ser, but I think that your skills would be put to better use on the battlefield. Who better to hoist Queen Daenerys’s standard than the Lord Commander of her Queensguard? Who better to convince the world that we have great strength in our leadership?”

Prince Doran’s eyes moved to Quentyn. “You have done your task well, Quentyn, but Ser Barristan and I must discuss some private matters alone. Leave us for a few minutes, if you would. Say your farewells to Arianne. And you too, Oberyn.”

“I am your most stalwart councillor—” Oberyn began.

“And yet you cannot know everything. Some secrets are made to be just that. Go now, with Quentyn. Hotah is all I need for protection, and I trust him not to spread my words.”

Sighing, Prince Oberyn laid a hand on his nephew’s shoulder. “Come,” he said, half-pulling Quentyn away from them. They went round a corner, and then Prince Doran and Ser Barristan were gone and forgotten. “Your father is still angry with me,” Oberyn said.

“Why?”

He sighed. “Doran will always find something to complain about. My speech at the feast favoured Aegon too heavily, apparently. For a co-rule to work we must maintain our distance from both monarchs, or so your father says. But Arianne is not marrying Daenerys, nor is she my sister’s son. I think it is only natural that I would harbour a slight bias towards my nephew.” He gave a pointed smile. “What do you say to that, as the future prince of Dorne?”

“I will not be the prince of Dorne until my father dies,” Quentyn reminded him.

“You may be waiting a very long time. I would not be surprised if Doran lived to be a hundred years old, though he will never stop complaining in all that time. Myself… well, such a long life is not for me. The day that my legs and arms turn frail, I’m going to go to Braavos, spit on one of the bravos, and get a sword rammed through my gut. A good way to die.”

Quentyn scowled. “You want to die on purpose?”

“I am not a patient man.” Oberyn shrugged. “The day it takes me more than a minute to get from my bed to my breakfast table is the day that I’ll be willing to die. Age does a man no favours. Luckily, you are on the right side of five-and-twenty.” He grinned. “Make the most of your life while you can. Women, war, wine, whatever you please. Now, where will we find your sister?”

“Arianne will be readying her horse,” Quentyn said. “At the stables.”

“I seem to remember that you love horses, nephew. Why not saddle your own mount while we are there?”

Quentyn groaned. “I will do that later,” he said.
“Will you? The courtyard will only grow more and more crowded. If you want to saddle your steed quietly, best do it now, while only Arianne and I are watching.” The smirk never left his uncle’s face. Of course, they were thinking of the same thing: the time when an unruly destrier had gotten too much for Quentyn and had nearly kicked him in the face in front of half the Dornish court. In Dorne, a man was judged by his reputation, and for a time they’d taken to calling Quentyn ‘Horseface’, because of where the horse had tried to plant its hooves. Fortunately, that nickname had not stuck.

Arianne was not alone. Her close courtiers had gathered around her like flies of a hundred colours. The Sand Snakes were there as well. Tyene, as the least confrontational of the Snakes, would be accompanying Arianne to court, as would sixteen-year-old Elia Sand. Meanwhile Nym and Obara would follow their father to war in the Prince’s Pass. Obara’s hand snaked around the ashen shaft of her spear as he watched, and Quentyn could see two daggers in Nym’s belt and no less than two more hidden on her person.

While most of the Dornishmen Quentyn had seen today were dressed for war, Drey Dalt wore a tunic of lemon yellow silk, and Ser Daemon Sand a studded brigandine of red leather with an overgarment of pale cream. Only Ser Gerold Dayne had donned anything even remotely resembling armour, and he sheathed a longsword in his swordbelt as well. Quentyn saw that the pommel was made in the shape of a sun, in white enamel, so perhaps it was made to imitate his house’s legendary longsword, Dawn.

“Arianne.” His sister greeted him with unexpected warmth, spreading her arms wide, then moved on to offer the same courtesy to their uncle. Prince Oberyn fell in beside his daughters, so he was left with Arianne. “Did Father send you to come see me off?” she asked.

“No,” Quentyn lied. “I came by choice. We… we are siblings, after all.”

Arianne’s eyes drifted to the clouds. She is remembering Trystane again, he thought. Eventually her gaze returned to him, and a small smile twisted her lips. “We are. And we have to trust each other. This will be an adventure for both of us, I suppose. You to war, and me to my marriage…”

“I… I hope that he is good to you,” Quentyn said. A brother was supposed to protect his sister. Sometimes the brothers of queens even took up a white cloak and joined the Kingsguard. But he was not enough of a man or enough of a knight for that.

“I hope he is good to me as well,” she replied.

Tyene Sand came to him next. “You will be going, then? I suppose we shall meet again in the capital.”

“Hopefully, someone will have made a man of him by then,” said Nym, who had appeared from nowhere. “Perhaps one of the Fowler twins, or Spotted Sylva, or perhaps I shall have to take responsibility for Quentyn myself.” She smiled. “Don’t worry, cousin. I know that it is my raucous behaviour that concerns you.”

“Raucous?” Tyene laughed. “We found you with the Yronwood boy only this morning.”

Quentyn was horrified. “Cletus? You… you bedded – he wouldn’t—” He shook his head and groaned. “Of course he would.”

“Was that his name?” Nym said. “I never really asked.” She squeezed Quentyn’s shoulder. “Fear not, I know you, Quent.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “You want the good girl, but you need the bad p—.”
Tyene slapped her on the arm. “None of that talk.” Quentyn used their momentary distraction to find his way back to his sister. He managed to stammer his way through some small talk with her until Elia Sand returned.

“Well,” Arianne said, reining up to leave. “We had best be off, Quentyn. I would ask you to give father my love, but I have already seen him and I would not want to worry him any more.”

Ser Daemon Sand climbed up beside her. “My lady. We are ready to leave, as it pleases you.”

“It does please me.” Arianne turned her horse about. She smiled at Quentyn, opened her mouth as though to speak, then closed it again, and turned away. Ser Daemon rode out through the gate first, then Gwyneth Yronwood, Valena Toland and Elia Sand, followed by Arianne and the rest of her guardsmen. Ser Gerold Dayne stared at Quentyn with his dark purple eyes, holding his gaze for an uncomfortably long time until he disappeared.

Prince Oberyn and his two eldest daughters remained, talking as Quentyn saddled his horse with much care and timidity in the next stall. “With luck, they will find the sea journey swift and easy,” Obara Sand said. “And with more luck, Arianne will not be left in a loveless marriage as Elia was.”

“There was love there once,” Oberyn replied, “but one woman changed that. As did Rhaegar’s mutterings of prophecy. He liked to think that he knew what he was saying when he spoke of the song of ice and fire, but prophecy is always something rich and confusing and all but indecipherable. Only a fool would waste their time trying to work out what it means.”

“Was Rhaegar a fool, then?” asked Nym.

“I am still not really sure what Rhaegar was. The simplest word to use would be mad, but he was never that. No, Rhaegar was… different.”

“Let us hope that his son is not mad too,” Obara said.

Quentyn felt shadows looming over him, and turned to see none other than Gerris Drinkwater and Archibald Yronwood. He was thankful that Cletus was not there, for he was not certain that he could have looked his best friend in the eye after what Nym had reported.

“Has she kicked you in the face yet?” Arch japed, nodding at the horse. He and Drink were clad in armour similar to Quentyn’s, though theirs was a little less ill-fitting and considerably less overstated in terms of its embellishment. And why should they hide behind bronze and shiny paint? They have nothing to be ashamed of.

“Can’t talk too long, Quent,” said Drink. “If we’re to be leaving in two hours, I’ll be short for time to seduce and fuck that Fowler girl.”

“You have unrealistically high expectations,” Arch said.

“And I always end up with unexpectedly good results.” Drink smiled. “Your father sent us to fetch you,” he explained, “or rather, Hotah did.” He nodded to Arch. “The Big Man here was surprised to find a man bigger than him.”

“Hotah is bigger than most men,” Quentyn said, “that’s why he makes a good bodyguard.”

Gerris scowled. “Did you just make a joke?”

“It was a shit joke,” said Arch. “Come on.” He dragged Gerris and Quentyn along behind him. “I can’t be arsed to waste any more of my time with you two.”
Gerris’s continued jokes felt increasingly more and more hollow as they made their way back through the palace. By the time they reached Prince Doran’s solar, Quentyn wanted nothing more than for him to shut up.

His father received him quietly, without pomp or ceremony. Only Areo Hotah shared the garden with them. “What happened to Ser Barristan?” Quentyn asked.

“He has agreed to my plan,” his father said. “Oddly, it was the welfare of his squire that concerned him most. He needed not fear, though. Edric Storm has not been hurt, though being Robert Baratheon’s son may place him in danger if he comes up against any large groups of Dornishmen.” He raised an eyebrow.

“If—if I see anything, I’ll… try to keep it in check,” Quentyn stammered.

“You sound uncertain of the fact. Uncertain of yourself, truth be told. That will not suit, not for a future prince of Dorne.”

“It’s nothing, Father.”

“You used to harbour no concerns about spilling your worries to me when you were younger.”

“I’m a man grown,” Quentyn said, his voice strained.

Prince Doran smiled. “And yet you do not seem to believe that yourself. I am proud of you, Quentyn, remember. Arianne might be more diplomatically suited and Trystane might have been bolder than you, but I see myself in you most of all. Perhaps that isn’t something to feel pride for, but I think it is.” His gouty knuckles reached out, taking Quentyn’s wrist with surprising strength. “I am proud of you,” his father said again, never breaking his gaze. “My son.”

His father straightened in his chair. “There is a strange irony here, in that you would inherit my lands and title anyway were we not in Dorne, and if we were not in Dorne I daresay you would have done quite well in the task of ruling. But that is not the case, and we must adapt to the circumstances, as birds adapt to the coming of winter. Dornishmen will not follow you because you are my son, and some may reject the proposal outright, but know that this was always my intent. Part of the promise of fire and blood. Had Robert’s Rebellion not come about Arianne would have wed Aegon long ago, making you heir apparent of Dorne as a result. I suppose it was always your destiny, Quentyn. And I think you can succeed in the task. You are selfless already, though you do not know it, and you can be strong. The skills of ruling are specific, but its principles are not so difficult to understand.” He nodded to his guard captain. “Tell him, Hotah.”

In the corner, Areo Hotah stirred from his eternal guardianship. “Simple vows for a simple man, my prince. Serve. Protect. Obey.”

“Just so,” said Prince Doran, “you must serve Dorne’s wants, Quentyn; you must obey her people, till your dying breath; you must protect her land in heart and body. “So remind me now, Quentyn. What must you do?”

He took a breath. “Serve. Protect. Obey.” And that was all he knew.
Admittedly, this was quite a slow chapter, and not much ACTUALLY happened, but I think it was necessary setup. It probably steals the title of Worst Chapter of 2016 from 'Debts to Pay' (Chapter 26), but I like writing Quentyn's POV and from the reviews I guess that you guys also like Quentyn.

Also, if anyone is interested, Arianne will have POV chapters, but not until she gets to King’s Landing.

Next up: Bran, unless I get my Willas chapter finished first.
Willas rubbed his palms together. “Put some more wood on the fire,” he told his squire. “I’m getting chilly.”

Erron bent to his task, throwing splinters of greenish-brown kindling and scraps of red bark onto the coals. The wood sizzled when it met the flames, and sparks leapt. “More wine, my lord?” Willas nodded; his squire bent to fill his cup.

Erron Hightower was studious to a fault. He spent so long reading his books that his skin was starting to look pale and wan. “Are you certain you would not rather be outside enjoying the last of the sun?” Willas asked him for the tenth time.

“No, my lord. The sun might be shining, but it’s still cold.”

But after today, we do not know when the sun will come back. His grandmother had said as much when she had left for King’s Landing. White wings bring winter tidings, he thought.

Willas smiled at his squire. “As you will.” He nodded to the heavy tome Erron had set before him. “That looks ponderous.”

“Most books look ponderous, my lord. It’s what’s inside them that really matters.”

“Mmm.” Willas took a long swallow of his wine. “My mother always told me never to judge a book by its cover.” He ought to have taken that advice when it came to Sansa Stark. Lady Olenna had mentioned that he might have difficulties, yes, but he did not think that his bride would have fled by the time he woke from his wedding night.

“You would never have thought that there could be so many different types of moth,” Erron mumbled. “Look, my lord.” He pushed the book across to Willas, pointing to one of Maester Darwyn’s illustrations. “In the cities their wings turn dark; because of all the soot that the forges and furnaces produce, they can hide better from predators when the wings are black, whereas in the country—”

No longer listening, Willas flipped another page in his own book, taking care not to break the spine of the crusty old tome in half. A Treatise on Rebellion by Maester Ulfric ought to have been at least
mildly thought-provoking, but in his sour mood it seemed one of the dullest volumes Willas had ever laid eyes upon.

With a sigh, he stretched his legs and his toes to relieve some of the pain in his leg that could come about if he stayed still for too long. A sharp stinging ache lanced through it, but Willas shook his head and took a long sip of wine to soothe the hurt.

“My lord?” His eyes fell on Talla Tarly, standing beside the table. “I have a letter for you. It’s from Sam.”

She was not alone. Willas recognised the girl standing beside her as Samwell’s companion from the Citadel, but it was a moment before he remembered her name.

Gilly. For the gillyflower. “Lady Talla,” he said, “and, uh, Lady Gilly.”

“Don’t call me ‘lady’,” Gilly said, looking much aggrieved. “I’m a mother, not a lady.” And truth be told, she did not look very much like a lady, in an ill-fitting dress that was threatening to swallow her.

“Well, Lord Willas can hardly go around calling you ‘mother’,” Talla said. “Might we sit with you?”

“Oh.” Willas moved his inkpot, books and papers down to the end of the table and shifted across the bench, forcefully closing Erron’s own book. His cousin looked up irritably, then saw the two ladies and turned a little red. “My… uh…”

“This is my cousin and squire, Lord Erron Hightower of Oldtown,” Willas told them. “Erron, this is Lady Talla Tarly and her companion Gilly.”

“We’ve met before,” said Talla. “We danced at the—” She stopped herself abruptly.

“I am not averse to the mere mention of the wedding, you know,” Willas said. “What happened was unfortunate, but I should have expected it. Lady Sansa never held any affection for me.”

“I think it’s wrong for a man to make a woman marry him,” Gilly blurted out.

“Hush now, Gilly.” Talla frowned reproachfully. “You have to be careful when saying such things, must I remind you?”

“She is right, though,” Willas admitted. “Then again, I didn’t really want the betrothal either. All things considered, it could have only ended poorly.”

“All the same, I am sorry, my lord,” Talla said.

“Your pity would be better spent elsewhere.” He gave her a small, sad smile. “Might I see the letter from Sam? I think his words might cheer me.”

Talla drew it out from her sleeve and passed it across. Willas broke the seal with a steady hand and laid the parchment before him. It was far too long for him to read at the moment, so he only skimmed it.

Ser Willas, he read.

_I hope this finds you well… I am in Volantis, having travelled from Oldtown aboard the_
Windskater… trying to find out about the knights of the nightingale… prince of the vulture… lady of the phoenix… if you find anything, send word to Lord Commander Jon Snow at Castle Black… Euron Greyjoy may pose a danger to you and him both… he has the Horn of Winter, which could bring down the Wall and let the Others through… he is still alive, I think… you should take precautions… dragonglass arrowheads and Valyrian steel swords… wish you good fortune in the wars to come…

Regards,

Samwell Tarly

“You can tell your brother not to write so pompously, for a start,” Willas said. “I am his friend, not his liege lord.”

“In a different world, you might have been,” said Talla. “If Sam had never left Horn Hill, and if your lord father were—”

“I’m glad that Sam left Horn Hill,” Gilly interrupted, “else I would still have been with my father when the mutineers came. It was Sam who saved me. None of the others spared me a second look.”

“Mutineers?”

“From the Night’s Watch,” she explained. “When they came to my father… came to Craster’s Keep… they killed the Old Bear, and they took the other women. I don’t know their names, ser, or what happened to them… unless they stopped with the sacrifices—”

“Gilly,” Talla admonished.

But Willas’s curiosity had gotten the better of him, and so had his squire’s. “Sacrifices?” Erron asked. “Blood sacrifices?”

Gilly nodded. “His boys… he gave them to the white walkers.”


“They’re not stories!” Gilly shouted so loudly that the candle flame threatened to gutter out. “If they’re stories, then what was it that came for my baby in the night?” Her knuckles turned white as she clenched the table. “What?”

Willas looked down at the letter, then back up at Gilly, sweet and unasumming. “I don’t know, my lady,” he answered on Erron’s behalf. “But this is something that would be very interesting to hear more about.” He nudged his cousin. “There you are, Erron. Something for you to read up on.”

“That’s why we haven’t gone back to Horn Hill yet,” said Talla. “Gilly wanted to look in the library for books about… the white walkers. If what she says is true—”

“Your brother warns me the same, Lady Talla.” Willas waved the letter at her. “The cold winds are rising, and the dead march with them. It does sound like something out of a story… but I trust Sam, and I am inclined not to discredit his words. Perhaps I should—”

“Willas.” Behind Erron’s shoulder stood Loras. He had led the efforts to find Sansa and bring her
back to Highgarden for the first few days, until Lady Olenna had recalled him to Highgarden ahead of her departure.

“Loras,” he said. “Does Father have need of me?”

“He’s holding a war council.”

Willas sighed inwardly, and folded Sam’s letter into a neat square. “I will not be able to help him.”

“You should come all the same,” Loras said. “We may discuss your wife’s whereabouts, among other things. And if you are to act as the castellan when Father rides to war, you might do well to consult with your advisors.”

“I have acted as the castellan before.”

“I helped Margaery make a cake once. That does not make me a cook.”

Loras’s explanation was irrelevant, but Willas decided not to confront him on it. He is angry enough as it stands. No one seemed to know who he was angry with, but no one really wanted to ask. “Very well.” Willas closed his book, drained the last of his wine and stood.

Loras led him down the library stairs and along the wallwalk. In one of the gatehouse towers, Captain Igon Vyrwel was teaching a pair of green recruits how to man a scorpion. Down in the bailey, Ser Raynald Ashford was showing a crowd of squires through their steps against straw-and-wood dummies. Two of Lord Mace’s knights fought a vicious bout in a shaded area of the courtyard; a clangour of steel filled the air as blades bit against boiled leather hauberks and each other.

“Maester Lomys says that Garlan could be back in the training yard by the end of this week,” Willas said.

“I know,” Loras replied. “I was there when he told him. While you—”

Willas scowled. “We can’t go blaming each other for every little thing. I know that you’re angry with me—”

Suddenly Loras grabbed him by the arm. “You’re damn right I’m angry with you. For a time we didn’t even know if Garlan would ever walk again. His family… Willas, his children aren’t even a year old; they need our support. And Margaery… she’s lost out on her marriage not once or twice, but thrice now – have you actually asked her how she feels? Of course you haven’t. And Mother is a mess after all the preparations that went into the wedding; she worries about you beyond reason. And in the meantime you and Grandmother spend your time gallivanting about making plots. Yes, I am angry with you.”

“I will not argue with you, Loras.”

“You will, unless you want to be known as a coward as well.”

Willas sighed heavily. “I know what it means to be crippled, better than almost everyone. Sometimes… it is nice to have a little space, rather than to have everyone crowding around your bed every hour of the day. Leonette and her children are my family as well as Garlan’s, and rest assured, I have been checking in on them from time to time. As for Mother… I cannot help Mother, but in time Father will calm her or she will do it herself. And how exactly am I plotting with Grandmother when I haven’t seen her since she left?”

Loras knew that he was defeated, but was too proud to admit it. And so they walked the rest of the
Their father and their brother were both at the council, as were Ser Horas Redwyne, Ser Parmen Crane, and the lords Merryweather and Rowan. A few lesser lords made up the numbers. Garlan was leaning over a table of maps and charts when they came in, while Lord Mace sat behind his desk inspecting a table strewn with wooden markers. Heavy green drapes shaded the war room from the outside world.

“You look busy,” Willas said.

Garlan did not look up. “Preparing for war is not easy work.”

“It will be war, then? For certain?”

His brother gave a half-hearted shrug. “We have no choice now, what with Prince Oberyn’s lancers riding up the Prince’s Pass as we speak. He will likely head for Nightsong first. It is in the demesne of Lord Connington, but Lord Foote is bannerman to House Lannister.”

“I trust that we will not be sacrificing good men to preserve Lannister lands?” Loras said.

Lord Mace said, “We won’t, though the Rock will be most displeased by it. What was it you were saying, Garlan?”

No doubt Garlan had explained this a dozen times before. The words came out as if learned them by rote. “We will ride out only if they cross our border. Starpike will be their first target. Lord Peake is off with Randyll Tarly’s army to the southwest, and the castle is weakly defended.”

“We should still ride out to meet with Tarly,” said Lord Rowan.

“I would advise against that,” Willas said. “Lord Randyll has not responded to any of my ravens. I fear that he may have betrayed us.” Which makes another problem to deal with.

Ser Horas Redwyne had flocked to the table now. “Wasn’t Lord Randyll claiming dominion over the entirety of the Reach?”

“He was, but we still hold the Reach,” said Garlan.

“For now,” Willas muttered. He could see why the war council was incapable of getting anything done; half of its members seemed completely oblivious of what was going on outside Highgarden’s walls.

Loras started. “If he is backed by the Lannisters—”

“He is almost certainly backed by the Lannisters,” Willas replied.

“I’ll wager that the Imp has something to do with Tarly’s claims,” said their father. “He was not kind to us in the capital after Lord Tywin left to go to war. He and Tarly could have had a deal… plotting against his own father, even—”

“If the Imp is plotting anything, Grandmother will send word of it once she reaches King’s Landing,” said Garlan. “For now, we have to contend with problems closer to home.”

Lord Merryweather spoke up. “So it would be foolish to meet Tarly in the field?

“Aye,” said Ser Parmen Crane, who looked as bored by the proceedings as Willas and Garlan. “But if we could encourage him to parley instead—”
“We hold Tarly’s wife and daughters,” Mathis Rowan reminded them.

Lord Mace shook his head. “We will not use women and children as hostages.”

“If it is a war, we will have no choice.” Willas liked it no more than anyone else, but it was the bitter truth.

Mathis Rowan said, “My lord, I doubt that Randyll will care for his wife and daughters anyway. It is only the welfare of his son—”

Garlan interrupted, “If Tarly has turned his cloak, he will not remain idle outside our walls. Fifteen thousand men will need food, water, and entertainments of a sort. He will not be averse to pillaging and plundering. Little better than ironborn reavers.”

“He would not dare,” said Father, in all his indignant good-hearted stupidity.

“I am sorry to say it, Father, but he certainly would.”

“Let us not be too hasty here. If Tarly comes to the walls, I will parley with him. It may be that our fears are misguided.”

They aren’t, Willas knew. But he let his father delude himself. “Aye… let us hope.”

“There is little that we can do for now,” Lord Rowan said. “We should send out scouts to get the measure of Lord Randyll’s army… and if they do not come back, then we will know the truth. Elsewise, we should prepare Highgarden’s defences, against Tarly or the Dornishmen.”

“How many fighting men do we have?” asked Willas. “Not old men and boys, but seasoned men who can fight in battle?”

Only Garlan knew. “More than Tarly, thank the gods, but half of them are ranged north and south of the river, a week from here or more. There is no word from Lady Oakheart yet, so perhaps she is with Lord Randyll.”

“Her son Ser Arys is of King Tommen’s Kingsguard,” Loras reminded them.

Lord Merryweather said, “And we are King Tommen’s bannermen.”

“For now,” murmured Loras.

Aye, Willas thought, for now.

The rest of the council was so uneventful that he could have slept through it. When it finally ended the sun was setting and the snow had started to fall in earnest. Willas left quickly before his father decided to hold him back.

Hopefully, Erron would have remembered to leave the library to light a fire in his chambers. But not even the Seven themselves can take that boy away from his book.

At the end of one corridor stood a stone effigy of Garth Greenhand, smiling down at him with a basket of flowers in one hand and a book in the other. His eyes gleamed like rusted emeralds, and his stony skin was cracked and grey with age. The Seven might not be able to stop Erron from reading, Willas thought, but they can stop me from worrying.

Willas had never been devout. He had not visited the sept in two years, and even then he hadn’t actually believed anything that he’d said, or truly thought about what he was saying.
Indeed, he barely remembered what the sept looked like until he went inside. Here in Highgarden, the gods were found in a place far more grandiose than was surely necessary. Seven stained-glass windows were decorated with scenes from the Andal religion, while tapestries showed images of builders and septons and more than a few maesters, all in righteous prayer.

The place was empty save for Willas and a single piebald septon. He made his way to the Father’s altar and went down on his knees.

He had barely started to mutter the names of the Seven when the septon’s shadow passed over him. “Would you like a candle, my lord?”

Willas shrugged. “If you think that it a good idea. It has been a long while since I last prayed.”

“Did you lose your faith?” the septon asked, with only kindness in his tone.

“No. I had… other commitments."

“The Seven have other commitments too,” the septon lectured him, “To each and every man, woman and child on this earth. Yet they are always there for you when you need them, my lord. The Seven are there to guide us.”

“And how would they guide me?”

“That depends on your circumstances.”

“You know my circumstances.”

The septon sat down on a simple stone bench. “I am only a humble servant of the gods, but I have seen many like you, my lord. You are far from the first to see the world with a cynical eye. You are far from the first to do anything.” He lit a candle with a taper and passed it to Willas, who placed it down before the altar. “The ancestors who walked before us were full of brave new ideas, but the ones that exist now only came into being only because of the strong conviction of those who created them. As the Crone told us, a man needs perseverance and self-belief if he is to succeed in the world, my lord. And I think if you can find those…” He went, still smiling that smile.

The candle flickered through a hundred incandescent shades of yellow. Willas gazed through the flame, and up into the Father’s stone eyes. May the Father judge me justly, he thought, only half-ironically. May the Mother have mercy on my soul, and may the Maiden keep the virtues of Highgarden safe. May the Smith make our weapons and our walls strong, may the Warrior give us courage, and may the Crone give us wisdom and knowledge to light the way, and may she keep Grandmother safe in the capital. And may the Stranger not murder us all in our beds tonight.

After, he found himself outside his mother’s rooms, not knowing quite why he’d had such a sudden fit of conscience. “I am sorry,” he told her, “but you need to stop worrying yourself about the wedding.”

Lady Alerie frowned. “She was your wife, Willas…” she said slowly, “and she left you. It is for you, my boy, that I—”

“Sansa has done nothing wrong,” he reminded her. “We made a mistake too. We forgot that she has a family in Riverrun as well. As someone who loves his family dearly, I can understand that… she has not seen her brother in two years, Mother.”
Lady Alerie stopped. And swallowed. And nodded. Willas continued, “The marriage was... well, consummated, so we are still bound by that. I have sent a letter to Lord Edmure Tully telling him that she is likely on her way north, so he will receive her instead of someone who wants to do her harm. Hopefully in time Sansa will repay the debt.” He gripped his mother’s hand.

“I hope you are right, Willas,” she said, “I hope with all my heart.”

I hope so too, thought Willas, as he made his way back across the castle. He was fond of Lady Sansa, though not necessarily as a wife. Regardless of what happens, I hope we can still be good friends.

Inside his chambers he was met with two surprises. Firstly, Erron had returned, and the hearth was lit. Secondly, he was not alone: Margaery sat beside him, listening as he read. “…Garth was probably lying, of course; you can’t just make roses bloom in winter because you want them to.”

“You never know,” Margaery replied. “They say that there used to be a lot more magic in Garth’s time.”

“Well,” said Erron, “if Garth lived alongside Brandon the Builder, and if Brandon spoke truly about the cairns of dragonglass, then—”

“I think that’s enough mystical debate for one evening,” Willas said from the doorway. “Erron, go down to the kitchens and bring me my supper. When you’re back, you can tell us all about dragons, or whatever it is that you’re discussing.”

“It was—”

“My supper first.” Willas sat down in the chair opposite Margaery. All the while the fire flickered, its capering tongues reflected in the darkness of the window-pane.

“I almost wish you didn’t send him away,” she said when they were alone.

“Almost?” Willas helped himself to the wine.

“Well, he manages to be both boring and interesting at the same time,” his sister said, “not unlike you, actually.”

“Was that a compliment?” Willas said sarcastically.

Margaery sought to change the subject. “It’s snowing,” she told him.

He nodded. “The Starks were right. Winter has come.”

“Do you remember the last winter, Willas?”

“Of course.”

“I do. But not much of it. I was only five or six at the time. But I remember the few weeks when we actually had snow, instead of it just being cold. We threw snowballs at the guardsmen when they came passing, and built snow soldiers along the battlements.

A soft smile twisted his lips. “I was probably in Oldtown, wasn’t I?”

“Some of the time, yes. But when you came home you always played with us.” Margaery squeezed his hand. “And we made bigger snowcastles that Garlan and Loras ever did.” She smiled. “All of you have your merits, and I love you all the same, but you’ve always been the brother that I turn to
with my troubles, Willas.”

And here is the root of it, he thought, and squeezed her hand back. “What troubles you now?”

“We both know that Sansa leaving was not your fault,” she said. “She wanted to return to her family. In Riverrun.”

“Maybe I could have taken her,” Willas considered. “But we shouldn’t dwell on that.”

“You couldn’t have done anything, anyway. Once you got her with child, then there would be all manner of excuses that meant Sansa would never leave Highgarden.” She paused. “But the strange thing is that… if I were in her place, away from my family in an unfamiliar castle, I might have done the same, given the opportunity.”

She took a breath. “And that makes me think… this new war we’re starting… what is the point of it? Even if we do manage to take Casterly Rock, how many families will we tear apart with our warmongering? How many of the smallfolk will lose fathers and sons and brothers? We are lucky to have escaped unscathed thus far, Willas. But our luck will not hold forever. The War of the Five Kings tore the Seven Kingdoms to pieces and left only a feast for crows. And now our ambition is only making more and more corpses. Our words are growing strong… but are we?”

Willas scowled. “What would you have me do?”

“Make peace with Casterly Rock and King’s Landing alike. Let Sansa return to her family, and build bridges rather than burning them.” From her sleeve she drew forth a sheet of crumpled parchment. “And we would not stand alone, Willas.”

He was surprised to see the lion of Lannister imprinted onto the wax. “Tommen sent me this,” Margaery explained, “Myrcella doesn’t know about it, and neither do Cersei and Ser Kevan. A secret letter. ‘I won’t let someone else’s sons die for my wars,’ he wrote, ‘perhaps we are not friends, and perhaps we are soon to be enemies, but surely we would gain much more through a friendly alliance than through hateful tensions. I do not want to marry you again, but I want to keep my family safe, as do you. I would prefer that we remained only friends rather than husband and wife, but if that is the price I must pay, then so be it.’” She looked up. “Those are his words, Willas. I know they are.”

He gave her a long, searching look. “Grandmother will not like this,” he began, and would have said more, but just then Erron burst through the doors without knocking, pale in the face, breathing heavily. “You forgot my supper,” Willas said.

“No, my lord,” the boy rasped out. “It’s… it’s something else. Lord Tarly, he’s here. And… he’s got siege engines, trebuchets and ballistae and scorpions and rams. It’s a siege, my lord.” His lip quivered in fear. “He’s betrayed us.”

That came as no great surprise to Willas. “I must go and see my father,” he said, rising. “Tarly will not attack tonight. He must have force-marched here and his armies will be exhausted. We must prepare.”

Margaery placed a hand on their cousin’s arm. “They will not break Highgarden by throwing stones,” she said.

“Not stones, my lady. My uncle Garth… he’s with them… and he knows—” He shivered.

“Knows what?” asked Margaery. “It’s all right, you can tell us.”
The squire’s voice came out as a squeak. Cold sweat shone on his brow. “About the cellars,” said Erron. “And where they kept it. How to make it. The wildfire.”
Three Treasons You Will Know

Chapter Summary

“As the khalasar rode east I watched you grow, from a girl, into a woman, into a khaleesi, and then into a queen.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAENERYS

Lord Varys rose from his seat and said, “You stand before Daenerys of the House Targaryen; the Stormborn, the Unburnt, First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men alongside King Aegon; Lady of the Seven Kingdoms, Queen of Meereen and Slaver’s Bay, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons.” Then the eunuch took his place beside Haldon Halfmaester, Archmaester Marwyn, Lord Celtigar and the disinterested-looking Tattered Prince at the foot of the dais. Dany had wanted to bring Daario to court, but on second thoughts that had been a foolish idea.

“I would not forget our liberator’s name,” said the Meereenese envoy, “for thousands of years hence, free men and former masters alike shall shout their praises of Daenerys Targaryen, who is not only the mother of dragons, but our mother.” He placed a hand over his heart.

“Do you have a name?” Dany asked him, from where she sat high among the blades of the Iron Throne. When they were holding court together, they sat at the foot of the chair on twin seats in order to be seen as equals, but since Aegon was inspecting their army today she was alone, and thus there was no reason for her not to sit the throne.

“I am Narozo no Naqqan, of that Ancient and Noble House, Your Grace,” the man replied in accented Common Tongue. “I have come here as an envoy from His Excellency, Reznak mo Reznak, the High Seneschal of the Great City of Meereen, Master of the Skahazadhan, Lord of Slaver’s Bay, Principal Wisdom of the Ruling Council of the Great Pyramid, Most Excellent Representative of Her Grace, Daenerys, of the House Targaryen, the Stormborn, the Unburnt, First of Her Name-.”

Dany held up a hand to silence him. Reznak has been collecting titles too, I see. “And what would the honourable Reznak mo Reznak have of me?”

“Your pardon, first of all, Your Grace. The noble Reznak reminds me that…”

“Without the pleasantries, please,” Dany said, “I am not one for unnecessary courtesies, my lord.”
“His Grace has taken certain concessions regarding the slave trade in Slaver’s Bay.”

Dany did not understand. “There is no slavery in Slaver’s Bay,” she reminded him.

“There are freedmen selling themselves back to their masters—”

She sighed. “I decreed that these contracts would not be binding.”

“Of course, Your—”

A soft voice spoke up from the foot of the throne. “If I may, Your Grace,” said Lord Varys, “Perhaps we should postpone these matters of the Meereenese court and concentrate on the pressing issues here in Westeros.”

He was right. The petitioners were queuing up the steps outside the throne room, and Dany was not sure that she had the patience to listen to Reznak mo Reznak’s various apologies and requests. “My lord of Naqqan,” she said, gesturing to a steward. “I beg your pardon, but I cannot hear your concerns today. If you follow my attendant, you will be shown to rooms suiting your position.”

“Your Grace.” Narozo no Naqqan looked somewhat dismayed as he followed the steward out. A sour expression caused his lips to pucker, and for a moment, he bore a more than passing significance to a rat. There were times when she wondered if her liberation of Slaver’s Bay had been worth the trouble, but then she remembered the children without collars and the slaves without shackles, standing before her outside the walls of Yunkai, chanting, “Mhysa! Mhysa! Mhysa!”

The next petitioners were all commonly born, and they flocked together in a group, ushered in by the gold cloaks. None of them seemed particularly willing to come forward, but by some sort of mutual consent they pushed a thickset man of about forty years ahead of the rest, to stand before the Iron Throne a good ten feet away from his companions. “Your Grace,” he said, looking up at Dany, and bowed before her. The others followed suit as a timid, frightened mass. They were men, women and children, all dressed in their finest clothes: a motley of green dyed wool and grey leather; one fellow had a cloak of rich blue felt. They smelled better than most King’s Landing folk, so Dany doubted that they came from a slum as poor as Flea Bottom, though they were certainly not rich by any stretch of the imagination.

“Rise,” she told their leader. “What would you have of me this day, Goodman?”

It was a long moment before he spoke. “Your Grace… it’s… it’s about the horselords. The…”

“The Dothraki,” Dany told him. A knot was tangling itself in her stomach.

“Yes,” the man said, “those men. They came into the city and they came to our shops and our houses and they took… they took our things. Our possessions and our prizes. They raided our shops, tried to take our women, and attacked good men who tried to challenge them. Your Grace… please… they are… they are…”

They are not suited to waiting next to cities. Only to sacking them. Dany gave the goodman a small smile. “I will see that you are recompensated for your loss. Twice over. Each and every one of you. The Dothraki are not—”

Suddenly a woman pushed to the front of the crowd. “They shouldn’t be here in the first place!” she shouted at Dany, “my husband, he tried to stand in front of them, a good man, Your Grace, but they beat him, tried to beat my son too! Those savages belong across the Narrow Sea!”

In the instant of silence that followed, Dany could have heard a pin dropping at the other end of the
hall. Lord Varys made a soft sound that died down to a whisper, the tumultuous crowd was silenced immediately, and all eyes fell upon her. They want answers. I must speak for all of them. “The Dothraki way of life is very different to our own,” she told the crowd, “they do not understand peaceable means as well as you or I. At war is how they live their lives, save for when they visit their sacred city of Vaes Dothrak.” A thought came to her then, unbidden, yet Dany knew that it was the right idea. “Soon,” she told the crowd, “I will see to the Dothraki. They will trouble you no longer.”

The petitioners did not look all too satisfied by that, but they did not pry any further. Mumbling and grumbling, they shuffled out in a mass, some bearing disdainful looks towards Dany as the gold cloaks ushered them towards the exit.

Lord Varys climbed the steps of the throne. “Your Grace?” he whispered to her. “What do you mean to do with the Dothraki?”

“I will put them to good use, Lord Varys. War is how they live their lives, and as it would happen, we are at war, are we not?”

The eunuch looked troubled at first, his face creased with concern. Then he nodded slowly and said, “As it please Your Grace,” and went back down the stairs to his seat before the Iron Throne.

The next man came in with an escort of his own, two guards who wore suits of silvered plate and hats tipped with green feathers. A merchant or a small lord, Dany thought… until the man came closer and she saw the plainness of his garment, a near-shapeless robe dyed the colour of slate, trimmed with ermine at the collar, but still frugal-looking. He came closer still, and she could see the chain of many metals that he wore around his neck, dull bronze and bright steel and heavy tin and glittering gold.

Archmaester Marwyn stood and turned to Dany. “This will be your Grand Maester, then,” he said, a twinkle in his eye. At the small council table, the rest of the councillors were having a hushed conversation. She could not hear their words, but the Tattered Prince and Haldon looked unusually animated.

At the foot of the Iron Throne, the maester drew up short and inclined his head in a deep bow. “Your Grace.” He was a small man, but Dany was comparing him to Marwyn, who was near six-and-a-half feet.

“Rise,” Dany said, “state your name.”

“Your Grace, I have the small honour to be Gormon, formerly of House Tyrell, now a maester of the Citadel-,”

“-and ordained Grand Maester if the ravens spoke truly,” she finished.

“Indeed, Your Grace.” He glanced around the hall. “I would hate to take you away from the court, but I have matters to discuss that would better be said in private.”

Dany looked to the window. The day was turning to sunset, and the clouds had turned orange. “Lord Varys,” she said, standing, “Archmaester Marwyn, with me. The rest of you, continue to receive the petitioners and appease their wants; use the Crown’s authority as you see fit.” She was unsure how Haldon, Lord Celtigar and the Tattered Prince would end up agreeing on anything, but she would sooner not have a sellsword and two of Aegon’s councillors privy to such private matters. On second thoughts, it might have been wiser to leave Marwyn behind – the man being rather confrontational as he was – and she did not entirely trust Varys either. It is too late to change my mind now, Dany thought, as she left the dais and led her chosen party in the direction of the queen’s private audience
chambers.

Once they were seated and the wine had been poured, Marwyn asked the first question of the other maester. “You have come from Oldtown?”


Lord Varys’s soft whisper came next. “Perchance you have some whispers from the Tyrells, then?”

“Indeed,” said Gormon, turning to Dany, “my nephew Lord Tyrell has given me a few commands, Your Grace, and he has petitions of his own to bring before you.”

“If Lord Tyrell has petitions for my attention, surely he is capable of coming to me in person?” Dany said.

“Beg pardons, Your Grace, but secrecy is required in circles such as these-

“I am not unfamiliar with how a court works, Maester Gormon.”

“Of course not, Your Grace. Even in Oldtown, I had heard of your successes in Meereen, and the liberation of Slaver’s Bay.”

Dany thought back to the envoy from earlier. A liberation that is not like to last long under Reznak mo Reznak. She had never really trusted the man, but what could she do now? Go flying back to Meereen on dragonback and retake control of the city? That had been a sweet thought, but she had no one to install in place of the seneschal. Better a dictator who at least pretends to listen to me, than one who simply does as he pleases. “I dare say I have quite a bit of experience with how the great game is played, Maester.”

More than Aegon, at any rate. Her nephew had been clueless in his first few weeks here, until in the end he had consented to deal with only the military matters and he was happy sitting court only a couple of days each week.

Maester Gormon continued, “Nonetheless, Your Grace, I have not come alone. Lady Olenna, the Dowager Lady of Highgarden, is on her way up the roseroad, barely a week from your walls. I rode with her for a time, but I thought it best to make haste to the capital.”

“Then we shall receive Lady Olenna when the time comes, but not before.”

An alliance with the Tyrells could be promising, in Dany’s view. Most promising indeed. “Are you familiar with the circumstances of the Lady Olenna’s proposed agreement?” she asked. Aegon had won the Dornishmen to their side… but they would be supportive of his claim more than they were of hers, Dany knew. That promise had been sealed with marriage. But the Tyrells had more men than the Martells, and she understood that at least one of Lord Mace’s sons was unmarried…

“I was not privy to the specifics of this agreement, Your Grace,” said Gormon. “I suppose that Lady Olenna will tell you when she arrives.”

Varys gave a soft cough. “Why come to King’s Landing now?” he asked. “Meaning no disrespect, Grand Maester, but the Citadel sent for a replacement for Pycelle in the days long preceding the king and queen’s ascension, and as I understood your appointment was all but confirmed before the battle in Oldtown, yet we are only receiving you now.”

“The countryside has been tumultuous of late, Lord Varys, as I am sure you can understand,” Gormon replied, “the Citadel thought it best to wait until the roads had cleared before sending me.
There are reports of Randyll Tarly marching on Highgarden, sparrows and broken men roaming across the Reach and the Riverlands… it did not seem wise-”

“What state would I find the Citadel in?” Dany inquired. “If I were to be there today?”

Gormon hummed under his breath. “Difficult to say, Your Grace. The fires gutted half of our ancient halls, and the Tower of Ravens is all but collapsed. Hundreds of good men died, both within the Citadel and without… yet Oldtown’s spirit remains strong, and the city is intact.”

“Thank you, Grand Maester,” she said, “I suppose that you must have certain matters of settling yourself here to attend to.”

Gormon rose. “Aye, and I don’t suppose that rest would go amiss after such a long journey.”

“Will you need a man to show you to your chambers?” She was gladly prepared to offer up Marwyn or Varys.

“No, thank you, Your Grace,” replied the maester, “after all, life is about discovery, isn’t it?” He rose, smoothed down his tunic, and left, whistling as he departed. Dany did not look away until the door had closed behind him.

She turned to Marwyn. “Perhaps a ride on dragonback to Oldtown would not go amiss; I could stop at Highgarden and-”

“Drogon has not been seen for days, Your Grace. And you will not be able to ride Rhaegal and Viserion; no dragonrider has ever ridden two dragons at once.”

The dragon has three heads, Dany thought. “Have you any idea who these other two dragonriders might be, then?”

Marwyn put his hands in his pockets. “None, Your Grace,” he said, “nor does there seem to be any sort of reasoning behind who is capable of riding dragons either. I have looked through the old books… and found a few curious patterns… but nothing that I am certain of, yet. Perhaps, one day, I will show you my findings-.”

“Forgive my interruption,” said Lord Varys. “I know precious little of dragonlore, but it seems unwise to discount King Aegon from being a dragonrider. His father was Prince Rhaegar, after all, who harboured a certain interest in prophecies like these, often speaking of fabled princes and-”

Marwyn interrupted. “I think that is irrelevant, Lord Varys, but Aegon’s ridership is not impossible. There is only one way to find out, I suppose.” He smiled.

Yes, Dany thought, and he will be burned to death if you are wrong. “I am heading to the Dragonpit,” the archmaester said, “to conduct a few more studies, as it please Your Grace.”

They had cleared the rubble and the fallen rocks from around the great dome, and opened up the roof once more, so that Rhaegal and Viserion could land inside and take to nesting. They left the pit during the day, to hunt for prey over Blackwater Bay and the Crownlands, but of late, they had taken to returning to the Dragonpit to make their lairs at night. Marwyn had come up with a few interesting suggestions of their behaviour… none of which Dany particularly cared to think about.

When the archmaester was gone, only Dany and Lord Varys remained. The eunuch opened his mouth, then closed it, and whatever words he had meant to say were lost. “Your Grace,” he said, bowed, and left.
Dany found her guards next. “Sers,” she told them, “I am going down into the cells. You are to come with me, but do not hold me back when the time comes.”

“Your Grace?”

“You will understand.”

The steps down into the bowels of the Red Keep were slick and slippery, and the world was damp and dark. The undergaoler, an unsavory-looking man with a pinched face who went by the name of Rennifer Longwaters, showed her to the black cells with a certain measure of pride on his face, grinning as he rapped on the wooden doors of each cell in turn. “Very good,” Dany said, a little sickened by his gleeful expression, “but it is not the black cells I have come to see.”

Ser Jorah Mormont was in a second-level cell, alone. His room had no windows, and instead of a door, thick metal bars kept him hemmed inside. There was a narrow bunk with a straw mattress and no sheets, a pot for him to make water in, a sprinkling of fresh straw on the floor, and nothing else. Not even the smallest comforts had been afforded to him, but imprisonment was a fate kinder than what she had promised him in Meereen. *If you are still here at dawn, I will have your head.*

Yet Jorah had kept his head, his face with its familiar faces. She could see his broad shoulders and strong arms through the shirt of torn roughspun, and his cheeks and his chest were as hairy and he looked as swarthy as ever. *My bear. Jorah the Andal.*

He looked up. “Daen- Your Grace.” Then he went to a knee, remembering his courtesies. *He almost called me Daenerys,* she thought. That made her oddly sad, as memories of times forgotten flooded back to her.

*Enough of that,* she told herself, *you are the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, not some silly little girl.*

“I told you never to return to my presence,” she said, unable to meet his gaze. “And yet you have returned. Why?”

Ser Jorah took a deep breath. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and raw. “Permit me to tell you a story, Your Grace. After you… after you banished me from your presence, I travelled from Meereen to Volantis, then east to Qarth when I heard Quaithe’s calling-

“No. You must go west-" Dany said, but Ser Jorah went on. “I went to the gardens of the House of the Undying. She said… she said that I had to go back to you, whatever the cost, to save you… and to save myself from a fate of wandering in sorrow until my death. She said that I had to protect you from ‘the false and the fair, and from the shadow that was birth from the womb of light.’”

“What did she mean by that?” Dany asked.

“I do not know,” he confided, “but I understood what she meant by wandering in sorrow.” He took a deep, rasping breath. “I love you, *Khaleesi.* I am a deeply flawed man, and returning to you might only prove my madness, but there is no greater cause to die for than for you, my queen. If die for you I must, then I will do so with valour, whether it is on the battlefield, at the headsman’s block… or by your side.”
Dany gazed upon him, staring back into his deep brown eyes. *Honest eyes. Those are not liar’s eyes.* “When your treasons were presented before me in the Great Pyramid of Meereen, you spoke not of remorse for your crimes.” She bit her lip. “Yet… I could see it upon your face, and I could see you begging me for forgiveness. But when I asked for your reasons, you did not say a word in your defence, and offered me only empty courtesies. Why didn’t you speak, Jorah Mormont?”

For the longest time it seemed that Ser Jorah would not say anything this time either. “Because I had watched you since our meeting in Pentos,” he said at last, “so many distant years ago. You were a frightened child then, cowering in your brother’s shadow. Yet as the khalasar rode east I watched you grow, from a girl, into a woman, into a khaleesi, and then into a queen.

“After you walked from Khal Drogo’s pyre with three newborn dragons suckling you, ancient stone given life by the sacrifices that you had made, you became the mother of dragons, and made me believe in gods and miracles once again. When you led us across the starving deserts of the Red Waste to the walls of Qarth and gave your people sanctuary, fought off the warlocks and the shadows, you became a true Targaryen, the queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men. When you burned the slavers in the Plaza of Pride, when the slaves threw their shackles at your feet before the proud walls of Yunkai and cried out your name, when the city of Meereen bowed before you and the great golden harpy was toppled from her throne atop the Great Pyramid, you became the breaker of chains.

“But when the time came for me to say my plea before you, to ask forgiveness for my wrongs, I made a mistake; I spoke to the girl Daenerys I had met in Pentos, not to the strong young woman who sat before me. My queen.”

Dany gave him a long, searching look. Ser Jorah would not flinch from her gaze, she saw, he would not let go, not ever, and it was then that it became too much for her. “Ser,” she said, rising with all the courtesy she could muster. “I… I must talk with my advisors. I will see you again on the morrow.”

*Why did I say that?* she wondered, climbing the slick stone steps from the dungeons back up to the Red Keep proper. *I must not act as some foolish girl who dreams of lemon trees and houses with red doors. I am the queen now, and I must rule.*

And yet… something seemed wrong. Quaithe’s prophecy came back to her, different words this time. *To go forwards, you must go back.*

*Back where?* Dany wondered. *Where?* She had returned to Dragonstone already, to the place where she was born. She had returned to the Dothraki too, for a time. *Where?*

In her chambers over in Maegor’s Holdfast, Irri and Jhiqui were arguing as they ran her bathwater. As her prospective ladies-in-waiting, the pair had dressed in jade and opal-coloured silks trimmed with silver that were very much at odds with their Dothraki style of dress. “*Khaleesi,*” said Irri, pointing at the other handmaiden as Dany stripped down climbed into the tub. “Tell her she is foolish girl, thinking that the storms will drown the world.”

“But I saw it in my dream, *Khaleesi,*” Jhiqui insisted. “The rivers rose high and the storms thundered across the night sky and the rain fell as though the great lake at the foot of the Mother of Mountains had emptied all at once over our heads. And where it fell, the ghost grass grew and choked the world.”

“It is only a foolish nightmare, stupid girl.” Irri continued as she scrubbed Dany’s back. “The great lake at the Mother of Mountains has no bottom, how could it be emptied? It is known.”
“It is known,” Jhiqui said uncertainly, and went back to brushing out Dany’s hair.

Let us hope that you are right, thought the queen, as they dried her off with towels. Let us hope that they are only dreams, not the heralds of the future. “I will wear the blue silk tonight,” she said, “I have not had a chance to wear it since leaving Dragonstone.”

The silk was a very dark blue in colour, so dark that it was almost purple. Silver fastenings and silver embroidery made the dress shine brightly when seen in a particular light. It was a warm night, and Dany was thankful for the fact that the gown left her arms and her upper back bare. She and Aegon would be dining together for supper, as they often did, and it was Dany’s turn to host her nephew.

Her nephew. It was odd to think of him as that, especially since Aegon was a couple of years older than her... that being said, he did not act his twenty years, and his overeagerness and impulsive behaviour were testament to that fact. Still, Dany was certain that she could have shared the Iron Throne with rulers much worse than Aegon.

He was smiling a broad grin when he came to her chambers, one that made Dany feel a little unsettled. Today he had dressed quite casually; dark breeches, a red doublet with silver buttons in the shape of dragonskulls. His silver-blond hair framed his face nicely, while purple eyes stared out from the hollows of his face. Aegon had quite a handsome face, and Dany had heard many say that he looked like her brother Rhaegar, and had his charm too, though she doubted (from what Ser Barristan had told her, at least), that her brother had been quite so vain. Her nephew never went anywhere without the Valyrian steel blade that was their house’s most prized possession; even at supper, Blackfyre hung at his belt in a scabbard set with rubies and black diamonds. Still smiling, he withdrew a rolled-up scroll from his palms and laid it triumphantly in her hands.

“What’s this?” Dany asked him.

“A letter,” he said, “from Prince Doran Martell. I received it earlier today, but I thought that you’d like to hear the good news in person.”

“Good news?” Could it be?

“Ser Barristan Selmy is on his way north with Prince Oberyn’s host,” Aegon reported, taking a seat and pouring himself a cup of wine without waiting for Dany’s invitation. “He is safe and unharmed.”

“Why would he be?” She sipped from her own goblet. “The Dornish are our allies, remember.”

Aegon grinned boyishly. “I am certainly aware of it. Ser Barristan is not the only one headed north; my bride is on her way to King’s Landing. Arianne Martell.” He said the name as though he were tasting a fine wine.

Why did they not send Barristan with her? Dany found herself wondering. She hoped that he would hasten to the capital; he could not get here soon enough. “I’m sure she’ll be pleased by you.” She gave him a joyless smile.

Aegon smiled back. “Yes, I hope so. I suppose you must be rather familiar with marriage by now?”

The comment was barbed, but whether it was by intention or by accident was another question. Aegon could be quite careless with his words. “I am,” Dany said, remembering her sun-and-stars fondly, and Hizdahr zo Loraq less fondly. “Why do you ask?”

“Nervousness, that’s all.” He made a great show out of fidgeting with his thumbs. He means to suggest suitors to me, Dany thought. She decided to kill his intentions in their crib. “We shall have to organise a grand ceremony, then.”
“Well,” said Aegon, “perhaps we should leave that to Arianne. In her letter to me, she told me that she was prickly.”

“Aren’t we all?” Dany asked.

“Lord Jon told me that most women will be happy once they have what they want. If I can give her that-.” He trailed off before Dany’s frown.

“I don’t think Lord Jon knows what women want,” she said, as Irri and Jhiqui brought round a platter of figs, grapes and cheese.

Aegon nodded. “No. I don’t think he does either.” He leaned back in his chair. “How was court today?”

“We received our new Grand Maester. I trust you’ve already heard of that.” He nodded. “Other than that,” said Dany, “it was uneventful.” She thought it best not to mention the Dothraki problem, though doubtless Haldon would tell Aegon what had happened given time.

“The inspection is nearly done,” he told her, “in just over a week we will be ready to march.”

“To the Riverlands?” she asked.

That had been Aegon’s pet plan. He meant to head to Harrenhal to convince Lord Baelish to join his side – despite Lord Varys’s insistence that this was a pointless idea – and then continue to Edmure Tully at Riverrun. “It seems the best course,” he summarised. “The Tullys have no real love for Stannis Baratheon, and Lord Arryn despises the Lannisters. We-”

“-are the lesser of two evils for both of them,” Dany finished. “They do not love us either.”

Aegon smiled at her; his youthful naivety had never been plainer. “Not yet.”

She did not challenge him any further. *Let him ride north and fight a pointless battle, while I fight another against the courtiers of King’s Landing. If you truly mean to ride north, then I may have yet more soldiers to give you. The Dothraki hunger for battle.*

“Like as not, there will be no battle in either Harrenhal or Riverrun. It will be nothing more than a protracted siege at the most.”

“Let them pillage the lands, then.”

“They will not love us for that.”

“They do not love us anyway.”

Aegon looked agitated. “They will love us even less if we burn their fields. Winter has come. It will not be kind to any of us.”

Dany gave a slow nod. “We… our enemies are in the West. The Lannisters and the Baratheons. If I send the Dothraki to fight them-”

“Meaning no offense, but your Dothraki are undisciplined and unlikely to obey any order save for your own. Unless you mean to head to war with us, I would sooner take one of your sellsword companies.”

The Stormcrows remained in King’s Landing, and half of the Windblown, as well as the greater part of company that the Meereenese freedmen had formed. Perhaps they would benefit from a good long
march; after all, Daario Naharis was growing restless here in the capital. *Mayhaps Aegon is right… and I could go with them, perhaps… Daario and I, we could share the road together, rule as queen and… sellsword? Soldier? Lover? King? What? “Someone has to rule in King’s Landing,”* she said at last.

“You have dragons,” Aegon reminded her. “The mere sight of you mounted on Drogon’s back would be enough to make lesser men surrender.”

“Drogon refuses to answer my call. Viserion and Rhaegal are slumbering in the Dragonpit; you are welcome to try and ride one of them, if you are bold enough.” *The dragon has three heads. Perhaps Marwyn was right; why not Aegon? And if the worst should happen, and he is burned by them-*

A thoughtful look crossed Aegon’s face. His purple eyes flashed by the low candlelight. In the end, he pushed his hair back from his brow and drew a deep breath. “Well,” he said at last, “I am the blood of the dragon, after all.” He rose from his seat abruptly. “Pray excuse me. I have… preparations to make.”

_As do I_, Dany thought. The conversation about Daario Naharis made him hunger for her company, oddly. When Aegon had gone, she sent Irri after the sellsword captain, while Jhiqui poured her a cup of wine. “I will not need this gown again tonight,” Dany told her. “Put it back where it belongs.”

By the time Daario arrived at her rooms, the queen had changed into a loose garment of sheer blue silk that clung closely to her frame, and a pair of velvet slippers adorned with moonstones. She was lounging on the chaise by the window eating hot peppers when he came to her.

“You interrupted my drinking with Grey Worm,” he told her. “We were having such fun.”

“Drinking? With Grey Worm?” She laughed. “You jest prettily, Captain Naharis, but not well.”

“It was not my intention to tell a good joke. I meant to see you laugh, my queen. And it seems I have succeeded.”

That was so silly that it made her laugh all over again. Then he kissed her. His lips were gentle against hers, and Dany could smell the sweetwine on his breath, and it smelled good, so strangely _good_. The candles cast their shadows tall against the wall of the chamber as they drew closer together, and their fingers entwined as one, then lips, hands, bodies, everything. “Take me, take me,” she was saying, her voice bound to her pleasure, “yes, yes, oh, yes.” He kissed her on the lips, and down near her bellybutton – that made her laugh again – and around her wetness, and all she knew was him, Daario, Daario…

When they were done, Dany threw her robe back on and went out onto the balcony. She was barefoot (her slippers had come off at some point during their union), and the tiles were cold against her feet, and colder still in contrast to her beating heart. The little lights of King’s Landing glowed in the streets and alleys down below. For a moment, she was sure that she saw a black shadow circling over Blackwater Bay, faint against the gathering grey clouds. *Drogon.*

Daario came up beside her, his chest bare, his cock pressing hard against her leg. “You should go back inside,” Dany hissed. “Someone might see us.”

“Up here?” It was his turn to laugh. “I could fuck you right here on this balcony and no one would ever know. We’re practically gods up here.”

Something in those words twanged Dany’s heartstrings. “I am not a god. It is not my decision who lives and who dies. Only a woman-”
“The most interesting, most incredible, most intense woman in the whole wide world. I could sail from Ib to Asshai in search of another like you, my queen, and I would find no one.”

“There are no women like me,” Dany said. “But I am no god.” She turned to face him, guided him back into the close familiarity of her chambers. “You know of my dilemma,” she told him. “Ser Jorah-”

“Let us not speak of Jorah Mormont,” Daario said hoarsely. His lips moved to greet hers, but Dany pushed him away. He shrugged. “It is obvious what you should do with him.”

“And what should I do with him?” But she already knew what his answer would be.

Daario sat beside her on the bed, a hand resting on her cheek. “You are the queen,” he reminded her. “And in every city, every place that you have ruled, regardless of its people or its culture, you have remained consistent in the way that you lay down the law.” He kissed her softly on the nose, rubbing his finger over her cheek. “Ser Jorah Mormont broke those laws. By… by common sense, you must lay down the same punishment for him here as you did in Meereen.”

“Death,” Dany said simply. Such a simple, short, chaotic word. “You would have me kill him?”

“Your head tells you that you must. But your heart hesitates, I think.” Daario rose, then took her hand in his. “But I remind you this. You are Queen Daenerys Stormborn, not some young girl with three dragons and an ancient name. You must bring the law and you must keep your oaths. And I say it to you now, my queen. I think you know what you must do… and truthfully, I think that you have made your choice already.”

Yes, Dany thought, staring at the stars beyond her window. I have.

Chapter End Notes

I have to say that despite my dislike for Dany as a character in most circumstances, I love writing in her POV - which is really weird, I suppose. She's up there with Jaime as one of my favourite POVs now, even though I don't particularly like her as a character.

This chapter itself is more concerning Dany's identity, and my favourite moments were her talk with Jorah and her dinner with Aegon. We see that there is still a lack of unity between the two Targaryens, as Dany thinks of herself and Aegon as separate with their own motivations, rather than as two rulers with a common goal.

Another theme here is Dany evaluating and choosing her advisors: Jorah, Daario, Varys, Maester Gormon.

The next King's Landing chapter (probably chapter 37) will see Tyrion and Dany together again.
The Road to the Golden Tooth

Chapter Summary

“Show them that a Lannister always pays his debts.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MYRCELLA

The Horn of Herrock was a family heirloom of the Kennings of Kayce, a last reminder of the time they had spent on the Iron Islands. It was a gold-banded warhorn made from a hollowed-out walrus tusk, as long and thick as a man’s arm. When blown it made a great booming sound that could silence even the rowdiest of crowds. At Ser Kevan Lannister’s signal, Ser Kennos pressed it to his lips and blew. The noise of chatter and marching drums paled at once before it, then faltered and quickly died. The only sound that remained was men and horses manoeuvring themselves back into their positions for the march.

Above, the king’s banners flew proudly in the breeze, hoisted by their bearers, bolts of crimson silk with the lion of Lannister worked upon them in heavy golden thread. Other banners were carried, bearing the sigils of lesser houses and vassals, but none stood so tall, Myrcella saw.

Then Ser Kennos blew the horn again, and when the blast had died out she heard the shouts of “Forward march!” and “Left, right, left, right...”, loud at first, then fading as the host marched further and further away, across the bridge that bound Casterly Rock and Lannisport together, five or six abreast, boots and hooves echoing off the stone under their feet.

Myrcella turned to Ser Kevan. “We had best be off, then.”

“Aye.” The Lord Regent bowed his head and rode forwards a few paces on his palfrey. “Here is the letter.” He pressed it into her palm; a yellowed parchment with the lion of Lannister imprinted on the neat circle of scarlet wax. *Doubtless he would not be such a fool to give me the only copy,* she thought. *Tommen has one, I can be certain of that... and probably Ser Balon as well.* Of all her travelling companions, the white knight was likely the most trustworthy, even if he were not senior among his brothers. Balon Swann’s incorruptibility was well known. *A shame that the same cannot be said of House Swann.* That had been troubling news, regarding the loss of House Lannister’s few allies in the Stormlands and the Crownlands, but not entirely unexpected.

“Thank you, uncle.” She leant across to kiss his cheek, and led the horse in a circle around the square. Myrcella enjoyed riding, but she had never been the most practised in the art, and she could not quite match her brother in the saddle. *They’re just like cats,* Tommen had told her. *Or other*
animals. If you look after them, they’ll look after you.

Queen Cersei rode forwards on her palfrey. They had said their goodbyes in the privacy of their chambers, but she kissed both of her children on the forehead before riding back into line beside her uncle.

Myrcella surveyed her riding companions once more. Tyg sat patiently on his horse at the edge of the bailey, away from all of the goodbyes. A springy yew longbow and quiver of green-tipped arrows was slung over his shoulder, a dirk at his belt. But if it came to battle she would sooner rely upon Ser Balon—the only one of the four Kingsguard who would be following her all the way to Harrenhal—or one of his brothers. The silent giant Ser Robert Strong sat a destrier that seemed a dwarf between his massive legs. *Mother should not have put him on a horse,* Myrcella thought, *there are plenty of large knights in Westeros, but only a few of them ride in the exact same fashion as Ser Gregor Clegane.*

Ser Lucion Lannister mounted up beside Rollam Westerling, both on brown coursers, while Rollam’s sister Eleyna rode a grey palfrey. That had been part of Myrcella’s price for her undertaking this journey without complaint—Eleyna would act as her handmaiden until they reached the Golden Tooth and then as a noble ‘companion’ of the king thereafter. Myrcella’s cousin Rosamund would also act as a handmaiden, but she would be following her all the way to Harrenhal.

Tommen had ordered a new suit of armour for this campaign, to suit a proper king, he’d said. The Lannister lion roared on his breastplate while leather straps crossed from shoulder to shoulder; his swordbelt was also adorned with studs in the likeness of bronze lions. “My lord.” He nodded in Ser Kevan’s direction and turned his horse around. “Shall we?”

Ser Lucion led the way, followed by half of the Lannister escort and Ser Arys of the Kingsguard. Then came King Tommen and Princess Myrcella, Ser Arys and Ser Balon, the Westerlings and the other King’s Companions, and finally the remnants of the Lannister guard. Myrcella sat tall in the saddle, and did not look back. The waves were churning angrily below them as they rode across the bridge between Casterly Rock and Lannisport, searching the nooks and crannies of the caves beneath the castle. Gulls circled above, cawing a tune that sounded oddly like ‘the Rains of Castamere’. Then they were across. Smallfolk were shouting seven blessings from the walls of the city, while Lannister guardsmen raised their pikes and tipped their bowl-helms in salute.

The host was a snake armoured all in red-gold steel, flying a hundred banners or more as they rode out into the light of morning. After an hour or so, the ranks started to thin out and Myrcella found herself riding beside Tyg Sarsfield. “How do I look today?” she jested with him.

“Striking,” Tyg replied without a moment’s pause. Then he turned bright purple and looked at his hands again. “My lady.”

“But it’s not entirely true, is it? I’m wearing red and gold, same as half of the army. I wouldn’t be surprised if they managed to lose me in all of this.” She gestured around her. “I worry about you, Tygett.”

“Why so, my lady?”

“The ride to Harrenhal is three weeks at least. By then, you’ll have run out of words for me.”

He blushed, then swallowed and said, “and what happens when we run out of words?”

“You’ll have to wait and see,” she replied teasingly. “You have something on your face.” Her fingers brushed against his nose and ran slowly down his cheek. “There.” *Just a little more every*
day, never too much, else the illusion is worthless. She would have to move on soon, though; she could not keep flirting with Tyg if this marriage to Robert Arryn ever came to fruition.

That being said, the less she thought about the day when her family would sell her in marriage to some sickly thirteen year-old, the better.

“Sometimes,” she said, “amidst all the war and the death, I forget how beautiful places can be.” She took a look back over her shoulder, where the top of Casterly Rock was fading into fat white clouds. She breathed the cool air deeply and exhaled. “We live in a beautiful world, Tyg.”

“We do,” he said.

“Sarsfield is on the goldroad, is it not?”

Tyg nodded. “Yes, my lady. Two days east of Oxcross. We’ll probably pass it by at some point.”

“Your lord father rules there, correct?”

“Aye. But he’s getting old. Almost five-and-forty. My parents… they didn’t think that they would have another son after my brothers came along. They’re twins, seven years older than me. Raymund is in charge of Father’s estates and all of the fields, and Medwyck garrisons a holdfast on the southern edge of Father’s lands, to make sure that the trade wagons don’t get accosted by bandits. I expect that I’ll join them soon.” He looked gloomy.

“But you don’t want to?”

He paused a long moment. “No. I want… I’m better than them at archery; I can shoot a rabbit through the eye at two hundred paces, my lady. Probably. Maybe I could become captain of Raymund’s guard, once he’s the lord, but—”

“The world is so much bigger than Sarsfield. Your brothers never squired in King’s Landing, did they?”

“No, my lady. Begging your pardons, but I heard that your lord father didn’t like having too many Lannister bannermen in his court.”

“My father? – King Robert… yes, he was prone to that suspicion.” She nodded. “But times have changed, Tyg. My brother is the king of the Andals, the rightful lord of Casterly Rock and Storm’s End. And I am to be lady of the Eyrie, it would seem. Someday I may have need of a loyal captain of the guard to keep me and mine safe. And on that day, I may look to a certain thirdborn son of the Sarsfields that I have in my loyal service. You can rise far higher than your brothers ever will, if only you have the willingness to do so.”

They came to Oxcross on the third day out of Lannisport, as the dusky sky was darkening to night. “Send for my brother,” Myrcella told Tyg, who was cooking a haunch of venison over a spit outside the tent. “Tell him that I should like to dine with him.”

While she was waiting for Tommen, she sat down and wrote a letter to her mother. Ser Addam reckoned that they would reach the Golden Tooth inside another seven days if they kept their current pace, nine at the most, but Myrcella had half a mind to ride ahead of the main column. She would reach the Tooth quicker… but even then she must needs wait for the army to arrive there before continuing to Harrenhal. Perhaps it was pointless. There is no harm in waiting a little while longer, she thought as she sealed the message with a blob of red wax and handed it over to Tyg.

Her tent was a vast pavilion of red-and-gold tourney silk, furnished with every comfort she could
ever have need of on the road, and more. She had a featherbed here that was big enough for three, a
generously sized copper bathtub, camp chairs set before a stout dining table, a pair of braziers where
hot coals burned by night, tables set with cyvasse boards and no less than half a dozen flagons of
wine from the Reach and Dorne. She changed out of her riding leathers and into one of her older
gowns, one where the spiral patterns on the silk had already started to fade.

Her brother had changed his garb too, exchanging kingly steel for a dark grey shirt and plain jerkin.
Unlike Joffrey, who could spend hours vainly screaming at his tailor about how a king did not wear
roses, Tommen would wear whatever was put in front of him. “I have sores on my feet,” he
complained as he sat down in front of her. “I knew I ought to have worn two pairs of socks when we
set off this morning, but I decided not to bother with it.”

“Why didn’t you stop the march, then?”

Tommen scoffed a little. “The march stopped because His Grace’s feet were hurting. Do you know
how foolish that would make me look?”

“Yes,” she acknowledged, “but then your feet wouldn’t hurt so much.” He had no answer to that.
“Eleyna’s mother taught her – and her sister Jeyne – some of the old herbal remedies that her
grandmother brought over from the East. She could help you with that, make a salve or something
and put it on for you.”

Tommen smiled. “You want Eleyna Westerling to touch my feet? You could at least be a bit more
subtle about forcing us together, Cella.”

“You know?” It seemed wiser to play the fool here.

He snorted. “Of course I know. I’m neither stupid nor blind, believe it or not.” He took a sip of wine,
smiling a wide toothy grin. “What will you have her do next, I wonder? Check that my hair doesn’t
have lice in it? See that my shoulders aren’t aching? Make sure my smallclothes fit properly?”

Myrcella raised an eyebrow and smiled sweetly at him. “That would depend on whether or not
you’re around Lady Eleyna, dear brother.”

This time Tommen could not keep the laughter in. She smiled to see him like that; it had been a long
time since she’d last seen him laughing, as he should be. A crown does not become you, little
brother, she thought.

They shared the venison between them and afterwards ate honeycakes with lemon cream and
strawberries. The night turned from blue to black, and Myrcella brought out the cyvasse board. She’d
spent a few nights in King’s Landing trying to teach Tommen how to play, but she knew that he
wasn’t patient enough for it. Though he was playing better than last time, at least. “Why does the
dragon get to move like that?” he asked her.

“What does it matter?” She knocked his piece from the board.

“I was trying to do a pincer movement. Your dragon messed it up.”

“Strategy doesn’t always work how you expect it to, little brother,” she told him, “and life isn’t fair.”

Tommen moved his king forward towards her side of the board, put it down, flicked away one of her
pieces with a wry smile and stopped. “Oh,” he said.

Myrcella smiled sweetly at him. “Death in two.” Her dragon swooped again and knocked her
brother’s king from the board.
Tommen picked up the king piece, turned it in his hand, and suddenly threw it down as hard as he could on the tent floor, sending it rolling across the rushes. “I… I shouldn’t have done that,” he said afterwards. “It was wrong of me… were they expensive?”

“They’re only wood,” said Myrcella, “in Dorne they have much more ornate boards, pieces of onyx and ruby or emerald and lapis lazuli, with squares made from gold and silver.”

“Silver.” Tommen snorted. “Silver, for the second-best. He looked up at her with scorn in his eyes. “Joff’s wedding gift,” he summarized, “I brought him a dagger, with a hilt of silver, studded with rubies. “It’s only silver,” he told me, with that look in his eyes. He tossed it down at my feet. “I am the king, and I deserve gold. Keep this, you mewling pup. Silver, for the second-best.” That was the last thing he ever said to me, I think. Then he had his wedding and drank his wine and—” He hiccupped suddenly. “I was only ever supposed to wear silver. Only ever meant to be a prince, or a lord of someplace far away from Joffrey.”

“Someone should have poisoned his wine a long time before that,” Myrcella said darkly. “Before he grew up to do what he did.”

But Tommen shook his head. “You… you can’t poison a babe in his cradle. Maybe if Father had… if he had raised him to be a proper king, then he wouldn’t have acted as he did. He’d still be alive, but… sometimes, it doesn’t hurt to wonder, does it? To wonder what Joff would have been like if he’d actually seen us as brother and sister, and not just as…” His lips met in a frown. “We shouldn’t dwell on the past.” He rose from his seat.

“Tommen,” she said, as he was leaving, walking towards him. “We still have each other, you have to remember that.” It was not her intention to sound fragile, but her voice was almost pleading. Tommen gave a stiff little nod, then held out his arms hesitantly. For once, it was Myrcella who was grateful for his embrace rather than the other way around.

She watched him go, then set the plates and wine cups aside and changed again into her clothes for bed. That night she fell asleep quickly, but it was an evil dream she dreamed. Joffrey and Tommen were standing over her, holding twins of the same Valyrian steel sword. “You lied,” they were saying over and over, a horrific chorus, snarling at her. “You lied, you lied, you lied to us.” She did not know what she meant, and she could not move, could not do anything as they laid into her with the flat of their blades, their swords raining down on her horribly, cuts and bruises blooming on her pale skin. And from somewhere, far off in the realms of memory she could hear the calling, two voices arguing with one another; one cruel and mocking; the other, a boy’s voice, a fearful, reedy wail.

“Don’t… don’t, Joffy, I’ll be good, I swear it—”

“Silence, you insolent pup. Or I’ll have my dog murder you—”

“I… I can’t. I won’t.”

“You will, or I’ll make you do it again.”

“It isn’t… why are you doing…—”

“Because I can.” Those words were the ones that etched themselves most clearly on her memory, in the days and weeks and months and years afterwards. “Because I can.” They would stay with her forever. “Because I can.” Her last haunting memory of Joffrey. “Because I can.”

She awoke in the bleak grey dawn of the morrow, cold and alone. She washed herself from the
basin, dressed in her riding leathers once again, and broke her fast on oaten porridge with a little honey. Two hours later, they were riding.

It was another three days before they came to Sarsfield, the ancestral keep of Tyg’s family. Ser Medwyck had an escort to take them up to the Golden Tooth, and another five hundred men to join to his king’s. After greeting his squire’s father and brothers, Myrcella made to follow Tommen inside the command tent, but he held up a hand to stop her. “You don’t need to concern yourself with all this,” he said in a choked voice.

“If I am to help you in this war, surely it is better for me to know the circumstances of it?”

Tommen chewed his lip nervously. “If they capture you… I don’t want… them to learn our plans from you. I don’t want them to think that you know.”

“You don’t want them to torture me.” She nodded. “Or is it that you don’t want me concerning myself with your war.”

“This is not my war!” The outburst was surprisingly explosive, but he calmed himself quickly. “I did not choose it, Cella… only, I don’t want you getting hurt over it. Please, go and… I don’t know… go somewhere else.”

She did not want to argue with him, much as he seemed desperate to argue with her. “As you will, Your Grace,” she muttered, with an edge of sarcasm in her voice. “I’ll just go and embroider another cloak, and take afternoon tea with my ladies.”

“Yes,” Tommen said, turning to enter the tent, “you do that. Good. Go and see Eleyna.”

Myrcella had not mentioned that, but there was no harm in doing so. She found the Westerling girl with chatting with Tymond Vance of the King’s Companions and her brother Rollam around a small campfire. “My lady,” Eleyna said when she saw her, rising to her feet and smoothing her dress down. “Do you need my help?”

“My lady.” Eleyna moved away from the campfire to stand beside Myrcella. She wore a gown of plain grey cotton, with a red cloak around her narrow shoulders. “Is it about your brother?”

Myrcella let them get some distance away from the others before replying. “I had hoped to make small talk, but there is no harm in getting to the heart of it, I suppose. Tommen is having his doubts about you.”

She looked concerned. “My lady… perhaps… well, maybe you are right. We spoke together on the morning before he went to inspect the garrisons in Lannisport… only he never returned to visit me in the afternoon.”

“My little brother does not often go back on his promises.” She smiled. “It makes him rather predictable, really. That being said, his moods are changeable. Sometimes he acts with the utmost conviction; once he just pissed himself when it got too much for him.”

“He… my lady? Did I hear your words—”

“Oh, it was a long time ago,” Myrcella said offhandedly. “Bran Stark challenged him to climb a wall in Winterfell. He couldn’t, and he got stuck and had to be fetched down. No one else seemed to notice that his breeches were wet after we managed to get him down, but I agreed to keep his secret.”
Eleyna’s cheeks reddened. “I know my brother’s secrets as well. I could embarrass him in any number of ways. One time, I found him in his chamber under the covers, moaning and groaning as he—”

“I think I understand,” Myrcella said, “…but you may have touched upon something there.”

Eleyna smiled. “Well, Rollam certainly did.”

She grinned. “Yes. Perhaps we are thinking of our brothers too specifically, and forgetting that they are almost men grown. And they have a man’s needs.”

“I’m not sure I… oh.” Eleyna’s eyes went wide. “You want me to—?”

“That would be rather brazen of you…” Myrcella said, “…and stupid, I think. Tommen already suspects that I am behind all of this, and if his suspicions are confirmed you will not get anywhere with him until I return to Casterly Rock, which might not be for a year or more. No, you must have a genuine reason to bring the pair of you together.”

“When Robb Stark’s army came to the Crag, Jeyne and I helped with the healers… on the Lannister side, of course. I saw… lots of men wanted women to comfort them before a battle; to soothe their woes, to see to their hurts, to spend the nights beside them.”

“I’m sure those were whores, Eleyna. But you may have a point. Go to my brother before his battles – and after them, and try and get him to sit with you. Listen to his qualms, see to his aches, eat his meals, play cyvasse or whatever you please with him. The less clothes you happen to be wearing, the better. If you can coax him into bed, stretch your talents as far as you can—”

That seemed to offend the girl. “I am not some glorified camp follower.”

“When did I say that? You suggested it yourself. And I am not making you into a camp follower; no, I am making you into the lady of Casterly Rock. Into a queen.”

After, she went to find Tyg. He was on the riverbank, practising his archery against a pair of straw targets about eighty yards away. The wind ruffled his hair and threatened to knock the targets down, but he stood tall and unwavering, his arm tensed. For the first few shots, Myrcella watched him in silence, as he raised his arm and drew the string back to his cheek, glanced down the range carefully, then loosed an arrow. The shaft spiralled through the air, and embedded itself in the central ring.

“You’re certainly a good archer,” she said, “not quite the best I’ve ever seen.”

Tyg smirked at her. “Who is, then?”

She approached him. “Might I have a turn?”

“You think you can beat me?” He laughed.

Myrcella was no stranger to a bow and arrow. At Winterfell, much to Sansa Stark’s chagrin and Arya’s pleasure, the princess had taken up the longbow for a time. Admittedly, her eye for the target had become less practised with the years of lacking use, but she still remembered Ser Rodrik’s commands; to stand sideface, to hold the bow as though it were a part of her arm, to not be afraid of her own strength. As the night grew long, Tyg tutored her beneath a breezy willow tree at the edge of the town, as he told her stories of Tylos One-Eye, the greatest archer House Sarsfield – and indeed the entire world – had ever seen. “I don’t understand that,” Myrcella told him. “How could he be the best archer in the world with only one eye?”
“He knew what he was doing, for a start,” Tyg said, nudging her foot over and placing his hands a
little lower on her waist than was perhaps necessary as he adjusted her position. “And unlike you,
princess, his arm was in the right place. Now, draw back the string, but slowly. Careful.”

“You never do it slowly.”

“I’ve been learning for years, princess.” He paused a second, smiling. “But you shouldn’t rush when
pulling back on the bowstring. And be careful, it’s good yew, light and springy. I don’t want you to
break it.”

“I make no promises.” She pulled back her arm. The effort of holding the bow up was starting to
take a toll on her arm, and the makeshift arrow started to slip from its position. “Keep your back
straight, my lady.”

“No. I’m loosing the arrow,” Myrcella told him. “This can’t be worth the effort.” And so she did.
The shaft sailed into the sky, much higher than their target and disappeared among the canopy of
trees. She did not even hear it land.

Tyg smiled. “I think you might have hit something. In the North, mayhaps.”

She tossed him the bow. “Your turn, then.”

His smirk widened as he took the longbow and pulled three arrows from his quiver. “You see that
tree,” he said, pointing to an ancient, sprawling yew spotted with frost. “I reckon I can hit it three
times out of three.”

“As do I,” she said heavily. “You are quite good at this, as you love to remind me.” She pointed.
“Hit that other one instead.” This trunk was thinner, and further away.

“You do so love to make it difficult for me.” Tyg adjusted his feet, then raised the longbow to his
shoulder and drew back the string. A breeze whistled through the trees, setting Myrcella’s braid to
fluttering with the wind. Tyg pointed the bow down. “There’s a slight wind,” he said, “hold up a
moment now.” He turned towards her, “and what reward do I get if I succeed in this task, noble
lady?”

“A song and a kiss,” she said sarcastically.

Tyg seemed to take account of that. He raised the bow again. He was reedy and thin, but stood tall
and unwavering when the time came to loose his shots. He breathed out and loosed one shaft, then
another, then a third in succession. Thud, thud, thud, went the shots, as they embedded themselves in
the wood. “My lady,” he said, bowing his head mockingly, then set off to retrieve his arrows.

She gave him neither a song nor a kiss, but she did permit him to eat with her that night in the
privacy of her tent. The night was cool, so Myrcella chose a gown of plain red silk through which
the outline of her womanly figure was clearly visible. Tyg spent half of his time staring where he
ought not to. “Are… are you not cold, my lady?” he blurted, when she reminded him that her face
was ‘up here, not down there’.

“No,” she said, “the breeze is nothing tonight. But I have a sneaking suspicion that the snow will
start to fall on the morrow.”

“How can you know that?” Tyg asked.

“Look at the sky when you leave the tent. Dark clouds are growing in the north. And as I seem to
remember from my time in Winterfell, that means that chilly winds are moving in from the Wall. And
“I’ve always wanted to see the Wall,” he said. “And the Long Bridge in Volantis, the pyramids in Slaver’s Bay… I’ve only seen them in books.”

“Uncle Tyrion is not too different,” she murmured. “Perhaps if you see him again, the pair of you could go on a voyage across the Narrow Sea, look upon the wonders that were built by the hands of gods and men.”

“And you.”

Myrcella raised an eyebrow. “I am not a wonder of the world, Tyg. Much as your eyes seem keen to dispute that.”

He turned almost purple. “Sorry, my lady. No, I meant you could come with us.”

She leant forward, took his face in her hands and pressed her lips softly to his forehead, then moved them down to his nose, caressing his cheek all the while. Tyg made a strange, soft moaning noise. “I- I…”

“I am to marry Robert Arryn, remember,” she said as they drew apart. “I will be lady of the Eyrie, expected to run his household, rule his castle when he is away, and sire his sons. That being said… my prospective husband is weak, and likely to die soon after our consummation. And I may have to travel to the Wall, given time, to present my support for the Night’s Watch, or sail across the Narrow Sea to Braavos or Pentos to secure trade alliances with the Vale. When the time comes, Tygett, I will have you with me.”

“My lady.” He rose to his feet, still red in the face, and quickly withdrew.

She had not been wrong about the weather. When the next day dawned, the snow on the ground was about an inch thick in places, and the trees glistened with hoarfrost. Myrcella donned a dress of thick red wool lined with ermine on the sleeves, and a grey cloak. When Tommen approached her through the snow, wearing a similar fur-trimmed cloak and thick grey gloves, she burst into laughter. “You haven’t looked like that since Winterfell.”

“No,” he said, grinning weakly. “I suppose I haven’t.”

There was no reason for it, but they hugged each other then. “Winter has come,” she said, when they drew apart.

The snowfall did not stop until the end of the day. Chilly winds whistled across the cloudy sky, and the moon glimmered above, even by daylight. For three more days they rode, as the oaks gave way to pines and thistles, and as the trees fell away altogether and the road curved upwards sharply into the mountains, passing beneath arches of carved grey stone and under half-frozen waterfalls. The novelty of the snow fast died away, though, and Myrcella found herself longing to an end to the road, for a seat by the hearth and mulled wine and memories of Winterfell that were a distant dream.

And so when the towers of the Golden Tooth loomed suddenly above them as the stars began to appear on the fourth night after Sarsfield, she was so surprised by their appearance that she almost thought them a part of her reverie.

All at once a fresh burst of morale coursed through the army like fire through a man’s veins. We are nearly there. The Tooth awaits us. It was a grey, drab fortress perched on the mountainside between the towering peaks that separated the West from the Riverlands on one side, and a yawning chasm on the other. A half-frozen susurrus of a river trickled over the lip of the mountainside into the black
bowels below. The road wound up to a single great gatehouse on the castle’s western side, then
snaked down out of the eastern gate somewhere on the other side of the vast courtyard, descending
the mountain by way of a steep stony slope to the valley of the Riverlands on the far side. Myrcella
knew that the great peak that shadowed the Tooth entirely was home to some of the West’s richest
goldmines, but she was so tired by the ride that she barely had the strength to care.

The Tooth was not nearly large enough to house a garrison of ten thousand, so the common soldiers
were conducted away from the castle road to set up their campsite on a vast grey sward on the shady
side of the mountain. It hardly looked a comfortable place to camp, open to the wind and the rain, but
Myrcella was not concerned with that. The only thing that roused her from her daydreams in the
saddle was the sound of the gatehouse winching upwards, icy chains creaking as they fought against
rust. She felt fresh snowflakes on the hood of her cloak, drifting into her eyes and melting in her hair.

In the courtyard, the young squires and grooms swarmed around her as expected, pushing and
shoving each other out of the way in their eagerness to help the princess down from her horse. They
all looked rather disappointed when Myrcella climbed down herself and took a disdainful look
around the Tooth’s courtyard. It reminded her a little of Winterfell in its grey drabness, but it did not
look nearly so historied, nor were the walls anywhere near so tall and impressive.

Nor was the young woman who came to greet her Sansa Stark, though the pair did have their
similarities. This girl had auburn curls aplenty, but her eyes were hazel brown instead of blue. “My
lady,” she said, sketching a haughty curtsey. “I am Arianne Lefford, Lady Alysanne’s younger
sister.”

She must be younger by quite a few years, for while the Lady of the Golden Tooth was five-and-
twenty if she was a day, her sister seemed not much older than Myrcella, if at all. “Might I show you
to your chambers?”

“We have put you in the guest rooms near your brother,” Lady Arianne told her. “There can quite a
chill during the nights, so you might want to make your fire early. In the meantime, I can show you
to the library, if you’d like. I’m afraid we don’t have much to do here, not while Stannis’s army is
gathered below.”

Myrcella stepped inside the door of her chamber. “No matter. I will not be here long, my lady; in a
few days I will be heading to Harrenhal.”

“Might I show you to your chambers?”

“I have no choice. She had to hasten to Harrenhal; there was no other way about it. “Where is my
brother?” she asked. “I saw some knights greeting him in the courtyard.”

“Likely they have gone to a war council,” said Arianne. “In the Great Hall.”

“If a lie is kindly meant…

Lady Arianne raised her hands in protest. “A war council-,”
“-is no fit place for a lady. But I will go there nevertheless.”

Of course, Arianne Lefford had likely been sent to greet her by the Westermen to stop Myrcella from doing exactly this. Without her present, it would be a lot easier for them to manipulate Tommen into doing their bidding. She was a little surprised that men who concerned themselves with warfare had such political cunning… but this was the Westerlands after all, a distinctly Lannister place, and it was steeped in intrigue just as King’s Landing had been.

The Great Hall of the Leffords was long, with vaulted ceilings and pillars of stone along its length, wooden beams supporting the rafters. On the southern side, a frosty waterfall trickled down, fed by some underground stream beneath the hall, and flowed over the lip of the cliff into the snowy valley below. The windows went from floor-to-ceiling, affording those inside an admittedly spectacular view of the mountains that ranged below. The room was bathed in the fading sunlight. Inside, the long benches and feasting tables had all been cleared to the sides and the back of the hall, leaving a solitary table around which the lords and captains of the Lannister army had arrayed themselves. On a tablecloth of red silk, decanters of red wine sat before men dressed in red cloaks. A map was also laid down, showing the Westerlands and the Riverlands; red tokens represented Lannister forces, while the black were Stannis’s.

They all followed her with their eyes as she marched down the hall, listening to each and every footstep as it rang against the flagstones. “Princess Myrcella,” Ser Addam Marbrand began, “we did not expect to see you here.”

She took a seat at the table before any of them could protest. “Well, what is life without a few surprises? Please continue as you were before I interrupted, sers.”

Myrcella was not looking, but she could feel Tommen glaring at her. “Anyway,” he said, “Ser Franklyn, exactly how many men do we have to garrison the castle?”

“Before Your Grace’s arrival, there were seven hundred and eighty-three of us. Now-”

“Does that count include the boys who have put on Lannister helmets and the orphans who have no choice but to fight because it is their only way of getting fed?”

The knights glanced at each other uncomfortably. “Officially, they are not a part of the Lannister army, Your Grace,” said Ser Addam.

“Officially they are,” Tommen said. “They fight and die on our walls just as other men do, and often they are the ones who take the brunt of the losses. If you will not give them what they are owed – their food and their coin – then send them to the King’s Companions. I will have a use for them even if you do not.”

Ser Forley Prester said, “As it pleases Your Grace. I warn you, though, this may present certain… impracticalities. Up here in the mountains it is hard to get supplies, and our rations are not limitless.”

“Control the rations more closely then,” said Tommen. “I will survive on stew and porridge just as my men do, and I hope that you would do the same, sers.”

That made them look uncertain. “Your Grace,” began Ser Aron Payne, a stout knight who was cousin to his house’s main branch, “we cannot make such sweeping changes so suddenly.”

Myrcella smiled at him. “Would you care to explain why, Ser Aron? Will eating a little less for a change kill you?”

The knight glanced down, avoiding her gaze. “No, my lady.”
She turned to her brother. “Your Grace, I know little of war, but it seems to me that if I manage to get through the mountains and rally the armies of the Vale for you, we will be able to take Stannis in the rear even if he crosses into the West somehow. And when that is done, we will be able to march on King’s Landing.”

That sent a murmur around the table. Myrcella was not surprised. *They have become so preoccupied by Stannis’s war that they forget that it is the Iron Throne we intend to win in the end.* “I don’t mean to forget other important aspects of the war, but can we discuss the specifics of my quest?”

Tommen shrugged. “Of course,” he said. “Ser Forley, is there a route through the mountains that bypasses most of Stannis’s forces?”

Ser Forley Prester leaned over the table and pointed to the spot on the map where the Golden Tooth was marked. A thick red line, signifying the river road, ran due northeast towards Riverrun, but other, fainter lines were also marked. “There was a pass that Robb Stark used to get around the Tooth on his way to the Battle of Oxcross,” Prester said. “He managed to march his whole army up it, so I daresay it is more than wide enough to make your passage, princess.”

Addam Marbrand disagreed. “Stannis has lords such as Tytos Blackwood with him. He may have a few Northmen in his camp. They will remember that route, to be sure; they may even try to use it themselves.”

“How well is this pass defended?” asked Tommen.

“Sufficiently,” said Ser Russell Yarwyck, “there are archers ranged along its length and we are building defensive fortifications at this end-”

“Then it will be obvious,” Myrcella surmised. “Surely there are roads through the mountains that have not been used for years.”

“‘Roads’ might be an overly generous way of putting it,” said Ser Franklyn Lefford, “when my brother was lord of the Tooth, he tried countless times to clear those passages, to make another route for trade headed this way. He never succeeded.”

“And what is the nature of these passages?” she asked.

“They cut through crevices in the rock and some use tunnels. They may be blocked, though-”

Myrcella shrugged. “I will have men with me to unblock them. Which leads me to the matter of my escort.”

“You will have Ser Lucion Lannister and forty men, as well as Ser Balon Swann of the Kingsguard,” Tommen said.

“Your Grace, is that wise?” Addam Marbrand asked. “Ser Balon is of the White Swords, after all, and-”

For the first time, Ser Arys Oakheart spoke up. He was the only man at the table wearing a white cloak instead of a red one. “The Kingsguard have sworn a vow to defend the king *and* his family. Princess Myrcella is part of the royal family, so she should have a knight to protect her. I thought that Ser Jasper Peckledon might be better suited to the task, but I am confident that Ser Balon will do his duty well.”

“Ser Balon is loyal and stalwart,” Myrcella assured them. “He will not fail me, nor will Ser Arys and Ser Jasper fail His Grace.”
“And do not discount the silent giant,” said Ser Aron. “I would hate to find myself fighting that one.”

As would I, Myrcella thought. She knew what Gregor Clegane had done to the Targaryen children and it sickened her. “I would have Rosamund and Tygett with me as well, to serve as handmaiden and... well, squire, I suppose.”

Tommen looked disconcerted. “Tyg is of the King’s Companions, and I need someone to show the others how to shoot.”

“Surely Tyg is not the only one who can fire a bow?” she said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Oh,” Tommen said. “No. You can... very well. Is that all you need of us, Myrcella?” He sounded tired.

Part of her wanted to stay, but she thought that it might be best to let Tommen handle the Westerlords himself. I will not be here when the battles begin, and he needs to show that he can cope without my help. She rose from the table and left them behind without a word.

Back in her chambers, Myrcella had Rosamund fetch some water for a bath, while she and Tyg sat on chairs before the window, watching the snow fall slowly as they played cyvasse.

“We leave at dawn in three days,” she told him. “So you had best say your goodbyes before then.”

“I have no one to say goodbye to,” Tyg said, shrugging. “You told me once that we should look to the future instead of the past.”

“Did I?” Myrcella did not remember that, but she would not be surprised to hear that Tyg remembered everything that she ever said. He is more than in love with me; he is obsessed with me. She wondered to what extent he would be willing to go for her. “Tyg,” she said, “where are you sleeping?”

He turned so red then that the embers of the fire looked grey by comparison. “Uh... on the mountainside, my lady. With the other squires. It’s cold,” he added as an afterthought.

“I see no reason why you should not share my quarters until we leave the Tooth. There are two beds in here, after all, and it will be good for me to have a companion to talk with. I’ve had trouble sleeping lately.”

“I’m sorry, my lady.” He coloured again. “Are... are you sure?”

She gave him a small nod. “Why not? What harm could it possibly do either of us?” There will be whispers that the princess sleeps with her squire, but no man would dare to repeat them, unless they want me to prove that a Lannister always pays her debts. She could contend with rumours, for certain... but they would not do Tommen any good. “Perhaps not,” she intoned, “not here. But I have a large enough tent for both of us to share when we are riding to Harrenhal. We can keep each other company.”

“My lady,” Tyg squeaked. He scurried out of the room like a mouse, and left just as Rosie and two guardsmen were arriving with the water for her bath.

She did not have the same luxuries here as she did in Casterly Rock, no scented oils or bubbles, no Dornish sours to indulge in as she bathed, but with the warmth of the water soaking everything below her shoulders, she felt more at peace than she had in days. For a strange, brief moment, she was reminded of Trystane’s embrace. What would life have been like had he not died in the capital? Would she have returned to Dorne to sire his children, or would they have remained in King’s
Landing, with the Dornish joining the Lannisters as they held off Targaryen invaders from across the Narrow Sea?

One thing was for certain, though; she would never have ended up like this. Princess Myrcella had always had an aptitude for the game of thrones, but she had never been quite as calculating or determined until Trystane’s death. For she knew now that the family she still had could be torn away from her as easily as anything, and that only her efforts could stop that from happening.

The door creaked open and footsteps came inside. “Myrcella,” her brother said, then saw her sitting in the bath and averted his eyes. “I… I’m sorry.”

“You can look, you know,” she said. “When we were small, we used to have baths together.”

Tommen gave a strange little laugh. “That was thirteen years ago, not yesterday.” He moved to sit on the edge of her bed. “A lot has changed in thirteen years,” he said, “but not much of it for the better.”

“That’s not true. We’re far happier now than we were when Joffrey was still alive.”

“Yes.” Tommen picked at his fingernails. “The things he did… sometimes… did they ever actually shock you? Or did you become so used to his actions that they seemed… almost normal?”

Myrcella swirled the bathwater around with one hand. “Joff was never normal,” she said, “but… yes, I supposed to grew used to it. No, nothing he did really shocked me.” There was only one thing that Joffrey had ever done that shocked her, and it was better that Tommen never knew that she knew.

“I…” He stretched his arms. “There was something that you said today, Cella. When we were at the war council. You said that we would get the army of the Vale so that we could take back King’s Landing… and the Iron Throne.”

Myrcella gave him a sideways glance. She had expected nothing less from Tommen, of course. With a sigh, she rose from the bath, watching him even as he averted his eyes from her, dried off with a towel, and threw a robe around herself. Her hair was still wet as she sat down beside him. “The Iron Throne is your birthright. Father’s gift to you, and it has been stolen away. You have a duty to reclaim it, for the sake of House Baratheon and…” She trailed off, uncertain how to proceed.

“I have no intentions of being like Father,” said Tommen, “I will not have thousands die so that I can sit on a stupid metal chair. Would it not be easier, kinder, even, if I were to lay down my arms once Stannis is defeated, ride to King’s Landing with an escort, and swear our fealty to the Targaryens?”

He looked to her, a tear in the corner of his eye.

Myrcella slapped him. Not hard, but hopefully it was enough to make him realise the stupidity of what he’d just said. “You are a king,” she told him, gripping his hand hard, “the First of Your Name. And you are my brother, the only of your name. The Iron Throne is ours, not theirs, and we will take it back.”

“I will not sit back and watch more men die for me.”

“Then by all means, march forward and watch them fight, as Robb Stark once did.” Even as she said the words she knew that they were untrue. Tommen was no great conqueror, no true fighter. He was reasonably tall, yes, but not particularly broad in the shoulders, with thin arms that were not made for swinging a sword or holding a shield. And there was nothing imposing about his stare, not even the gleam of Joff’s unpredictable – but admittedly frightening – madness, nor did his words strike any sort of fear. He will never make a great king, Myrcella thought; she had known that for years. But he must try.
She reached up suddenly to his brow and pulled sharply at his hair, then at her own, drawing forth two long strands of spun gold, one from each of them. She held them up to the light for his inspection. “Gold,” she said, “A royal colour, and a Lannister colour. You’re right when you say that we have lost friends and family during these wars. Lord Tywin is dead, and our armies were shattered on the Tumblestone. Aunt Genna is dead and Trystane is dead. Tyrion is a captive, and Jaime is lost, missing, possibly dead himself. Our home has been taken from us, the Tyrells have betrayed us, and Mother is a broken woman. Yet here you sit, acting like a coward, suggesting that we roll over and die quietly.

“We will not die quietly. Get up, little brother. Get up and stand at the head of our army where you belong, where you are supposed to be. Show our men where their loyalties belong. Show them what Lannisters are, what we do to our enemies, what we do to those who hurt the ones we love.” She rose above Tommen, turned to him with wrath and fire in her eyes. “Show them that a Lannister always pays his debts. They will hear us roar from Casterly Rock to King’s Landing to Asshai-by-the-Shadow across the Narrow Sea. We will not stop until every Targaryen, every Tyrell, everyone who has ever wronged or betrayed us, lies broken and dying at our fight, with their armies shattered and in ruins. We will not stop until they bow before us, till the dragons are nothing but blackened bones, till every man, woman and child in the Seven Kingdoms are yours. You are not some boy-king. You are King Tommen of the House Lannister of Casterly Rock, First of Your Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Dārys Sikuda Dārŷi Vestero, and you will take what is yours. What is ours.”

Tommen looked at her, blinking rapidly. There was fear in his gaze, and a horrible realisation appeared to be dawning in his eyes. “Y-you,” he stammered, “Cella, you’re mad.”

“Perhaps I am,” she said, “or perhaps I’ve learned what the world does to cowards, to those who bow before its every whim and wish, to those who are too weak to forge their own path in life.” She took his hands in hers, met Tommen’s gaze. I should have been queen. She had always known that. Suddenly she pulled him close into a long, tight embrace, wrapping her arms tightly around him, holding on tightly, tangling her fingers in his hair. “You are not some cub who will go mewling for his mother at every opportunity,” she told him, “you are a lion of the Rock, and lions do not bow.”

And I am a lioness of Casterly Rock, she thought. And I protect my own.

Chapter End Notes

I loved this chapter.

That’s probably the reason why it’s the longest in TSK so far, longer than Sansa’s wedding: because I never wanted it to end. It is the definitive Myrcella chapter, all of her strength and hypocrisy and ferocity and borderline insanity and cunning boiled down into 9000 words.

From cyvasse games with Tommen to playing at seduction with Tyg, this is her chance to show the world what she is. Show-watchers may recognise part of her speech at the end of this chapter as being stolen from Cersei in the Season 6 episode “Blood of My Blood.” To be honest, that’s exactly what I was going for there. She is Cersei, but cleverer, smarter, kinder... and yes, possibly madder. The way she switched from Common Tongue into High Valyrian seamlessly in that final speech seems like something born out of pure (and possibly insane) passion. I think deep down she knows
that House Lannister has little chance against Dany's dragons... but at the same time, she
doesn't particularly care.

I should probably stop now, otherwise I'll have said everything that you'll want to say in
your reviews.

Thanks for reading. :)
Service and Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

“The Lord will do his work, and I’ll do mine, and we’ll keep our distance from each other.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAVOS

“And Aegon said to him, “I will not judge you by your lateness, Lord Stark, for I always meant to come to you last. Men will remember you as ‘the King Who Knelt’, but your house will be spared the fate of the Durrandons and the Gardeners and the Hoares.”” To that, King Torrhen nodded and said, “there are worse ways to be remembered.” Shireen laid the book down on her lap. Davos tried to make out the title: The Tale of Three Dragons.

“He was right,” Rickon said. “There was King Brandon the Burner, who set all of the Stark ships afire after his father was lost at sea, and King Daryn the Wicked, who tore down Greyscale and raped the womenfolk of the Sisters, and King Gerren, who…”

“I’m sure there have been good lords of Winterfell as well,” said Shireen.

Rickon rolled over. He was still muddy from the yard, and his cheeks were flushed red from the earlier exertion. Shaggydog sprawled by his side. The young lord was still dressed in his training clothes and he stank of the yard, but Shireen was either too polite to mention it or did not particularly care. “My father was a good lord,” said the boy.

Shireen raised a hand to her greyscaled cheek. “There have been lots of good Baratheons as well… and lots of bad ones, I suppose. Our house isn’t as old as yours, though. We only became lords of the Stormlands after Aegon’s Conquest.”

Rickon sat cross-legged on the bed. “What happened before that?” he asked.

“I just read that,” Shireen said, plainly annoyed. “Ser Davos, tell Rickon how it happened.”

Davos sighed. “I fear that all this history is going right over my head, princess.”

His lie did not fool her. “If you don’t listen, you’ll never learn.”

“Apologies, my lady. I never was very good at listening. It doesn’t come naturally to me.”
“You can’t serve as King’s Hand if you don’t listen to Father.”

*Your father is not here, child.* The last he’d heard of Stannis, the Baratheon soldiers had taken a score of castles on the Westerlands border and were besieging Wayfarer’s Rest, the last remaining stronghold, but that had been nearly a week ago. He could have gone another hundred miles by now. Perhaps he was already through the Tooth and marching on Lannisport. Lady Melisandre had seen Stannis at the city’s gates, but she hadn’t been sure whether her visions showed the present or the future.

Shireen was still glaring at him, displeased. “Well?”

She must have asked him another question while his mind was wandering. *So much for listening,* Davos thought. He was about to make his excuses when the door opened and made an excuse for him. It came in the form of Tywin Frey, the squire that Stannis had forced upon him. “My lord,” the lad said. “They’re here, at the gate. Lady Marya and your sons.”

Davos rose quickly. “Princess,” he said, “please excuse me.”

“Where are you going?” Rickon asked. “Can we come with you?”

Shireen nodded. “Please, Ser Davos.”

The onion knight hesitated. He had always intended for this to be a private affair, for the four of them to reunite quietly and without any fuss. *The Seaworth way.* But Shireen was a daughter to him in everything but name, and he found Rickon strangely endearing too. “Very well,” he said, “just don’t do anything stupid.”

“It’s only Rickon who does stupid things,” said Shireen.

“I do not!” Rickon replied as he passed through the door. “Your father said that I was mature.” He stuck his tongue out at her.

Today the air was chilly, touched by the suggestion of frost. The wind made a high whistling noise as it sneaked through the gaps in the newly mortared stone. Davos pulled his cloak tight around his shoulders. *Marya is here, and with her everything will seem a little less cold.*

It had been two years since Davos Seaworth had last seen his wife and their two youngest sons, and it was only due to King Stannis’s early thinking that they had made it out of Cape Wrath before the Targaryens had descended upon them. *But Stannis could not save Dale or Allard or Matthos or Maric on the Blackwater, and neither could the Seven, nor the red woman’s Lord of Light.*

They were waiting for him in the lower bailey, beside the ox-cart which had brought them from Maidenpool. Steffon and Stannis had never seen a castle even a tenth of Riverrun’s size before. They seemed so entranced by it that they scarce noticed their father until he was right beside them.

Steffon was eleven, of an age with Rickon and old enough to be a squire, while Stannis was thirteen, and almost as tall as his father. Both boys had their father’s dark brown hair and their mother’s blue eyes. “You’ve grown,” Davos told them both, holding back laughter.

“We have,” Steffon announced proudly. “So have you.”

“How so?”

“More grey hair.”
Davos could not help but laugh. “I suppose you are right.” Then he moved to his wife’s side and sketched a little bow. “My lady.”

“Don’t you ‘my lady’ me, Davos Seaworth,” Marya said as they hugged. “I should slap you; I thought that ship was going to kill us half our journey. You know how I hate ships.”

“You’ve married the wrong man, then.” He remembered his two followers. “May I present Princess Shireen, of House Baratheon, the rightful heir to the Iron Throne,” he said. Marya sketched the world’s clumsiest curtsey and his boys made uncertain bows, “and Lord Rickon Stark, of Winterfell.”

“I’m not really a lord, though,” Rickon said, “not while Bran is alive. But—” Whatever else he might have said disappeared when he started to stare at something behind them. Or rather, someone.

Steffon also got there before Davos could say a word. “You’re the red woman.” He pointed an accusing finger.

For a moment the awkward silence bloomed. “Yes,” Melisandre said, a little terse, “men have been known to call me that.”

“Lady Melisandre of Asshai,” Davos introduced.

Melisandre shrugged. “The red woman will suffice.” She raised a hand to Steffon’s cheek, her eyes glowing brightly as candle flames. “You are your father’s sons,” she said, and ruffled Stannis’s hair. “You should be thankful for Ser Davos. He is a good man, flawed as he may be.” Her eyes moved to Davos’s side. “And you must be Lady Seaworth.”

“Marya is fine,” said his wife, wary.

The red woman smiled. “Might I have a moment alone with your lord husband? My knights will be all too happy to show you to your chambers.” Ser Benethon Scales and Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain stood behind her. When Marya and the boys moved to follow the knights, Shireen and Rickon went off in the other direction, and he and Melisandre were alone. “It will start snowing soon,” she said.

“What do you want?”

“I want a great many things, Ser Davos. Most of all, though, I want to keep the realms of men safe from the Dark One and his servants. Winter is coming, the cold winds are rising, and my watch has begun.”

“Forgive me, my lady, but I do not share your love of riddles.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You don’t share my love of anything, Ser Davos. But we serve the same cause, and so we must work together rather than stand as enemies.”

“What do you want from me?”

“In Stannis’s last letter to you, he mentioned that he had taken the western Riverlands and means to march upon Wayfarer’s Rest, no?”

“Did the flames tell you that?”

“No, ser. Stannis sent me a letter as well.” She smiled at him. “His Grace will break Wayfarer’s Rest. I saw that in the flames. He will prevail at the Golden Tooth and Oxcross, as Robb Stark did before
him. Beyond that, though… it is your actions that will change the course of this war, Ser Davos, not your king’s.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come now, ser, there is nothing cryptic in that. For R’hllor to give Stannis a great victory in the West, certain costs are demanded of him. A price, if you will.”

“A blood price?” With the Lord of Light, everything came down to blood. The leeches, Edric Storm, that shadow…

She shrugged. “The ignorant would call it that.”

“And what would you call it, my lady?”

“Why, an act of necessity, Ser Davos.”

“I will not condone sacrifices,” he told her. “And neither will King Stannis…” I hope.

Melisandre only smiled at him. She went without another word. Davos watched her go, then turned and stomped back up the steps to his own chambers, crunching snow beneath his boots.

That evening, Davos found himself sitting at Lord Edmure Tully’s high table in the Great Hall of Riverrun, between Brynden Blackfish and Marya. Further down the table his boys sat with Rickon and Shireen. “If you come to the yard tomorrow, I’ll show you Shaggydog,” Rickon told them, spraying breadcrumbs from his mouth.

“I’ve never seen a direwolf before,” Steffon said. “Are they just big wolves?”

“They’ve got bigger ears,” Shireen told them, “but yes, Shaggydog is almost as big as a horse. They have bigger heads, too.”

“And he’s mine,” Rickon added.

At Davos’s end of the table, Lady Roslin Frey was looking tremulous, her fingers digging into her husband’s wrist. Her face was pale. “Are you expecting, my lady?” Marya asked.

“Yes,” Roslin said quietly, “I am, lady… ah…”

Marya shook her head. “I’m no lady… but I was a midwife once, and I have birthed seven sons of my own. I expect that you’ll be just fine.”

Roslin gave her a weak smile. “I’m nervous,” she admitted. “Especially after Jeyne nearly—”

The Blackfish let out a loud hacking cough, but he was too late. Jeyne, Davos thought, Jeyne Westerling, the Young Wolf’s widow. Wait…

Lady Roslin quickly looked down at her plate, but that only made her guilt more obvious. “Jeyne Westerling?” Davos asked. “Robb Stark’s wife?” Stannis will not like this, not at all.

Davos did not miss the sideways glance between Lord Edmure and the Blackfish. At the word Robb, Rickon’s eyes rose from his plate and he said, “Has she had her baby yet?”

“I told you—,” the Blackfish started.

“Would somebody please explain this?” Davos asked. “Pardon me, my lords, but there is far too
much mistrust at this table for my liking.”

Lord Edmure chewed his lip. “Ah, the truth of the matter is—”

“The truth of the matter is that we have not told you the truth of the matter, Ser Davos,” Brynden Tully said. “My nephew Robb’s widow, the Lady Jeyne Westerling, has… and there is no easy way to put this… she has given birth. A boy, healthy and hale. He is named Robb, after his father. He has the Tully colouring.”

“I’m sorry,” Roslin said quietly.

“You have nothing to apologise for,” the Blackfish said. “I expect you’ll want to know more, ser?”

“I will,” said Davos, “such as why you chose to kept this a secret from the king.”

No one spoke. On the tables the candles flickered, and the basket of bread sat untouched. “Lady Melisandre,” Shireen said at last, “she wanted to burn Edric, for his king’s blood, so why not young Robb?”

Davos stared at her. “You knew, my princess?”

“I thought Father knew as well,” Shireen said with a shrug, “and you.”

Edmure Tully was quick to agree. “Yes, we thought that you knew.”

A shame, my lord, when a fifteen-year old girl makes for a better liar than you. “I see,” Davos replied. “And where is Lady Jeyne now? I have not seen her at Riverrun.”

The two Tullys glanced at one another. “At Raventree Hall, with Lady Blackwood,” the Blackfish said.

Edmure added, “We thought to keep her and the babe separate from the rest of us, in case the Lannisters should come marching.”

“They’ll have to cross the mountains first,” Marya said, “won’t they?”

“Fear not, my lady,” said Ser Brynden. “They would be hard-pressed to pass this way.”

Marya nodded. “Thank you for the comfort, ser. Still, I am no lady.”

“I’m afraid I cannot stop the habit,” the old grizzled knight said, with a sad chuckle. “All these lords and ladies…” He got up and moved away, down the table to where the children said talking, and began to tell a story about the War of the Ninepenny Kings.

“Well,” Marya said to Roslin, “I’m sure that you’ll get through it all just fine, my lady. You have the hips for it, and the strength too, I think. And I assure you, the rewards of childbirth far outweigh its costs.”

Lord Edmure started to talk about outlaws ranging to the south of Stoney Sept. “Brave Companions, perhaps,” he said, “and maybe a few of the Mountain’s Men along with them. You never know with these sorts.”

Later, when the boys had been put to bed and the castle had quietened from its evening clamour, Davos and Marya sat on the edge of their bed together, neither speaking a word, for both knew exactly what the other was thinking. “Twenty-six years,” Marya said at last, “it’s been twenty-six years.”
“And yet I remember it as though it were yesterday.”

“As do I. You aren’t very good at proposals, Davos.”

Davos smiled. “Ever the romantic,” he said, “as you liked to tell me.”

“I still like to tell you that.” She shrugged a little closer to him, and he put an arm round her. “Salla drank two whole flagons of rum, I remember. And a third when he wished us a happy marriage, and an abundance of sons and daughters…” Her smile softened. “Davos… when the news came from the Blackwater, of Dale dead, and Allard, and Matthos and Maric… and we thought that you were lost as well, Davos. For a time. I… I felt lost too.”

“You did not give up, though.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “You didn’t give up, Marya.”

“No,” she said sadly, “but haven’t we lost enough to Stannis Baratheon already?”

He could feel the ghosts of his missing fingerbones. “Our seven sons only had the life they had because of Stannis,” Davos reminded her, “we have a duty to be Stannis’s men. Now and always. The words I chose for our house when Stannis knighted me – service and sacrifice – yes, they are our suffering… but they are also our strength.”

They had not slept together since Davos left Cape Wrath two-and-a-half years ago. And that night, feeling his wife’s head on his shoulder, listening to the sound of her soft breathing against his neck… well, if the night was dark and full of terrors, he supposed that they must have all gone away for now.

Come morning, he woke before her, and dressed in darkness. Downstairs on his desk, a new letter from King Stannis sat untouched, the wax seal unbroken. Davos cracked it open, poured himself a cup of weak red wine, and read:

Ser Davos,

Wayfarer’s Rest has fallen. The road is clear to the Golden Tooth. We had to stage a siege of the Rest for Karyl Vance’s sake so that the Lannisters would not kill his sons for his cowardice. I only agreed in the hope that it will better secure his loyalty. I have sent Tytos Blackwood south to circumvent Deep Den, though Jonos Bracken was rather aggrieved to be passed over for command, as I suspected. Blackwood has seven thousand, I have fourteen.

Once we get through the mountains we will have – I hope – good conditions to face this Lannister host. The Northmen are better suited to fighting in snow than these Westermen. If we break them once in the field, the lords of the West will come to my banners.

I have had word – doubtless coming your way as well – that Yohn Royce is at Pinkmaiden, laying siege to Lord Piper. It is time. You should tell Ser Brynden and Lord Mallister that the time is ripe for the march on Harrenhal.

Send my regards to Selyse, Shireen and the Lady Melisandre. Tell her that the rituals will be observed, Ser Davos. A false king’s blood is better than none.
Below, it was signed:

*Done in the Light of the Lord,*

*Stannis Baratheon, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm, Lord of Dragonstone and Storm’s End*

The letter was no more and no less than he had expected, brusque and to the point like the man who’d written it. Davos sighed and leant back in his chair. Outside in the yard, he could hear the faint sounds of sticks and swords clacking together, the sounds of morning sparring. He went to the window and looked out. Sure enough, Ser Malegorn of Redpool and Ser Brus Buckler were at their combat, and fast Ser Malegorn looked to be winning… but it was the other fight in the corner of the yard that caught Davos’s eye. He could make out the figures of two small boys fighting with sticks. One was Rickon, who fought with a ferocity that bordered on savagery, and the other… Steffon? Beside them, a weatherbeaten-looking Ser Brynden Tully stood watching.

As he descended the steps, Davos wondered whether the Blackfish would be taking his great-nephew with him when the Tully host left Riverrun for Harrenhal. It might be for the best, a much-needed opportunity to let Rickon simmer off some of his anger. The boy was accustomed to beating his opponents in the yard even after they had yielded, until the other boys came away with bloody bruises on their arms and legs, broken noses and worse. *On second thoughts, Steffon shouldn’t be—*

“Ser Davos?” The voice came from one of the cloisters. Turning, he found Princess Shireen sitting on a stone bench with a heavy book in her hands. Shaggydog was sprawled across her feet, his coal-black fur spotted with frost. When he saw Davos he glared at him with bright amber eyes.

“My lady.” Davos inclined his head. “Perchance you came down with Lord Rickon and my sons?”

“That we did.” Shireen was not alone. In the shadows stood the wildling woman Osha, hunched beneath her cloak of thick grey-brown wool, and Patchface, the fool with bells in his hat. Patchface had been seen with Shireen infrequently since Stannis had left Winterfell, but the fool was still present among Selyse’s court. No one seemed to enjoy his japes or his songs anymore, but he was still there.

“Lady Osha,” said Davos.

She scowled. “Spare me, kneeler. I want none of your courtesies. You and your kings.” Her voice was full of spite.

“My king. Stannis is but one man.”

“Aye. And yet half your folk look on him as some sort of god. That red woman most of all. There are no gods this far south, kneeler.” She retreated, a dark look in her eyes. Shaggydog turned and followed.

Patchface leapt across the cloister, the bells ringing loudly in his hat. The fool’s eyes went wide as eggs as he suddenly launched into song.

*“It’s always summer under the sea,”* he sang. *“I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.*
The Grey King sits upon his seaweed throne, I know, I know,
And faceless limpets cling to hearts of stone,
I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.

Under the sea, the wind has wings, I know, I know,
and blows green fire, to take the black away, I know, I know,
The crows are ravens and the gales are crows, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh,

Under the sea, all this to see, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

Davos stared at him. That is an evil creature, he remembered Melisandre saying. For the first time, he could not help but wonder whether the red woman had been as deluded in thinking that. Those were dark words, even if they were nonsense. “Patches,” Shireen said quietly, “go... go somewhere else. To the sept. To the kitchen. You like the bread, don’t you?”

“The bread will burn, the bread will burn,” Patchface sang merrily as he stumbled away, “three sheaves of barley, wheat and corn, burned, burned, burned bread, all, I know, I know...”

Shireen pressed a cautious hand to the greyscaled patch on her cheek. A flicker of worry crossed her face. “Ser Davos,” she said, “I think... I think you have a question for me.”

He nodded. “Last night, when we were at dinner—”

“I lied when I said I knew about Lady Jeyne’s baby.” Shireen closed her book. “I shouldn’t have, I know, but I didn’t want everyone to start shouting at each other.”

“None of us do, child.” But I do not think you are such a fool to believe one lie would solve all our conflicts. There remained the question of why the Tullys had chosen to keep their knowledge of Robb Stark’s child a secret from Stannis. What harm could a babe at his mother’s breast do to the king’s claims? The Northmen will not follow a suckling babe over Stannis Baratheon... will they?

New footsteps echoed in the cloister. Davos turned to see Ser Axell Florent approaching. The self-proclaimed ‘Queen’s Hand’ wore a cape of furs stitched with cloth-of-silver, and a pin shaped like a pair of antlers at his throat. “My princess, Ser Davos,” he said, “I hope this morn finds you well.”

“He had been expecting Selyse’s summons, oddly. The red woman will be there too, he knew. Go on, do your duty. Davos bowed again to the princess, and followed after the knight. Over the eastern ramparts, the sun was poking long slender fingers above the horizon. The frosty fields turned to milkglass in their glare, and the river shone like a ribbon of silver.

Queen Selyse’s solar was lit by an abundance of faintly flickering candles, but the drapes and curtains were drawn so that everything behind the queen herself was shrouded in shadow. Melisandre hovered at Selyse’s side like a fly clad in crimson, smirking at him. She knows something, the onion knight thought, unsettled. Something that I do not. A thick red shawl was thrown about her slender shoulders. Is she cold?

“Your Grace.” He went to one knee before the queen.
“Rise,” Selyse said. “This morning, I received a letter from my royal husband, Ser Davos. Lady Melisandre seems assured that His Grace will succeed in making it to the walls of Lannisport.” Her mouth set in a hard line.

“Pardon me, Your Grace, but I fail to see how this concerns me.”

“The walls of Lannisport are not Casterly Rock. Lady Melisandre warns me that your support will be required for my husband to prevail in the wars to come. And your obedience. The whole situation carries a certain irony, given that it was you who freed Robert’s bastard in the first place.”

“I fear I do not follow, Your Grace.”

Selyse narrowed her lips. “For the Lord to answer our prayer, we must needs offer up a king’s blood.”

“Stannis is on the march, my lady – you could send him a raven, I am sure His Grace would be—”

“Lady Melisandre says that the, hmm, offering, must be performed here in Riverrun. She has seen it in the flames, a great pyre, a sign of the Lord’s duty being carried out. Since you have hidden Robert’s bastard from us—”

Is she still talking about Robert’s bastard? “Your Grace, I—”

“Your complaints regarding the boy’s welfare do not concern me, onion knight,” Selyse spat, “But as it would happen, we have someone better than the bastard. And my royal husband’s blood runs through her veins.”

It was a moment before Davos realised what she meant. He heard himself take a sharp, involuntary intake of breath. She cannot mean it. But he knew that Selyse was sincere. Her face was not made to jest.

“Come now, Ser Davos,” Melisandre said, still smirking. “It will only be leeches.”

“For now,” the queen muttered under her breath, “The child is stubborn, Ser Davos, and she will not listen to my commands, as her own mother.”

And rightly so! You mean to use her blood in your magic. Davos took a breath. “Forgive me, but I… I do not think that His Grace would consent to this choice, Your Grace.”

“He will. Stannis loves the Lord of Light just as fervently as I do, and he would tell us to do what needs to be done.” She said the words which such self-assuredness that Davos almost believed her.

“My lady, Princess Shireen is a child.”

“She is much more than that,” Melisandre said in her silky smooth voice. “The king’s blood runs through her veins, as the Lord’s fire runs through the king’s. I saw what I saw, Ser Davos, and…”

“If there are ‘only leechings’, then why have you seen ‘a great pyre?’”

“A great tribute will require great spectacle,” the red woman lied through her teeth, “And with an audience to bear witness to the offering, the queen’s brave knights will be able to bathe in the Lord’s light.” She turned to Selyse. “I did warn you that this was useless. The Onion Knight will have no part in our plan. Not yet, at least.”

I will never have a part in your plan. Already he was thinking about whether it would be safer to
send Shireen away or to keep her close by. The first option seemed tempting, but then he remembered the suspicious looks between the Tullys at the dinner table the night before. *If they are plotting against Stannis, best to keep his heir at my side. For now.* “Perhaps there is hope for you yet, Onion Knight,” Selyse said, frowning as she was wont to do. “If you will follow the Lady Melisandre’s command and do the Lord of Light’s work—”

“Begging your pardons, Your Grace,” Davos interrupted, “but the Lord will do his work, and I’ll do mine, and we’ll keep our distance from each other. As King’s Hand, I’ll act upon my conscience and my instincts. I can do nothing more than that.” He bowed his head and backed away.

“You would defy the Lord?” asked Melisandre.

“With respect, my lady, I’ve been defying him for years.” *And I’m not dead yet.*

Chapter End Notes

There were a fair few developments here: the arrival of Davos's family, Melisandre's new plans, news of Stannis and Jeyne Westerling, but a lot of it (for me as the writer) was about tying up loose ends and putting minor characters back into play. Jeyne Westerling can hopefully play a part in the story in the Riverlands just as her brother and sister have their own parts to play in the Westerlands. And we saw Osha again, and Patchface - for only the second time in this series, I think. Honestly, I sort of forgot about him.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the lore behind Patches, the basics are that he's the sole survivor of a shipwreck, seemingly insane, possibly a vampire and some of what he says is prophetic. That being said, I'd be interested to see if any reviewers have any thoughts as to what Patchface is predicting in this chapter.

On Melisandre - everyone has that character whom they love even though they are generally unpopular with the fandom. Honestly, I like Mel just as much as Davos; she is genuinely one of the most fascinating characters in the story. And, yes, if there are any Melisandre fans out there... well, let's just say that you may be getting a nice surprise later in the story.
“This city stinks,” Numbers said, wrinkling his nose.

On Tyrion’s other side, Brown Ben Plumm laughed. “You clearly haven’t been to many cities, boy. They always stink.” He sniffed the air. “King’s Landing is a bit like Volantis, only the smell is less like fish, and more like nightsoil.”

“All cities smell of piss,” said Brown Ben. “But if they didn’t, then they wouldn’t be cities, would they?” He sniffed the air again. “But you know she’s a rare sort when the stench is worse inside the walls than in the encampment outside.” The rest of the Second Sons had set up camp behind them, between the pavilions of the Stormcrows and the Windblown. The Golden Company had their tents upwind of the city, and they were cleaner and somewhat better-maintained.

Their path was not clear. In Gin Alley, two men were fighting a drunken brawl in the street, battering each other over the head with bricks and shards of glass. Things did not improve as they reached the Sept of Baelor, where the stonemasons were hauling up blocks to help rebuild the seven towers. The sparrows were out in full force here. Tyrion was certain that he saw a dog’s head being brandished on a pike among the onlooking crowd.

The road from Visenya’s Hill up to the Red Keep was quieter and less openly hostile to them, but Tyrion was still on edge when he saw the smallfolk staring at him from the alleys. He tried to ignore them – he had long since grown used to the stares, after all – but it was difficult to unsee the way in which these men and women were looking at him. Hungry. As if I were a choice piece of meat. Despite all the Unsullied patrolling the streets, Aegon and Daenerys had not succeeded in making King’s Landing a safer place.

The anger of the peasants was bolstered by the enforced rationing that had been instated to preserve
food, and by the occasional Dothraki raids on the city that Tyrion had heard of. *We will need to sort those out first of all.* He had plans, aye, but they would be worth nothing unless he was actually allowed to join the small council. The sealed letter from Lord Jon Connington was a now-familiar weight in his pocket.

Tyrion could not help but reflect ironically on how similar his return to King’s Landing was to when he had first come here to serve Joffrey, armed with nothing more than a paper shield and his wits. He harbouried hopes that he would find the king considerably less psychotic than his nephew, and that the queen would not be quite as incompetent as his sister.

The Red Keep seemed more hostile than it had under the Lannisters. No less than twenty Unsullied stood guard inside the gatehouse, and twice that number on the walls surrounding it. They checked each and every man to see what he was carrying, and looked to identify their faces even if they flew the Targaryen banners above their heads. A few Stormcrows were present among them too. Their Tyroshi captain regarded Tyrion’s arrival with a suspicious look. “Dwarf,” he called.

*Naharis,* Tyrion thought, *his name is Daario Naharis.* He climbed down from his horse and bobbed a mocking bow. “How might I help you?”

Daario Naharis glowered. “Why are you here?”

“I have business with the queen. And the king. Royal business that is not for the eyes of you, sellsword.”

“The queen sent you to take back the Stormlands. Yet we have had no word from Lord Connington at Storm’s End.”

“Lord Connington had the common sense to realise that a dwarf like me would be of little use in a military encampment. So he has sent Brown Ben and I back to King’s Landing.”

The sellsword gave him a supercilious look. “The queen does not want to see you.”

“Have you asked her?”

Daario Naharis scowled. “Very well, little man. Come and ask her yourself. And do not blame me when she throws you into a black cell.”

Tyrion furrowed his brow. “Why, has Her Grace been throwing men into the cells of late?”

“No, but she has no qualms about releasing men from them,” said Naharis.

They stopped outside the oak-and-iron door of the small council chambers. “If you do manage to find some way into the queen’s trust, Imp, be sure to remind her that justice ought to be the same for thieves, rapers, and traitorous exile knights.”

“Aye,” Tyrion said, pushing through the doors, “and for sellswords too.”

Lord Tywin Lannister had been fond of hosting his councils above the Small Hall in the Tower of the Hand, but the Targaryens held them in the antechamber attached to the throne room. The sunlight through the open window threw up the shadows of six royal counsellors and the two monarchs.

The eunuch was the first to react. “My lord Tyrion,” he said, his eyes widening in surprise. “It is so good to see you again.” Varys occupied the middle of the table, between Aegon at one end and Daenerys at the other. Even from the first glance, Tyrion could see the clear divisions here: King Aegon sat with Haldon Halfmaester, Lord Celtigar and another counsellor on the left, while
Daenerys and Archmaester Marwyn sat on the right. A man who must be the new Grand Maester — if his collar of links and ermine-trimmed robe were anything to judge by — sat near to her too.

“I share the sentiment, Lord Varys,” Tyrion said, advancing towards the table. “It is good to be back.” He stopped his head in a low bow. “Your Grace,” he said to the king. “Your Grace,” he repeated to the queen.

“Tyrion Lannister.” The queen’s face was ice. “Why are you here?”

Straight and to the point. Tyrion could work with that. “I carry a letter from Lord Jon Connington,” he told the table, “you will note that his seal is unbroken.” He held the letter up to the light so they could see.

“It seems to be intact,” Varys observed. “Give the letter to the Grand Maester. Surely we can all rely on his sound judgement.”

Tyrion passed the letter into the old man’s grasp. His hands shook less than Pycelle’s as he broke the seal and read. Then he said, “Lord Connington, the Hand of the King, requests that we grant Lord Tyrion a seat on the small council, so that he may use his proven expertise in certain matters to help us govern the realm.”

Lord Varys rubbed his hands together. “While no one can deny Lord Tyrion’s capabilities, I must admit that there are certain concerns to be voice. Especially when we consider that he has served our enemies in the past—”

“I hardly think that such a thing should be held against him,” King Aegon said. “A man’s deeds in the past do not necessarily dictate what he does in the future. And I must remind you, my lord, that you served the Lannisters as well.”

“And Robert Baratheon,” added the youth at King Aegon’s right. He had silver hair among other Valyrian features; his doublet bore the seahorse sigil of House Velaryon, but its colours were reversed. A bastard, then. A Waters, born of the Crownlands. “At least Lord Tyrion did not serve the Usurper, Varys.”

The king scowled. “Lord Varys has supported our house since before Robert’s Rebellion. And I have a debt to repay him that cannot be forgotten. Without his help, I would not be here today.”

And Daenerys would sit the Iron Throne alone, Tyrion thought. He cleared his throat. “I beg pardon, my lords, Your Graces, but I think we should give some consideration to what Lord Connington has said.”

“The Hand is not the king,” Aegon said, “but I trust in Lord Jon’s decision, and I would be in favour of letting Lord Tyrion join our councils. I am certain that he knows what fate will befall him should he betray us. My lord, have a seat—”

“The queen has not yet spoken,” said Archmaester Marwyn.

Daenerys turned to study Tyrion, her eyes glowing like two amethysts. “I have no reason to trust you, Tyrion Lannister. So tell me, why should I?”

“I will not lie to you. You don’t have a reason to trust me, Your Grace. But there is little that I can gain out of any betrayal. The Unsullied and the City Watch guard all seven gates of this city, and I have neither the guile nor the stupidity to try and escape them. And suppose that I did, where would I go? Casterly Rock? My sister will have me hunted down as soon as she hears of my escape, and if by some miracle I did reach the Rock, she would have me thrown in a dungeon. At least here, I have
opportunities to rise high in the world. Who knows, maybe you will trust me enough to grant Casterly Rock to me someday.”

The queen’s eyes never left him, but she did not say a word. Tyrion took that as permission to take his seat. He chose a chair at the middle of the table, halfway between the feuding monarchs. “I fear that I am not entirely up-to-date with the situation in the realm,” he told them as he poured wine. “It has been a while since I was last in any one place long enough to receive reliable news.”

“You will probably know that your former wife Sansa Stark has fled her marriage with the Tyrell heir Willas and disappeared into the wilds,” Varys said. “We do not know where she is.”

“Do your little birds not stretch so far, Lord Varys?” the Velaryon mocked. “Did you run out of little boys to ferry your—”

Tyrion interrupted. “I fear we are not familiar… Lord…”

“I am no lord,” the youth told him haughtily. “But I am the son of the late lord of Driftmark—”

“The bastard son of the late lord of Driftmark,” said Archmaester Marwyn. “Lord Tyrion, you have the good luck – or the misfortune, as I see it – to meet Aurane Waters, the Bastard of Driftmark.”

Waters made to argue, but the queen gave him a frosty look that silenced his complaints at once. “Wonderful,” Tyrion said, “what of Dorne? I’ve heard no shortage of news from the south, but unfortunately none of it seems to agree on anything.”

“Prince Oberyn Martell is leading an army up the Prince’s Pass,” said Varys, “heading for Highgarden. Meanwhile, the Tyrells are under assault by Lord Randyll Tarly, who claims that the Lannisters in Casterly Rock have promised him the Reach as a prize.” He raised an eyebrow at Tyrion and for a moment a knowing smirk appeared on his face.

“Forgive me if I do not weep for the Tyrells,” Tyrion said. *It is no less than they deserved.*

Queen Daenerys affirmed. “Like it or not, we may have to help them. Lord Varys has suggested that if I were to offer a suggestion of marriage to Olenna Tyrell—”

Haldon Halfmaester coughed. “I must have misheard that, Your Grace. You mean to marry Olenna Tyrell?”

“Lady Olenna is on her way to King’s Landing,” the queen said. “When she arrives, I mean to see if it is possible for me to make a marriage pact between myself and her youngest grandson Loras.”

“You will find no love there, Your Grace,” Tyrion told her. “The Knight of the Flowers is quite uninterested in the wiles of women. And besides, he is a knight of the Kingsguard.”

“A Kingsguard to a false king. If the Tyrells should come to our side, no doubt they will be only too glad to have Ser Loras released from his false vows. And I am not looking for love in my marriages, Lord Tyrion.”

“Ser Loras may not see it that way,” said Lord Varys, “and the Fat Flower is notoriously pliable when it comes to accommodating the desires of his children. Look no further than Lady Margaery’s marriages. She has been a queen thrice now, and no doubt she would have no qualms about wearing another crown.”

King Aegon cleared his throat. “I am promised to Arianne Martell. I have sworn to marry Arianne Martell. There will be no further discussion on the matter, not while I am in the city and not once I
Again, this was news to Tyrion. “You are leaving the city, Your Grace?”

King Aegon rose from the table, throwing back his red-and-black cape. His fingers thumbed the hilt of the sword Blackfyre in its scabbard. “I am going to Harrenhal,” he said, “to negotiate with Lord Petyr Baelish and the lords of the Trident. Which is why I was so eager to see you raised to the council, Lord Tyrion, as Her Grace will no doubt find your knowledge of some matters invaluable in my absence.”

*Now there’s something interesting,* thought Tyrion. *The dragon means to bed down with the mockingbird.* He had absolutely no clue how that would turn out, but somehow he doubted that Littlefinger would come away worse for it. *Titles do seem to breed titles,* he’d told Tyrion, smirking at the dwarf’s expense. He would not be that surprised if Littlefinger somehow managed to buy the Iron Throne.

“Forgive me, my lords, but I think that it is time for us to adjourn for the morning,” the king said, already departing with his councillors. “By your leave, aunt.”

Daenerys gave a small, concise nod. Then she followed her nephew out of the room, the two maesters trailing behind her. Presently it was only he and Varys that remained. “Would you be so kind as to follow me back to my rooms?” came the soft, powdered voice of the soft, powdered man.

“Is that what you say to all of the little boys?” Tyrion jested, but followed him all the same.

Varys’s rooms were on the lowest level of the castle, not far from the Red Keep’s cellars. The only other time Tyrion had been here was to collect Shae for a secret tryst one afternoon. *M’lord had a hidden passage,* she’d said, giggling in his arms, *he pulled a special lever, and the bed rose up, and there was a secret tunnel underneath.*

The eunuch read his thoughts. “Perhaps I’ll show you some of Maegor’s secrets someday. The underground tunnels are twice as expansive as the castle itself.”

“Maegor the Cruel had all of his builders murdered,” said Tyrion. “If you ever show me the tunnels, I’ll be sure to know that my death is imminent.”

Varys made that soft tittering sound. “Oh, my lord, you amuse me. Why, if I were to kill you, I would be left with no friends in the world.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

The eunuch pushed the door open. “Ah,” Tyrion said, “it seems you have company.”

A pair of children almost as short as the dwarf waited in the corner of the eunuch’s chamber, glancing about with wary eyes as big as eggs. They moved past Varys as he entered, heads bowed, but Tyrion saw one of them slipping a piece of paper into the spymaster’s pocket. “Your little birds?” he asked when they were gone.

Varys ignored that. “I would offer you a drink, my lord, but I have nothing to give you.”

“No matter.” *Anything from you is likely to be poisoned anyway.* “I have survived without proper wine on the road for a few days. I am sure I can survive until I get back to my chambers.”

Varys moved to the wall and drew back a curtain, revealing not a window but a back room in his chambers, about ten feet square. In the middle of the floor, a large crate almost as tall as Tyrion sat
waiting. The eunuch picked up a crowbar and moved to it, prising off the screws that held the lid down. “No doubt you are wondering what is in here?”

“Aye,” Tyrion said warily.

“Something of great importance to me. I had to smuggle it into the castle, so I would appreciate it if you did not tell anyone.”

“You have my word.” For now, at least. If there were a situation where Tyrion would benefit from telling someone about this, he would happily give up the eunuch’s secret, and Varys knew that as well. Tyrion stood on tiptoe trying to look over the top of the crate, but he could not see inside. A somewhat sour smell was emanating from within, tinged with salt. The eunuch closed the lid with a smile. “Why are you keeping it in here?” Tyrion asked him.

“It seems the safest place for it,” said Varys. As he turned around, Tyrion tried to peek through the timbers of the box, and gave it a quiet kick for good measure. He felt something shifting within, followed by a rustling noise. Curious… is it alive, then, or…

Back in the main chamber, the eunuch bid him take a seat on the hard, comfortless bed. “Were you surprised to hear that the king is planning to treat with Littlefinger?”

“Somewhat. But if Baelish still holds young Lord Arryn, then it seems a logical step.”

“Oh, aye, I cannot deny that. Doubtless Petyr’s allegiance – or at least the pretence of it – would benefit us greatly, and if His Grace can rope in the Tullys and the Starks as well, then Stannis would stand alone, as would your nephew in Casterly Rock.” The eunuch gave him a small, sad smile. “I do hope that sweet Tommen will have the good sense to surrender.”

Not while Cersei is still around. “I think that any man with an ounce of sense would surrender if he saw dragons descending upon his army. Speaking of which, why has the queen not yet—”

“Daenerys only rides the largest dragon. The red-and-black, Drogon. And right now, he is nowhere to be seen. As for the other two, they have gone to the Dragonpit; Maester Marwyn seems to think that they are mating.” The eunuch giggled. “But in truth, my lord, the Crown is not in as healthy a state as you might think. Doubtless you saw those fanatics preaching on the steps outside the Sept of Baelor, crying out against the rule of dragons and protesting the raids of the Dothraki warriors and sellswords outside our gates. They are but the first of the challenges we must face in the coming weeks and months. Our debt with the Iron Bank of Braavos sis nearing seven million golden dragons. That must be resettled soon, before the Bank employs other means to take its due. And with the Reach and the Vale both denying us their crops, we are not far away from a complete famine. All is not well, Lord Tyrion.”

“I never presumed that it was. I hope you forgive me for saying so, but the council seems incapable of making any sort of compromise decisions – and neither do the king and queen.”

Varys smirked a little. “Oh, but those are treasonous words, my lord. Come now, we both know what happens when the Targaryens fight amongst themselves.”

“All the world ends up worse for it.”

The eunuch’s lips narrowed into an uneasy smile. “Though that does pose an interesting question, I suppose… were it to come to that, who would the common people support? Which lords would declare for which monarch? And how about you, Lord Tyrion; a very small man with a very large shadow? Who would you fight for?”
No, my lord. The question is who would you fight for? Varys’s allegiance was doubtful to everyone save for himself, and while he had escorted Daenerys to King’s Landing in the first place, he had also convinced Tyrion to surrender the city to Aegon back when the king’s host had come marching up through the kingswood. “Well,” he said. “Let us hope that it never comes to that.” He stifled a yawn. “Pardon me, but the journey was rather tiring. If we might wait until the morrow to speak again, mayhaps?”

Varys nodded. “On the morrow, then.”

They had given him his old chambers above the Kitchen Keep, where he had slept when he was master of coin. They did not lack for comforts, but Tyrion wished that they had not put him here. There were too many bad memories. *Shae. Sansa. Tysha.* The memories of the women he had known and loved haunted these halls.

Numbers was sitting on the windowseat when he came in, watching the rain. “Squire!” Tyrion called, “a cup of Dornish wine, please. A strong vintage, strong enough to keep me awake for another couple of hours.”

The boy turned from the window. “You don’t have any wine, my lord. It’s all down in the cellars.”

“I am sure that no one would miss one cask.”

Numbers nodded and went down the stairs. Tyrion listened to his footsteps fading away, then waddled across the chamber to the window.

He sat. And daydreamed of Tysha. He remembered telling her about his uncles Gerion and Tygett. “They sound like good men, m’lord,” she’d said, tousling his hair with her slender fingers, and then pressing a kiss to his lips. “*But not nearly as good as you.*” He had been a sweet, shy boy of five-and-ten back then, hardly knowledgeable in the woes of the world, and not yet accustomed to its evils either. *Like whores.* He’d only sought their company after Tysha’s departure from the Rock. Uncle Gery had hoped that a whore’s presence would cheer his sullen nephew, but Tysha had been the only girl he’d ever wanted. *She was no whore. Jaime said she was a whore, but she never looked like a whore, and she never acted like a whore.* Shae had pretended to be his lady as well, but Tyrion had never doubted what she was. *If Tysha was no whore, then why did he lie to me?*

A sharp rap on his chamber door roused him again. Tyrion turned, expecting Numbers… and was surprised when he looked up and saw Daenerys Targaryen, flanked by four Unsullied guards and her manservant. “Lord Tyrion,” she said, “might I join you?”

“My chambers are still something of a mess, though, and I cannot offer you any wine at the moment. My squire has gone to fetch some, so your manservant may be expecting a boy—”

“Ser Jorah is not my manservant,” said the queen. “Though I am not quite sure what he is, truth be told.”

Tyrion understood then why the Tyroshi sellsword had seemed displeased with his queen. He had seen Jorah Mormont winning the final bout of the tourney, and he had seen the man being dragged away by the queen’s men, yet here he stood, in spite of what he had done. Tyrion was not sure what to make of that. “Well,” he said hopefully. “I’m sure you’ll find a role for him. How can I help you, Your Grace?”

“Lord Connington sent you to advise me, didn’t he?”
“Yes.”

“Well,” she replied, “advise me, then.”

Tyrion gave her a quizzical look. “On what, Your Grace?”

She sighed. “Ruling. It is not what I expected it to be.”

“Well, Your Grace, that would depend on what you expected it to be.”

“In Meereen, I ruled with the support of the common people,” Daenerys said, “I was certain that I would find the same here. Do you know what they shout at me in the street, Lord Tyrion? They tell me to go back to Essos, that they do not want me here, they do not need me here.”

“Perhaps they do not. I doubt you are the first ruler to hear that.”

“Ser Jorah once told me that the common people pray for rain, health, and a summer that never ends, for bounty and happiness. But I have not brought that to them, despite my efforts. I hoped that my time in Meereen would have given me some knowledge of how to help them, but they only seem to want me gone.”

“As you said, their wants are simple, Your Grace. Food, happiness and safety. And if getting rid of you would be their easiest path to those aims… well, it might seem the sensible thing to do, from their point of view. From what little I heard passing through the streets and at the small council this morning, it is your Dothraki and your sellswords who must take some of the blame for their woes.”

“So you would have me banish the Dothraki?”

“Not banish them, but perhaps they can be put to better use. They have horses, which can be used to pull ploughs or—”

Daenerys shook her head. “The Dothraki are a warmongering people, not farmers.”

“Until you tried, the Dothraki had never crossed the Narrow Sea, but at your command, Your Grace, they will do anything.”

She gave that a moment’s thought. “As you will, Lord Tyrion. I hope that you are right.”

“Pray forgive me, Your Grace, but I do not think that you came all the way to me to ask how to deal with a few problems that you could have laid before the small council. I am but one man, and—”

“I do not trust the small council,” she said, “I do not trust you either, but in time, perhaps I will change my mind.”

“I hope you do,” Tyrion replied, as she rose from her chair. They are trying to win me over already, he thought. He wondered how long it would be before Aegon came calling.

Chapter End Notes

Admittedly, this was one of those short, filler-esque chapters with not much happening, though Tyrion did at least get his place on the small council, and we got a bit of Daenerys-Tyrion interaction. It was necessary, but admittedly boring. By the next KL
chapter, Aegon will have left the city to head to Harrenhal, where a lot of our major characters are converging. Also, Olenna will be in KL, and we all know that she's capable of livening places up.

Tyrion's story will pick up very soon, but we have to get some of the bad bits over and done with first. I'm afraid his stuff is a lot slower in TSK than it was in A Coat of Gold, though we do get new characters like Numbers (who replaces Pod and Tyg in the previously vacant position of Tyrion's squire/helper).

The only question is this: what's in Varys's box?
A strong wind whistled through the dusk, bringing with it a smattering of snowflakes and the threat of goosepimples. It was enough to make the sparks waver and dance and flicker, but not enough to make the kindling catch. Her father had taught her how to do this when she was eight, but Sansa had been a stupid little girl back then, and she could not remember his words properly.

“You need to move the sticks faster, my lady,” said someone behind her, “And those leaves are wet, so they’ll make poor kindling. Or you could just come and sit by the fire that I’ve already built, and save yourself quite a bit of trouble.” Jaime Lannister smirked. “The choice, Lady Stark, is entirely yours.”

Sansa twisted the stick back and forth, eager to show him that she didn’t need his help, not his stupid help. But then the wood caught in a crack, and before she knew it, the stick had broken clean in half.

“What a shame,” Ser Jaime said sardonically.

Sansa whirled around sharply. “Why are you here?” The question had been pressing on her for nearly two weeks, but she had never gathered the courage to ask until now. “Why? You have no reason to want to rescue me. Shouldn’t you be in Casterly Rock—?”

“I swore an oath to your mother,” he explained.

“You’ve broken oaths before.”

“That I have. Best not to make a habit of it.” The Kingslayer arched an eyebrow. “Surely Brienne has told you who sent her to look for you in the first place?”

“And you expect me to believe that you agreed to coming along on this quest of your own volition?”

“When did I say that? I had no choice about rescuing you, no more than you had about being rescued by me.”

“You didn’t rescue me.”
He leaned close to her face. “Would you rather be rotting in some Lannister dungeon, as my sister would have it? Brienne was not the only person out looking for you.”

Sansa scowled. “Do you take me for a fool?”

“Of course not, Lady Stark.”

“I would have to be a fool to trust a man who killed his king. Wouldn’t I?”

“That seems a little unfair. Especially considering that you barely know me.”

“Your sister—”

The Kingslayer sighed. “Cersei and I are twins, but we are not one and the same. Whatever misgivings you have with her, I cannot answer for them. Until our recent meeting in Highgarden, I don’t believe that we’d ever spoken more than one word to each other. We did not meet at Winterfell, I know that for sure.”

“Oh?” She had seen him in the courtyard, all golden and smiling, back when he still had two hands. For one stupid moment she’d thought he was the king.

“You would remember if you had.”

He is right. “Yes,” Sansa said acidly. “There are no men like you.”

“Indeed,” he replied, “there are no men like me.”

“No man so dishonourable,” she said, rising.

“I know.”

That made her halt in her tracks. “You are proud of that?”

“No. But it does not make the fact any less true. My honour is beyond repair, Lady Stark. The one thing I can do now is to ensure that my cloak does not get any muddier than it is already. Would you present a challenge to a man just trying to make the best of a bad reputation?”

“Yes,” Sansa said, “Tysha.” She left him there.

It was busy around the firepit, but she found a spot near Brienne and Podrick, comfortably away from the Kingslayer. She was not far from the Brotherhood’s smith Gendry and the pale-haired, lanky youth Edric Dayne, who was the lord of Starfall. Away from the campfire, Sandor Clegane leant on a tree, chewing sourleaf.

The last few days’ riding had been hard. Lem Lemoncloak wanted them to make it to Stoney Sept before the rain started up properly again, so they could sleep through the worst of the storm in a place with a roof. They were in the Riverlands proper now, away from the perils that the Tyrells might present, but ever since crossing the Blackwater a new threat had plagued them: outlaws. Every village they came across had been ransacked once or twice, though nobody seemed to know exactly who was responsible. “They came in the night, like ghosts,” one old woman had told Lem, “an’ left just as quiet, m’lord.”

Lem only replied that he was no lord. The Brotherhood gave the townsfolk a bag of gold – Sansa did not know where they had gotten the gold from – and then they had been on their way, taking nothing from the place but the blessings of the villagers.
Later, at a place called Pine Hill, an old dwarf woman even shorter than Tyrion had come before them, some strange wisdom twinkling in her eye. “The wolves have come again to my hill,” she sang, her eyes never leaving Sansa. Then, in a strange low voice that no one else seemed to hear, she said, “Sweet child, the red wolf tumbles and falters and falls. Red shall be their crown and red their shroud.”

“I saw a wolf not long ago,” the old woman continued, louder this time, “it was in a dream, a dream, a dream that I dreamed.”

“What else have you seen?” Anguy asked.

“Oh, many things, boy. Things that you would never want to see. The black wind is cold but the green wind is warm. Three heads has the serpent that knows the fate of the world. I saw a kingdom of eight thousand years, all that men had learned, and the cold consumed it all alike, while stormclouds thundered and churned.” Her eyes found Gendry. “Come close, my child, and let me see.” The ancient eyes widened, milk-white. “Yes, I see it now. In a coat of gold or a coat of black, a stag is fury born, but I saw that pride comes before the fall, and they shall fall, not fly. Bloody is the slash that brings the dragon morn.

“I saw a kraken king rising in the depths of the grey lord’s halls. I saw a griffin smoking and a dragon breathing tears of sorrow. And in the north I watched a crow scream on and on, and the doors of night breaking. Farewell, goodnight.” Then she lapsed back into silence, and moments later she seemed confused by their presence.

“Why did she want to look at Gendry?” Sansa asked Brienne as they rode away. That was how Sansa learned that Gendry was the bastard son of King Robert Baratheon, a more trueborn heir to his house than Joffrey ever had been. Edric Dayne told her more: she learned that Arya had met the old woman the last time the Brotherhood had travelled to High Heart. “She didn’t like her, though,” Edric he’d added, riding off without bothering to explain what he meant.

It started to snow, but the fire kept burning. Sansa remembered Winterfell and the Eyrie and all the other places where she had been warned that winter had come, and it made her a little sad. But now I’m going home. She hoped telling herself that would make it true somehow.

They supped on rabbit-and-lentil stew, with rounds of barley bread and bland brown ale to wash the food down. “M’lady?” she heard from her left. “Lady Stark?”

“Yes?”

Gendry did a clumsy half-bow, and his cheeks coloured. “Sorry, m’lady. My lady. I mean... sorry. It’s just that your sister always said that you were a proper lady.” He looked at his feet. “Sorry, m’lady,” he repeated. “Lem wants to know if you’d like any blackberries. Fresh-picked, he says.”

“No, thank you. I’m full.” But she stopped Gendry as he turned away. “Wait.”

“M’lady?”

“You travelled with Arya, didn’t you?”

For a moment he looked almost afraid to answer. “Yes, I...” He reddened. “Wait a minute, m’lady.”

When he returned, Edric Dayne was with him. “My lady,” he greeted her. Everything he did seemed effortless next to the fumbling awkwardness of the bastard smith. “Gendry told me that you needed our help.”
“It’s about Arya, my sister. You travelled with her?”

“Well,” said Edric. “I did, but only briefly. Gendry was with her for months before that. I beg your pardon, Lady Stark, but if you have questions about your sister, you’d be better off asking him than me.”

Gendry’s ears flared red. “My lady.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“A-Arya said that you’d like it, my lady. She didn’t, though.”

That brought a smile to Sansa’s face. Of course she didn’t. Arya was never made to be a proper lady, no more than I was made to travel the open countryside with a band of outlaws. Sansa was certain that she would not have survived a day on the road, just as Arya would not have survived a day in Joffrey’s company back in King’s Landing. “How did you find her?” she asked.

Gendry told her everything, about Yoren the black brother who had brought them north, about how the gold cloaks had come looking for him because he was King Robert’s son, about how they’d been captured by Polliver at Harrenhal, about how she’d made the weasel soup and how they’d escaped from Lord Bolton’s captivity and how they’d come to be captured again, by the Brotherhood without Banners. About some boy called Hot Pie and another called Lommy Greenhands, about Jaqen H’ghar the assassin and Vargo Hoat, the Goat of Harrenhal, and all the rest.

“Do you know where she went?” Sansa asked. “After you…”

Gendry shrugged. “The Hound took her,” he said, pointing to where Sandor Clegane sat astride a tree stump, sharpening his broadsword. “You might be better off asking him, m’lady.” He turned red again. “I could ask him for you, if you’d like. I know he’s…”

“Frightening? I’ve seen far worse than the Hound. He isn’t a monster, he’s just… well, a dog.” He says as much himself.

“Arya said that he killed the butcher’s boy,” said Gendry. “Her friend. Sorry, my lady, I shouldn’t have—”

Sansa nodded and let him go back to his work, but her eyes stayed fixed on Sandor Clegane. He killed the butcher’s boy. Arya’s friend. He could have just pretended, said that he ran away, but he hunted down and he killed him.

“Killing’s the sweetest thing there is,” he’d told her once. “Your father was a killer. Your brother is a killer. The world is built by killers.”

No one remembers the weak. She could not remember the butcher’s boy, not his name, not anything he’d said, nothing save for the shock of red hair and the freckled face that she’d seen running away as Arya and Joffrey fought at the ruby ford. Sansa suddenly felt sick. She went to Brienne. “I am retiring to our tent for the night,” she said. “We could all do with a good night’s sleep.”

She went to the stream first, to wash her face and to make water. It was unglamorous, but it was better than the alternative. Afterwards, she said her prayers – it had become something of a ritual for her, even though she was unsure that they actually meant anything – and went inside the tent that she shared with her companions. Podrick was already asleep in the corner, muttering something about how ‘he’d serve his lordship gladly, but was unsure where to find cranberries,’ whatever that meant. Sansa settled down opposite, pulling off her cloak and wrapping herself in furs. The snow was coming down faster as she shuffled over to close the tent flap.
Outside, she heard whispering, and the crackling of the fire. She saw Jack-be-Lucky talking with Swampy Meg, and the twins Arron and Rory chasing each other at their play. Someone was boiling mulled wine in a kettle. For a moment she was tempted to go back out and join them, but tiredness was slowly overtaking her, and she did not think she could face anything else tonight.

“M’lady,” Podrick Payne mumbled, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “You’ll catch a cold.” He moved to help her.

“I am capable of closing a tent flap, Podrick.”

“Yes,” he mumbled. “You are. Sorry, my lady.” He shrank back into his furs. “My lady said,” he began, “I mean, not you, my lady, but Lady Brienne. She said that I should ask you.”

“Ask me what?”

“Ask. If you were feeling alright. I mean, are you alright? My lady?”

“Yes, Podrick,” she replied. “I’m just a little cold, like you say.” She glanced out of the tent flap. “There’ll be a couple of inches of snow on the ground come the morrow.” Then she shut the flap.

“Oh,” Podrick said. “If you’re cold, you can have one of my furs. My lady.” He shuffled around in the corner. “I don’t need them all.” His voice broke a little. “I mean, I’m not like you right now. Not cold, that is.”

“You’re a terrible liar, Podrick.”

“Sorry, my lady.”

“If we’re cold we could share,” he blurted suddenly. “I mean, you could borrow… uh… Lady Brienne’s…”

“You’re a terrible liar, Podrick,” Sansa said again.


“You were not wrong, though.” Sansa shuffled towards the other corner of the tent and lay down beside him. “You needn’t look so embarrassed, Pod.”

He turned away from her, blushing nearly purple. Podrick hurriedly shoved one of his furs towards her and fled as far away from her as he could manage without leaving the tent.

“Lord Tyrion,” he said, after an age. “He said I should tell you someday.”

Sansa squinted at him. “Tell me what?”

“The story of my house. The sigil. I mean, the reason behind the coins. Since you can’t sleep. We, I mean. My lady.”

“Stories… stories are nice.” Stupid, yes, but nice all the same.

“Very well, my lady. There was once a hedge knight. Ser Parson Payne, they called him. Because that was his name. He was in a tourney. At Lannisport. Or Casterly Rock, maybe. When the Casterlys were still around, that was, before the Lannisters. So it wasn’t Lannisport, then, I suppose...”
Podrick broke off suddenly. “I’ll tell you some other day,” he mumbled. “Not now. I can’t really remember it. Do you want to hear a joke about a honeycomb and a jackass, my lady? Lord Tyrion told it. Sorry, my lady.”

“Sorry for what?”

“Ass. I mean, it’s a rude word for ladies to say. Even though I’m not a lady.”

Sansa yawned. “I’ve heard plenty worse, Podrick. Whenever… whenever Arya heard a new word like that in the yard, she used to come into my room and shout it at me at the top of my voice. I had to cover my eyes and bury my head in the pillows so that I couldn’t hear it, but it never worked. One time, Septa Mordane was in there, and she didn’t notice. She said that she would have hit Arya with a lash for her rudeness, if Father hadn’t forbade her. So she made her clean the floor of the Great Hall with only a tiny brush, every night for a week. By the end she had sores on her hands. “I’d sooner have taken the lashes,” she told me. “At least then it would’ve been over quickly.”” Sansa let out a bitter laugh. “We were so stupid back then.”

When Pod did not reply, she thought that he had fallen asleep. “My lady,” he said eventually, “at… at least you had brothers and sisters once. At least… well, you had friends. And family. I was my father’s only son. He died when he was small. My mother ran away.”

Sansa knew that he was right. At least we had a family, for a time. She would have given anything to go back to Winterfell, before King Robert had come north, even if only for a day. A day would be enough. She inched a little closer to Podrick, and put her arms around him for a short, fleeting moment. This time he did not even blush. “You do have a family,” she reminded him. “And so do I.”

That night, she dreamed that she was walking through the crypts of Winterfell, past the Kings of Winter on their granite thrones, past the great stone direwolves that curled up at their feet. The hall was dark, and the faces looked scary in the weak light, but Sansa was not afraid. I am home, she thought. At the end of the hall, she found her father’s statue. His stone hands gripped Ice by the pommel, so tightly that he seemed like to break it. Ice crystals glimmered off the blade. As she watched, his head moved slowly upwards, making the sound that snow made when you crunched it underfoot. “The pack survives, Sansa,” he told her in Bran’s voice. “Remember that, Sansa, and we will remember you. When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives.”

And then, from somewhere close by, there came the low mournful howl of a wolf. Aaaaaawhooooo00000.

She awoke all at once, tingling from head to toe. The air was cool. Podrick was asleep, snoring, deaf to the world, and Lady Brienne lay quiet and still on her pallet. The canvas of the tent shook as the wind whistled outside. Sansa was about to turn over and go back to sleep when she heard it again. Aaaawhooooo000.

That was in the dream, she thought. Sansa pinched herself to make sure that she was actually awake.

Aaaawhoooo000.

The howl echoed a third time through the darkness. This time it was so loud that Sansa was certain that everyone in the tent had heard it, but none of them woke. No, this howling was for her, and for her alone. It was more than just that. This was a calling.
She opened the tent flap just wide enough and stole out into the night. She was barefoot, the hem of her gown dragging through the mud, but Sansa did not care. Aaaaaawhoooooo. There was more than one wolf, more than one voice. *The pack survives.* She stumbled over a log, bracken cracking beneath her toes, up a bank, splashing down towards the stream—

“The fuck you doing, girl?”

Clegane was drunk, she saw at once. His speech was slurred, but the empty wineskins beside him were the real proof. He stumbled towards her like a blind man, his hand outstretched. “Little bird,” he said when he reached her, and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Little bird, you’re hurt…”

Sansa stood deathly still, frozen to the spot. The howling had stopped now. “I was walking,” she told him.

“In the middle of the fucking night?” He let out a hoarse, guffawing laugh.

“Did… did you hear the wolves?”

He leaned down, his face close to hers, almost close enough to kiss her. “Of course I heard the fucking wolves, girl.” His breath smelled of wine. “Whole fucking realm heard the fucking wolves, most like. Most folk have the sense to stay away from them, but you Starks…” He picked up his wineskin. “You want a drink, little bird?”

The way he thrust it into her face gave her little choice. The wine was all but tasteless, but it was so strong it made Sansa’s eyes water. Clegane laughed. “Like that?” His voice broke suddenly. “That’s my sorrow, right there.”

“You’re drunk,” she told him.

“Yes, little bird,” he said. “And not by accident.” He turned to face the forest. “Wolves are out here most nights. Your sister had a wolf.”

“Nymeria,” Sansa said. “Mine was Lady. Cersei killed her.”

He sat down on the hard cold earth. “Fuck Cersei, then. I’ll drink to that.”

Sansa summoned all of her courage. “Why did you work for her, then?”

The Hound let out a rasping, humourless laugh. “You wanted me to refuse the Lannisters? And besides, where else would work for a killer like me find work?”

“You… you’re not a killer.”

Anger flared up in his eyes. “You really are a *stupid* little bird, aren’t you? You think that I’d have gotten anywhere in the world if I wasn’t a killer? No doubt you’ve heard that I killed my first man at twelve, haven’t you? Should I tell you why? Gregor killed my sister, for a start. *Laena.* After he burned half my face off, she ran away, and went to tell old Ser Kevan at the Rock what he’d done. She got murdered by bandits on the way, or so my father said. Eventually he killed my father too, and made it look like a hunting accident. But before that, he made me his squire, and dragged me went he went to war. When Lord Tywin was riding to King’s Landing, Gregor rode ahead of him. On his way, he came across a tavern off the goldroad, killed the patrons and raped the innkeep’s daughter before murdering her.

“That night, the innkeep tried to kill me in return, his daughter for Gregor’s brother. He might’ve got me, and I doubt that Gregor would’ve given two shits, but I managed to shove a knife through his
head. I was so scared that I pissed myself and ran away, all the way back to our keep in the West. When my father died, I ran to Casterly Rock, hid from Gregor, made my way up from there to the Lannister household guard. So there’s a story for you, little bird. It’s not pretty, it’s no Florian and Jonquil, but it’s the real, ugly truth.” He laughed. “Might be you want me to talk to you about your sister now, eh?”

Sansa gave a mute, frightened nod. There was nothing else she could do. The Hound cackled that horrible laugh of his. “She was even worse than I was. Never thought twice about killing. Killed her first man when we were on the road together, though she might’ve killed more before then, actually. Some cunt who was one of Gregor’s soldiers, or something like that. Took a knife and stabbed him so many times in the throat with it that there was no throat left when she was done. I had to drag her away from her. She was screaming like a lunatic.”

Sansa’s breath caught in her throat. “Arya wouldn’t—”

“Arya would. Arya did. You think you knew your sister?” He laughed again. “She’s a killer, just like me. There was this other boy as well, some squire not much older than you. She stuck him through the stomach till all his guts were leaking out, till he was begging for mercy. I don’t know where she went. Most like someplace where she could kill more people.” His breath was hot on her cheek.

Sansa heard someone drawing their steel behind her. And not a moment too soon. But when she turned around, expecting Brienne, it was Ser Jaime Lannister who stood there, his sword gleaming bright as a comet by the moonlight. “Shame on you, Clegane,” he said, “scaring the lady like that.”

Sandor let go of her arm. Sansa had not even realised that he had grabbed it. She moved to stand beside Ser Jaime. “Are you hurt?” he asked her. When she shook her head, he turned back to Sandor. “As for you, dog—”

The Hound spat. “Go fuck yourself, Kingslayer,” he said, and stalked off into the night.

Ser Jaime watched him go, then sheathed his sword and offered his hand to Sansa. He helped her up from the riverbank, and led her through the sleeping camp, past the campfire. “You shouldn’t be up at this time of night, my lady. Best you get back to your tent before Brienne finds you missing and has a stroke.”

Sansa’s words caught in her throat. “Thank you, ser. I… I…”

“Think nothing of it. I am well accustomed to saving maidens. Though I doubt that I could have done much if he had decided to attack me.”

“He was drunk, I know. But I didn’t think he was that drunk. I didn’t think he would…”

Ser Jaime looked pained. “Wait,” he said, “you asked me about Tysha. Did Tyrion tell you…?”

“He told me,” Sansa replied. “How you bought her, and pretended she was—”

“No,” said Ser Jaime, his voice oddly thick. “She wasn’t. She was a common-born girl, only that. When our father found out, he made me tell Tyrion that lie. I hoped… I hoped that his feelings would not be…” He trailed off. “I will tell him someday. But please, Lady Sansa… let me tell him the truth on my own.”

For the longest time, she did not reply. He lied to Tyrion. To his own brother. For so many years. She knew that her lord husband had loved his first lady wife, however little he had spoken of her. “Why?” she heard herself say. “Why did you tell him that?”
“It’s always the same answer, Lady Sansa.” He looked unsure whether to laugh or sigh. “Someday, if we ever manage to get you back to your damned brother, you’ll realise that there are a lot of stupid things we do for love.” Then he walked away, and Sansa was left with only the cold ashes of the fire for company.

Chapter End Notes

There's not really much to say on this. I'm not entirely sure what the chapter's theme was myself, but it's something to do with the things men do for love, and also is part of Sansa realizing her Stark identity a little more. Admittedly, it's mostly filler, but I did like the conversations Sansa had with Sandor and Jaime.

The Ghost of High Heart was there too. So in the last four or five chapters, we've seen the three-eyed crow, Patchface prophecies, Melisandre, and now the Ghost of High Heart.

Well, thanks for reading.
Always Summer Under The Sea

Chapter Summary

“It’s always summer under the sea...”

Chapter Notes

“It’s always summer under the sea...”

- part of a song sung multiple times by Patchface during A Song of Ice and Fire

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

BRAN

The darkness was everywhere, flawless and absolute, a pool of shadow thick and choking and endlessly deep. Bran could feel himself slipping down among it, and the barest tickle of fear plucked at his heartstrings.

_Do not be afraid_, an old man’s voice told him, _darkness will be your cloak, your shield, your mother’s milk. Darkness will make you strong_. He took one step forward, and then another, pine needles crunching beneath his feet as he went. _This is a dream. I will never walk again..._ He said it aloud for good measure, and the sound echoed off the cavernous walls all around him. _“Never walk again, again, again...”_

“No,” a voice replied from somewhere ahead of him, _“you will never walk again, Bran, but you will fly.”_

This was not the first time that Lord Bloodraven had roused him from sleep to show him a mystical vision among the depths of the weirwood. He still felt a little scared, deep inside; his palms were sweating, and his furs clung to him like a second skin. _Can a man be brave when he is afraid?_

A soft winter wind ruffled his hair and spoke in his father's voice. _That is the only time a man can be brave._

Bran was not so sure. He could hear something scrabbling in the darkness above, watching him. _Just one of the Children_, he told himself. But when he turned, there was nothing, none of those reassuringly big eyes blinking back at him.

Underfoot, the ground was slick and wet. Bran put a finger to the mud and put it to his mouth. It tasted bitter. _Blood_. He could make out the vague grey outlines of stalactites hanging from the
ceiling, and he saw the droplets of blood, making their slow journey downwards, *splattering* against the cold stone of the pathway. A crow screeched, calling out to him. *Bran,* it squawked, *Bran,* *Bran,* *death,* *death.* He took another slow step, hearing the quiet splash of water this time when he put his foot down, watching as ripples spread across the deep. He could see it more clearly now, himself standing among the roots of the great weirwood. Before him, a pool of murky green water stretched out, unknowingly deep, lit up by the faintest shimmering crystal somewhere among the depths. Fingers of seaweed waved at him from beneath the water. It was the only way.

“*Bran,*” a voice called out to him from somewhere below. “*Bran,* Crow, crow, crow…”

He had always been a good swimmer. His father had taught him in the godswood of Winterfell, watching from the shore as Bran paddled and kicked his way through the hot springs. That had changed when he had fallen, of course, but here, the strength in his legs had returned, and he knew that he could do it, here and now. *The boy is a better swimmer than any in Winterfell, and a better climber,* Maester Luwin had remarked in jest. *Gods, he might well be half-animal himself.*

*Aye,* Bran thought now. *You were right, maester. I'm half a wolf.*

He stripped off his outer layers, bundled them up on the bank, and took a cautious step out into the crystalline lake. The water sparkled an iridescent green, and it was strangely warm, he thought. Then, with a final breath, he pushed out into the depths. He went underwater, his eyes blinking as they adjusted to the gloom. The view was surprisingly clear. In Winterfell’s godswood there was only algae and a few saplings growing on the bottom of the pool, but here he saw bright-eyed fish, swirling, dancing plants, and bright blue coral, almost glowing. He picked a piece up and ran it over his hands, and for a moment he was at peace.

*Bran,* the depths called out to him, *crow,* *prince of the green,* *green,* *green…*

He descended, feeling strangely at one with it all, feeling no strain from holding his breath, no resistance from kicking his feet through the waters, nothing…

“*Lord Stark.*” The voice came from somewhere ahead of him, and looking up and squinting, Bran saw him. He swam closer, close enough to make the figure out. *A man.* He was unusually short, with brilliant green eyes and seaweed in his short black-and-grey hair. He had a kindly face, lined here and there, with a smile that seemed to suggest a knowingness, a quiet intelligence. He wore a raven-feather cloak, with the black feathers flapping through the water, and a dark suit made up of pelts and animal skins and leaves.

“I’ve been watching you for a long time, Bran,” the man said.

“Who are you?” That was always the first question.

The man smiled at him. “Why don’t you have a guess?” He smiled. “Think of those closest to you.” *The eyes.* He knew them, but he could not say where. *Bran,* a voice called out to him, *Bran…* A girl’s voice, it sounded almost like-

“Meera.” He smiled. “You’re Howland Reed.”

The crannogman smiled at him and ran a hand through his beard. “That I am.”

“You knew my father.”

Lord Howland’s eyes crinkled with sadness. “That I did,” he said quietly. “*Eddard Stark was a great man,* as we both know. *It has been over a year now,* but I loved your father like a brother, and I still
feel his loss grievously.”

Bran nodded. *Can a man be brave when he’s afraid?* “Did you bring me here? Are you a greenseer?”

“You already know that I am not; Meera and Jojen have told you. Yet you are a curious spirit, Brandon, so you want answers anyway.” He smiled. “Not unlike myself. I am not a greenseer, but I know how to speak through these ways.

“As for whether I brought you here, no, I did not. Your own dreams - your own whims and wishes – brought you to me, child. As they will surely bring you to me in person, when the time comes.”

“The time for what?”

Lord Howland tutted. “So many questions. I’m afraid I have few answers. But I’m waiting all the same.”

Bran nodded. He stared around at the cavernous ceilings closing around him. “What is this place?”

“Under the Watch,” said Howland Reed. *Greywater Watch.* He blinked twice, adjusting to the gloom. “It’s beautiful…”

“That it is. As so many places are, and as so many places will be, until the Others come marching south.”

“Is that what you’re waiting for?”

“The Others? With any luck, they will not get here, no.” He smiled a little. “There is a place you must go, Brandon, and you must follow the call of home. You will know it in your dreams, and only you will know. Meera and Jojen are bound to follow you across the world if need be, but this time, you must be their guide.”

“Is this place beyond the Wall?”

Lord Howland shook his head, his hair floating behind him in a great black-and-grey cloud. “I think not. No… that one has already been found, and that is why the Others are coming.”

“That one?” Bran did not understand.

“Too much knowledge does a man harm,” said Howland Reed. “If you know of the place, it will throw your dreams off. I cannot tell you this, Bran, but believe me, you will know what you are looking for when you see it.”

“Can you not tell me anything?”

Howland Reed shook his head. “You *know* that I cannot,” he said. “And I know that you must go back now.” His lips turned into a smile. “Soon, Brandon, we will meet each other in person, but not here.” He glanced about. “It is beautiful beneath the sea-”

“But stay too long and you start to drown.”

“That’s right,” said Lord Howland, turning. As he went he glanced back over his shoulder one last time. “You remind me of your father a lot, you know,” he said. “He would have been proud of you. Never forget that.”
Never forget that. The rest of the world will not. Cripples, bastards and broken things. And he watched as Howland Reed faded among the darkness, carrying the last light with him. New voices joined him now, singing out his name. “Bran…” The girl’s voice again. “Bran, Bran, Bran…”

Then the world turned black.

He turned to glance upwards and found only the dark. Everything had faded away around him, the coral and the seaweed, the anemone and the shells, everything, all of it. Which way is up? he thought, panicking. Was it this way when I came down? He swam a few experimental strokes in the direction, and then in the other direction, and then another, and then water came into his mouth and fear took over all at once. The voices were all around him, screaming out his name in pain as he kicked his stupid cripple legs frantically, going nowhere, floundering, flailing, falling, drowning, drowning, drowning. Something swam past his ear, screaming his name, whispers all around him, and then another. Bran turned towards the noise, trying to take another deep breath, but failing, because now the water was in his mouth. Deep breath. Deep breath. Deep breath. He saw something floating close to him, and reached out for it, not knowing what it was, not caring, not-

Black hands reached up to greet him; a monster smiled back, his armour scaled with eyes, swimming through the dark, staring at him with one evil blue orb. He reached out with one, long, twisted blue finger and pressed it into Bran’s cheek.

He had never known a cold like it. The icy touch burned into his skin, and all the air was driven from his lungs at once. Somewhere, a raven was screaming at him. “The things I do for love,” it screeched, and then he was falling, down, down, down into his nightmare.

He saw his father sitting alone upon a throne of iron that writhed beneath him as though it were alive. The greatsword Ice was in his lap. “Orys Baratheon,” he said, “black of hair.” On an island in the deep dark sea, a woman was screaming as she gave birth in the middle of a thunderstorm. For a moment the thunder sounded like a dragon’s wail, long and low and loud.

“Steffon Baratheon,” said Lord Eddard, “black of hair.” Bran saw a ship smashing itself apart on the rocks, men falling, salt spraying into his eyes, a fool in motley being dragged down into the tempest, singing a haunting song that shook Bran to the core. “It’s always summer under the sea,” he sang. “I know, I know, oh, oh, oh. The Grey King rises, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh. The wind has wings and blows green fire, to take the black away, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

“Robert Baratheon,” said Father, “black of hair.” And two men fought in the swirling waters of the Trident, one with sword and one with warhammer, till the one with antlers on his helm drove the hammer into his foe’s chest and rubies scattered like drops of blood in the summer rain. As they flew, Bran caught the whispered word from Rhaegar Targaryen’s lips: “Lyanna.” And somewhere far off, in a tower beneath the baking Dornish sun, a woman began to scream.

“He has a song,” said Father in a strange voice, scraping his whetstone to sharpen Ice’s edge, over and over. “He is the prince that was promised, and his is the song of ice and fire.”

The world exploded, and Bran screamed. And then he was out in the open, breathing in air, gasping and spluttering for breath, over and over, eyes bleary and foggy. Someone crashed into him like a boulder, and he held on tight, crying without quite knowing why, sobbing and shaking. He was cold, he was shivering, and his clothes and his hair were wet through somehow, so he wrapped himself in the other. Meera. He pressed his face close to her furs and shuddered, holding her as tightly as she held him, and murmured her name over and over. “Meera, Meera, you’re here, you’re here…”

“We thought you’d gone,” said a voice from behind him. “Bran, you have to be careful.”
“He’s had a shock, Jojen,” Meera warned her brother.

“Nothing he couldn’t control-
Bran turned round and whimpered to him, “But I couldn’t! I couldn’t! I was there, and I don’t know
how… I don’t know… don’t know…” His salty tears ran down his cold cheek and into his mouth. They tasted a little like blood, he thought.

“Where’s Jon?” he managed to say, muffled. “Where is he?”

“He went down into the cave,” someone was telling him. Jojen or Meera, he did not know. “To find
Lord Brynden and tell him what was happening.”
He took a shaky breath and tried to remove himself from Meera’s embrace, but she wouldn’t let him.
“You’re cold,” she said, forcing him out of his furs. “Like you were underwater. You were shaking
in your sleep, and… you were thrashing, saying something about the knights of the nightingale on
their cold winter thrones.”

“I was.” Bran shivered a little, from the cold or from fear, perhaps. He did not know what any of that
meant, but he remembered. “I was underwater, with your father. Lord Howland, I mean. And then, he-”

All at once Jojen was by his side. “Y-you were?” he asked shakily. “What did he say?”

“He said that I’d learn where to go soon.” Bran smiled at Meera. Home. “Somewhere south, I think.”

“Somewhere warm, I hope,” remarked Meera. “None of us would argue with that-
“Aye,” Jojen said distantly. “It’ll be nice there. But… I need to know… where exactly did you see
my father?”

“Under a lake,” Bran told him. “I think it was Greywater Watch. It looked dark. The water was
green, though, not grey.”

Jojen shook his head. “Greywater Watch isn’t grey either. It’s just a name.”

“I know that. I’m not stupid.”

“I know.”

“But you do not understand.” The voice was not Jojen’s. It came from somewhere behind him, in the
shadows. Bran had to squint to see, and when he realised who it was he could not help but gasp.

Lord Bloodraven and Jon were rising out of the cavern, accompanied by Leaf and another three of
the Children. “You do not understand,” the old man repeated, “but you will.” He nodded at them. “I
would share a word with you, Jojen Reed.”

Hesitantly, Jojen climbed to his feet and disappeared into the dark. The Children ventured closer to
Bran, circling him. Leaf darted close to hand him a bowl filled with a gloomy liquid. He drank
deeply, expecting water… and could not help but retch when he discovered that it was nothing more
than weirwood soup. He nearly dropped the bowl, but Jon caught his hand. The splashed soup left
red marks on his fingertips. He turned to the Children of the Forest and said, “What is this?”

“Darkness,” Leaf said, “Brandon’s darkness. His strength, his mother’s milk.”

“Darkness will make me strong,” Bran said automatically.
Leaf’s big eyes glowed in the darkness. “Soon,” she said, “soon enough you will know the reasons why.” Then she glanced at Jon for a long second, parted her lips as though to speak, but relented, and slunk away into the shadows.

Bloodraven and Jojen reappeared at Meera’s side. “You must come with me,” he said, “all of you. Even Hodor.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor. He went to Bran’s side and scooped him up in his big arms.

Lord Bloodraven’s skin seemed to be glowing in the faint light of the cavern, and dust emanated from his skin, dissipating in the morning darkness. With eyes like lamps, the Children of the Forest fell in beside him. Scales and Ash and Snowylocks, if Bran remembered their names correctly. They led the way. Small glowing creatures with the forms of beetles and butterflies fled in their wake. From Hodor’s back, Bran stretched out his fingers along the walls of the tunnel, feeling for worms, wet leaves, and sticky red sap in the dark. He heard a mournful howling and turned his head to see Summer and Ghost following them down into the depths, under the hill…

Jojen and Meera had never been down this far before. Bran could see them marvelling at the intricacy of it all, eyes agape at the strange, ethereal beauty. “It’s magnificent,” Jojen said, “in a strange way.”

“It’s a strange place,” Bran said.

“That it is,” agreed Bloodraven from up ahead. “That it is.”

They went deeper still. Floating creatures as delicate as spider silk danced through the air, and the light from Jon’s yellow torch threw their shadows up tall as giants against the walls. The leaves seemed to part before them as they walked, and Bran could hear fleeing footsteps, and the distant whispering. “How far down does it go?” he heard Meera ask.

“As far as you can imagine,” said Leaf, “and further still. The younger ones among us live in the upper caverns, but in the furthest reaches of our world live the ancients, in places that no mortal man can reach.”

“Can we see them?” Bran asked. He was feeling curious today.

“Someday you may meet them,” the Child of the Forest called Snowylocks told him. “But it is not this day.”

He could hear the sound of water, at first only a few drops of it, then a slow trickle, then a downpour. They snaked around one corner, and then another. “Hooooooor!” shouted Hodor, his voice echoing all the way down the length of the tunnel, and then… all fell silent. For a moment Bran was afraid that they were lost, but then he heard splashing, and when he looked around he could see the great black river ahead of them. Hodor crossed carefully on glistening black stepping stones that were barely big enough for his feet, hopping from one to the next.

Then they were under the waterfall. He heard Jon give a sudden gasp at the cold, and he heard Leaf whispering, “they shall not pass, they shall not pass.”

When they came out on the other side, his hair was plastered down to his forehead and his face was wet from the spray. Hodor began to shout, shaking his head from side to side to shake the water out of his hair, and Summer and Ghost did the same, soaking Bran in turn.

The next thing he knew he was warm again, and a door was swinging shut behind them. The room was cozy but spacious, with two tunnels leading off, one on the left and one on the right. Leaf turned
back, to close the weirwood door shut behind them. The floor was littered with furs and green rushes. Lord Brynden seated himself on a low-lying branch, and bid Bran sit beside him.

“You cannot go back up there,” he said, when they were all comfortable, glancing round with some measure of anxiousness. “Scales,” he said, “are you ready to hold the door when the time comes?”

The Child of the Forest nodded, then turned away and disappeared down one of the tunnels. Bran suddenly felt very nervous. “Where are we?” he asked.

“At the very heart of the tree,” said Lord Bloodraven. “And here you must remain until it is time for you to go.”

“Go?” Bran asked. “Where?”

“Home,” said the old man. “You must head home, Brandon Stark.”

Bran shook his head. How could that be right? If he was supposed to have a destiny, then… “Back to Winterfell?” he asked emptily.

“In time. There will come a day soon when your visions will tell you that you must return to that place where you were born, to discover the past, the present and the future.”

“But can’t you teach me that?”

Lord Bloodraven laughed. “There is only so much an old man underneath a tree can teach you, Brandon.”

He did not realise it until then, but he was holding Meera’s hand. Reassuringly, he gave it a squeeze. Can a man be brave when he’s afraid?

Yes, her eyes said, that is the only time when a man can be brave. She turned to Bloodraven. “Why are we here?”

For a moment, he did not speak. And did not speak. “I must tell you a story, I fear, before it is too late. My story. If Bran has not already told you, then let me be clear: I was Brynden Rivers, bastard son of Aegon the Unworthy, the Hand of the King to my nephews Aerys and Maekar. The smallfolk called me the bastard sorcerer, a man with a thousand eyes and one, and I daresay I made a rather good spymaster.

“My mother was Melissa Blackwood, of Raventree Hall. Raventree lies within the Riverlands, but the Blackwoods worship the Old Gods just as they do in the North. Thus my mother raised me to keep the Old Gods, just as my father tried to convince me to worship the new. And my father was the king, while my mother was only his mistress, and a spurned one by the time I reached manhood. Thus I was recognised as my father’s son in the light of the Seven, and it was in their light that I once intended to wed my half-sister, Shiera, the woman I loved.”

“When the First Blackfyre Rebellion broke out I stayed loyal to her and followed her in standing beside my half-brother Daeron. At the Battle of Redgrass Field, I found myself facing the brother I hated, Aegor, whom men called-“Bittersteel,” Bran said, “he was a great warrior.” Then he realised that he maybe should not have said that.

“He was a mortal man, and he was flawed,” said Bloodraven, “and he was a fool.” He did not sound too angry, more disappointed at Bran’s rash words. “On the Redgrass Field, we fought with swords,
till he brought his blade down through my eye and blinded me entirely. Then the Raven’s Teeth climbed up onto the Weeping Ridge, and he fled. That was the last I ever saw of Aegor Bittersteel. It was the last I ever saw from my left eye as well, but that did not stop me. The pretender and his sons were fleeing the battle, but even as the blood poured down my face I took my longbow and loosed a shaft, and it struck Daemon Blackfyre in the gorget.

“Men would call me kinslayer for years afterwards. But I had other things to deal with. The three-eyed crow came to me in my dreams and told me that I could open my eye and see. I cannot very easily tell you how I managed that here, but I learned in time.”

Bran interrupted. “The three-eyed crow came to you as well? But… you… you are…”

He shook his head. “I am not the three-eyed crow, Bran. There was another who had taken that mantle before me.” His eyes turned to Jon. “King Aegon the Fifth banished me to the Wall, and in time I rose to become the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. Up there in the north, the crow’s visions came to me even more strongly, until… I ventured beyond the Wall, and I disappeared from man’s world. I am one-hundred and twenty-five years old, but my watch has not yet ended.”

A smile crossed his face for a moment. “But it will end. Very soon. The… the wards have broken.”

“Broken?” Jon asked.

“Aye, Jon Snow,” said Leaf, venturing out from the shadows. “We knew that a time would come soon when the wards would break, and now-

“The Others are coming,” Bran said, and he felt dread grip his heart. “But how do you know that?”

“A monster with a thousand eyes and one,” Jojen said, “you’ve seen it, Jon’s seen it, I’ve seen it, and I daresay that Meera might have seen it, even if she did not know what it was.”

She nodded slowly. “In my dream… I felt… cold…”

“And this morn, I saw the same thing. When I heard that Bran had managed to make contact with Lord Howland, I feared the worst.”

“Why?” Bran asked. “He’s my father’s friend-

“Aye,” said Jojen, “but he is south of here, south of the Wall, even, and the wards should prevent…” His voice caught. “You shouldn’t have been able to talk with him, Bran. And… I don’t know if that it was him. It could have been something else… a trick, mayhaps.”

“The wards have been broken,” Snowylocks said, “and the Others are coming. We can hold them for a time, but there will come a time when you must run.”

Jon stood. “We can leave now,” he said.

“You’d never make it out of here,” Snowylocks told him. “Even now, they are advancing. We have to draw them in and wait… and you still have much to learn, Brandon Stark.”

“Aye,” Lord Bloodraven agreed, “you do. I will not be able to teach you lessons in the south, Bran… this may be your last chance.” He placed his hand softly on the broken boy’s arm. From up above, there came a loud rumbling, like glass shattering a thousand times over, and the roots of the tree began to shiver ever so slightly. Bran bit his lip, tasting blood in his mouth again.

“And now they come,” said Leaf.
This chapter was one of my favourites so far, but obviously it is also setup for the next under the hill POV chapter, which is coming sooner than you may think. Obviously, Bran's visions haven't covered anything (not least the Tower of Joy), but he doesn't need to be north of the Wall to connect with the weirwood, so this will not be the end of his green dreams.

Also, Howland Reed was there. Sort of.

Next up: Willas.
First In Battle

Chapter Summary

“If you refuse my offer, all of you will burn.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WILLAS

On a stony ridge about five hundred yards from Highgarden’s walls, the Tarly standard flew from a lofty pike, fluttering in the wind so that it looked like the huntsman was striding on endlessly. The lord of Horn Hill’s command tent stood proud against the morning sky, surrounded by crimson pennants.

Randyll Tarly was the sort of man who always wanted to be on the front line, so his tent was close to the castle walls, just behind the five massive trebuchets that had been constructed on the surrounding hillrises. The camp extended at least a mile further back, the perimeter ringed by cavalry spikes. The guard towers were manned by men wearing the colours of Tarly, Hightower, Ashford and more. Willas saw Lord Varner’s heraldry among them, a weasel slinking in ermine, and the fox-and-flower banners of House Florent, whose Lord Alekyne had marched west from the camp two days ago to claim his old seat of Brightwater Keep.

The two retinues met halfway between the castle walls and the camp border, on a patch of earth that had been trampled by hooves to such an extent that grass no longer grew there.

Willas’s entourage was a curious one. Beside him rode Loras, along with Ser Horas Redwyne, Erron Hightower, Ser Parmen Crane of Red Lake, Lord Merryweather and Ser Jon of the green-apple Fossoways, his aunt Janna’s husband. His lord father was not present, though. Willas had managed to convince Lord Mace not to attend the parley for fear of what foolishness might come about.

Tarly led his own following down the hill. He rode in front, on an angry-looking black courser caparisoned in reddish leather. He wore a studded leather jack over black ringmail, with pieces of plate on his broad shoulders and chest. Then there were lobstered steel vambraces, gorget and pauldrons, all in red metal that was polished to a glossy sheen. His gauntlets were decorated with black diamonds and inlaid with the glimmer of niello. The Valyrian steel sword across his back, Heartsbane, had its hilt shaped like two great golden antlers, and a red garnet the size of Willas’s fist was set in the crossguard.

Tarly’s son Ser Dickon was dressed in an almost-matching suit, but looked far less formidable than his father. From both sides came Lord Tarly’s champions. Balding Lord Peake, Lord Ashford, ruddy and red-haired, who had donned full armour for the encounter, including an open halfhelm topped by
a sunburst of scarlet steel. Young lord Beesbury, who looked terrified to be here, Ser Gunthor Hightower, with his house’s ancestral sword Vigilance at his belt.

“Ser Willas.” The lord of Horn Hill nodded his head in greeting. “I did not expect to find you leading.”

*He means to belittle me.* “Nor did I, my lord. But here I am, and here we are.”

Tarly’s steel-grey eyes gleamed with frosty anger. “I suppose so,” he said, “all the same, I thought would be speaking with your lord father.”

“My lord father is busy with the castle’s defence. So you will be speaking with me.” He tried to sound more confident than he felt.

Lord Randyll shrugged. “Tell Mace that he need not trouble himself with ballistae and catapults. These trebuchets are a new design,” he said, gesturing to the towering siege machines on the hills behind him. “Constructed with the aid of good Archmaester Castos and his acolytes.”

Willas started. “The Citadel—”

“—is not supposed to concern itself with wars of the Seven Kingdoms, yes. But can you blame them, or the people of Oldtown, for wanting retribution against a lord who would have left them to die at Euron Greyjoy’s feet? I respect what you and Ser Garlan did, make no mistake, but the people’s justice must be meted out.”

“Might we speak of terms?”

“Of course, ser. But first, I must prove my claim’s legitimacy for all to hear. Dickon, the parchment.”

Tarly’s son rode across to his father’s side, and passed him a pair of weathered yellow scrolls. “Listen well, my lords,” Lord Randyll said, loud and clear, so that those on both sides of the parley could hear him. “A message, signed by Lord Tyrion Lannister, who was at that time Hand of the King to His Grace King Tommen, the First of His Name, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. Ser Willas, you are welcome to read, if it please you.”

“There will be no need,” Willas said. “If you mean to become lord of the Reach, I would expect you to have at least a trace of honour.”

Tarly ignored him. “In light of House Tyrell’s desertion of King’s Landing following the Second Battle of the Blackwater,” he read, “I, Tyrion, son of Tywin, of House Lannister do hereby declare House Tyrell’s claim on the Lordship Paramount of the Mander and the High Lordship of the Reach to be forfeit, and re-award their lands and titles, save for the Lordship of Highgarden, to Lord Randyll of House Tarly, Lord of Horn Hill, in the hope that he might be better suited to uphold His Grace’s laws and act with the dignity and courage that is required of a man holding the Wardenship of the South.” He glanced up. “There is more, but I will spare you that. When we take the castle, I will discuss the remainder of those terms.”

“A parley works both ways.” Willas shifted in his saddle. “So I will present you with our terms, plain and simple: you will disband your army, leave our lands, and your claim to the Reach will be forgotten. A truce and a pact of non-aggression will exist for twenty years henceforth between the Houses of Tyrell and Tarly, and the supporters of both sides. In return, we will grant you a landed increase of roughly one-third to the size of Horn Hill’s demesne, to include the towns of Langhollow and Hollow Oak, as well as seven mills and the crossroads between the Bandallon road and the roseroad. Your eldest daughter Talla will wed Lord Erron here and become the lady of Oldtown,
though no dowry need be paid upon your part. We will return your wife Lady Melessa, your daughters and your household in Highgarden, unharmed and unhurt. Furthermore, my father is willing to offer you some degree of autonomy in your lands, to be finalised after the remainder of the terms are completed.”

Lord Randyll nodded. “Those terms are fair… but why settle for half when you can have everything?” He gestured to the camp behind him. “You may have more armies, but they are spread over half of the Reach and here and now, we outnumber your garrison almost two-to-one. We have waited idly outside your walls for twenty days now. You have until midnight on the morrow to surrender, just over a day and a half.

“You and your family will remain unharmed as long as you co-operate, as will all of your household, unless they should choose to revolt. We may have to bring Lord Mace and you, as his heir, to Casterly Rock to seek the king’s word on the matter, but afterwards, you will be permitted to return to Highgarden, unharmed. Much as our ancestral ties to Harlon the Hunter and Herndon of the Horn would give us a claim on Highgarden, we will permit you to keep the castle. House Tyrell’s demesne will be extended by several hundred hides, and you will have dominion over the Manderford lords and the Shield Islands. Lord Erron will be fostered by his uncle Ser Gunthor in Oldtown, as will his siblings; in time he will receive his lordship and his house’s ancestral blade. The same goes for House Tyrell’s other young wards, who will be returned to their families. Furthermore, a hefty—”

“Forgive my intrusion, Lord Tarly,” said Willas, “but you yourself once told me that a man on a wall was worth ten men beneath it. By that reasoning, we should be able to defeat any assault of yours five times over.”

“We’re not going to assault the castle, Ser Willas.” Tarly’s self-satisfied smirk grew and grew. “You will not be able to see from here, but with some help of Ser Baelor Hightower and the archmaesters, I have managed to source five barrels of wildfire, from a storage over a hundred years old. A learned man such as yourself will no doubt be familiar with the fact that wildfire ripens with age, increasing its potency. A single pot about the size of your fist has the capacity to consume half a hectare of forest when set ablaze. It will eat through stone, wood… and human flesh.

“So, Ser Willas, if you do not surrender to me, I will launch five clay bricks over the castle walls from my trebuchets, each containing a quantity of wildfire at their heart. The archmaesters tell me that the substance is so volatile that the mere heat created from its airborne movement will be enough to ignite it. You can try and shoot them down as they fly, but if they fall into your moat they will burn on the water and then consume the castle walls. If even one of them lands in the courtyard, everyone in your castle will die in minutes, nay, seconds.”

Willas felt a knot tightening in his stomach. He was about to respond, but Loras beat him to it. “And suppose that we were to rain fire on your encampment day and night instead? The flames from the wildfire would consume your own tents.”

“I am not foolish enough to leave crates of wildfire out in the open. And I should like to see an archer that can reach a trebuchet five hundred yards away, or an arrow that can pierce through a heavy brick.”

“If you were to burn down the castle,” Willas said, “then what would stop the flames from crossing the moat and engulfing your own camp?”

For the first time, Tarly looked slightly unnerved. He glanced to his son Dickon, who muttered a few words. Lord Randyll straightened in his saddle. “The substance is so incredibly volatile that it would only burn for a few seconds before burning itself out.”
Which would contradict your suggestion that a single pot would engulf the whole castle. That fact did little to settle his nerves, though. “I will think on your words, then,” he said, turning his horse around and signalling for his companions to do the same. “And lastly, my lord; you would do well to remember that we still hold your wife and daughters.”

Lord Tarly did not flinch. “You would do well to remember that every Tyrell in Westeros is holed up behind your walls. If you refuse my offer, all of you will burn.” He turned away. “I expect your reply by midnight on the morrow, Ser Willas, as promised. Else I shall have no choice…”

His words echoed in Willas’s head on the long ride back to the castle. “He is bluffing,” he murmured to himself, hoping that it was true.

“My lord?” Erron rode up at his side. “What are you going to do?”

“What needs to be done.” I still do not know what that is, though. Hopefully a solution would occur to him before it was too late. Right now, only one was presenting itself. “Do you think he was lying, Erron?” he asked.

“We… we’ve always had caverns stocked with wildfire under Oldtown,” said Erron. “Grandfather told me. I don’t know. I don’t want to know, my lord.”

The drawbridge came down slowly in the wake of their arrival. From the walls, men armed with pikes glanced down nervously over the returning party. Ballistae and catapults ranged along the lengths of the ramparts, but Tarly had been right to say that they could not reach his encampment. And from here, Willas could see that the enemy’s trebuchets looked far more formidable than their own defences. All it would take would be one drop of it, and our house, our castle, our legacy; they would all be ruined. All of it, gone. Was it too big a risk to assume that Tarly was playing them all for fools?

Lord Mace’s chambers were at the top of the Great Keep. The climb made Willas feel even more weary than usual, and his bad leg was starting to pain him again. The parley had given him little success, and it had only festered the worries that Erron had first brought up. His squire trailed him up the steps, looking as nervous as he felt.

He met Garlan on the landing at the top of the stairwell, leaning on a cane. “How did it go?” his brother asked.

“Could have gone better,” Willas said. “Where’s Father?” “In his solar, with Loras and Margaery. Along with uncle Garth and Lord Rowan.”

“Wonderful,” he muttered under his breath. He could have done without the voices of Rowan and Redwyne interrupting him as he spoke. They should not concern themselves. This is our castle, not theirs. Willas pressed his thumbs together. “I’ll go to them, then.”

Garlan nodded and turned, staggering a little but just barely managing to catch himself. “I’m fine,” he grunted, when Willas held out a hand to catch him.

“How is your leg now?”

“Fine. Healing, Maester Lomys says.” He squinted. “He always says that, though.”

“Well, he’s probably right. He is a maester, after all.”

Garlan gave a small, humourless laugh. “That’s what I keep telling myself.” Erron went ahead to hold the door open for them. Inside, the room was dim and dark, thick velvet drapes drawn across
the windows. “Father doesn’t want Tarly to see us,” Garlan told him.

“That’s completely ludicrous,” Willas muttered back. And if he could see us, what would he do? Laugh, most likely.

Lord Mace Tyrell’s breakfast sat before him, a plate of eggs and bacon, entirely untouched. Margaery sat across from him, gazing emptily into space. It was Lord Rowan who spoke first. “How did Tarly receive you?”

“Not well,” Willas replied, “he has pretentions to a claim on the entirety of the Reach. Tyrion Lannister gave him a missive ratified by the seal of King Tommen. The seal seems legitimate.”

“The Imp,” Lord Mace growled. “He has sought to spite us ever since we were driven out of the city during the Second Battle of the Blackwater. We, who saved his family and his nephew’s crown the first time around!”

Margaery put a hand on his lordship’s arm. “Calm now, Father.” To Willas she said, “and what were the exact terms Lord Randyll presented to you?”

“He—"

“He has wildfire,” Erron said, “—or so he says, at least.”

Lord Mace muffled a gasp. “For certain?”

“No,” Willas said quickly, before his squire could say anything otherwise. “No. I think he was bluffing.”

“Aye.” He did not realise that Loras had entered the room until his brother spoke. “Some of the things he said, they seemed to contradict themselves.”

“And what if he is not lying?” asked Lord Mace. “What will he do then?”

“He means to launch his pots of wildfire over our walls at midnight on the morrow. Once they fall in the courtyard—”

“They will consume the castle,” Erron finished unhelpfully. “Everything and everyone will burn.” He gave Willas an apologetic look as he turned to Lord Mace. “Uncle,” he said, “I… we must surrender. Uncle Garth, I saw the way he was looking today, how he was looking so smug. It’s true, there were places under Oldtown, my father found some.”

Willas placed a hand on his shoulder. “No,” he said, “we can’t give you up. If he gives you to your uncle, how long will it be before you and your siblings suffer some accident or another. I expect that Tarly will give us you in return for Highgarden—”

“And what will become of us if we surrender?” asked Margaery.

Loras sighed. “He says that he will let us go unharmed. Whether or not I believe him, though—”

“I wouldn’t. At best we’ll end up confined to tower cells. At worst, the dungeons.”

“Or dead.”

“He won’t kill us. We’re too valuable as hostages.”

“Thinking about surrender means that we’re already fighting a losing battle. Perhaps we could send
men into his camp tonight, to find out whether or not his words are true.”

Garlan shook his head. “The wildfire - or the crates containing the fake wildfire - are bound to be well guarded. And Tarly will expect that. He is the best military commander the Reach has…”

“…and now we are against him,” said Father.

Inside the tower, the silence grew thick and heavy.

“What of his daughters?” asked Lord Rowan. “Talla, Elinor and Bethany, good girls all. It pains me that we might have to use them as hostages… but surely he would not presume to—”

Willas shook his head. “Tarly has his son and heir, Dickon. In his view, he needs nothing more than that.”

“Could we kidnap him?” asked Garth the Gross. “Twenty good men should be enough for—”

“Kidnap Tarly’s son out of his own camp?” Lord Rowan laughed dryly. “Would that it were possible. Tarly loves his son – well, he needs him, his only other heir is that fat boy Samwell—”

“Samwell Tarly is thrice the man his father is,” Willas said. “And anyhow, hostages will not be enough. If Lord Randyll senses a plot, then he is sure to…” He could not bring himself to say the word ‘wildfire’. Saying so will only make it more real.

“Do you believe him, Willas?” Father asked. “Do you believe that he has wildfire, like he says?” His voice was almost pleading.

“Do I believe him?” He knew that he would have to be very careful of what he said. Too much confidence and Father will take my words as the truth, and nothing will sway him, not even his better sense. Too little and it will only serve to make him more worried.

“I don’t want to believe him… if he speaks the truth, then surrendering the castle may not help us anyhow. But… I do not know. If he is not lying, and we ignore him, then House Tyrell… well, that is the end of it.”

His father gave that a slow nod. “My thoughts exactly.”

“This is a disaster,” Garth the Gross muttered, “We have Lord Tarly at our walls, threatening to burn the castle to the ground, and the Martells are not three days from here, trampling across our lands.”

The Martells are not three days from here, trampling across our lands. Not three days from here. Willas blinked. “Oberyn Martell leads this host, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” Lord Rowan said weakly, “once… if we manage to defeat Tarly, then we shall have to face a second siege from the Dornishmen.” He sounded on the verge of sobbing. Why? It is not your House at stake, my lord.

He caught Margaery’s eye then and knew that they had both come to the same conclusion. “Lord Tarly will not be such a fool to keep his wildfire inside the castle walls if he takes it, will he?” she asked.

Let us hope not. “I should think that he would keep his siege camp standing, with most of his army,” said Garlan. “Why?”

Willas smiled. “Because the castle gates aren’t the only way into Highgarden.”

Everyone except the table, save for – ironically – Lord Mace Tyrell. “No,” he whispered, “we
cannot… the Dornishmen… questioning this for years… especially Prince Oberyn.”

“Oh, I know. Oberyn spent half his time in Highgarden looking for it.”

“Looking for what?” Lord Rowan asked.

Father ignored him. “So what do we do?”

“Send a swift bird to Prince Oberyn Martell, offering terms that he will find sufficient… open one of the gates when Tarly arrives – he will never know – then one of us will venture down into the cellars… take the castle back from the inside out.”

Lord Mace Tyrell gave that a long moment of consideration. He looked wiser than Willas had ever seen him. “I swore to my father never to tell… and to my father’s father, and to his father before him… but it is either this, or the fall of our House.” He rose from his seat. “Wait until tonight, then send the raven under the cover of darkness. The next morning… we will raise white flags above the ramparts.”

*Perhaps we are fools,* Willas thought, *but better that than the alternative.* He nodded slowly, for the time had come for the Tyrells to bend the knee.

To save the Reach from fire and blood again.

Chapter End Notes

Tunnels under Highgarden might seem like a cheap solution, but they were actually referenced by Oberyn way back in *A Coat of Gold* (though I didn't have the foresight to write this with his line with this in mind).

So, Lord Tyrell, how much do you have stashed away in your barrows and your cellars? They say the Red Keep is full of tunnels, but it has nothing on the grain stores beneath Highgarden. A castle of tunnels.

- Oberyn Martell, from *A Coat of Gold*, 19, Tyrion IV.

I'm currently writing a few chapters that are a bit of a struggle to get through for some reason, which is weird, because they are actually interesting chapters. So you can expect my uploading schedule to slow down a bit over the next few weeks (unless I have one really good writing day).

Thanks for reading.
Blood of My Blood

Chapter Summary

“Hash yeri m’anhoon, ma jinne, m’ayyeyaان?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAENERYS

Her years in Meereen and Qarth and on the Dothraki Sea had made Dany no stranger to hot weather, but the King’s Landing heat was something different, muggy and wet and clinging.

“How far into the West should we range, Your Grace?” asked Brown Ben Plumm. The old sellsword wore a cowl to keep the sun off his brow.

“I do not know the Westerlands,” Dany said, “Lord Tyrion?”

The dwarf lord only shrugged. “That would depend on what defenses you face. The main routes into the West are through the Golden Tooth and Deep Den, strong fortresses both. And Payne Hall and Peckledon stand in your way too.”

“There is always the Reach as well, I suppose,” the sellsword said, “and the Riverlands.”

Dany shook her head. “I doubt that Lady Olenna would appreciate us invading Tyrell lands; that would not bode well for our negotiations.” The old woman was back at the Red Keep with Lord Varys and Aurane Waters, keeping the petitioners in order.

“True,” said Lord Tyrion, “but that leaves the Riverlands. Invading there would not help Aegon’s cause one bit.”

“We will have to travel through the Riverlands or the Reach to get to the Westerlands,” said Brown Ben, “how do you expect me to work with that, Your Grace? Especially if your Dothraki soldiers will be joining me—”

The question remains of how I get the Dothraki to follow you. Or anyone. “I’m sure you’ll find a way,” Dany replied, choosing to resolve those concerns later.

“Let us hope that the Dothraki are willing participants,” Daario Naharis said.

“Yes,” replied Dany, “let us hope…”

Brown Ben reached for the flagon of summerwine. “Would you like me to refill your cup, Your Grace?”
Dany rose. “There is no need. I am leaving now. I trust that you will have the Second Sons ready for war within the week?”

Brown Ben nodded tersely. Dany looked to Daario. “And what of you, Captain Naharis?”

Her Tyroshi captain gave a small, guarded nod. “If it is your wish, the Stormcrows will be proud to serve you—”

“It is my wish.”

“As you say. Would Your Grace like to see my soldiers now?”

“I am sure that you can see to them yourself, captain. On the morrow, perhaps.” Before he could argue, Dany was already leaving.

Outside, the sun beat down hot and heavy. The queen was thankful that she had only worn her sandsilks today; she was faring much better than most of her companions. Maester Marwyn was sweating beneath his heavy maester’s robe, as was Tyrion Lannister in his particoloured wools.

Dany mounted up on her silver, the horse that had been Khal Drogo’s first gift to her. The first reminder of my sun-and-stars. Her black dragon was the last. Drogon was still ranging across Blackwater Bay, most like. A few villagers from near Rosby had come to her three days past speaking of dragon sightings.

The wind was in her hair as she rode, warm and fragrant, tickling her brow. For a few brief moments, she was reminded of what it had been like back on the Dothraki sea. She remembered the tall grasses swaying like dancing ladies and the smells of the Eastern Market in Vaes Dothrak. She remembered how Khal Drogo and she had made their son in the deep black pool beneath the Mother of Mountains. I will always remember. Until the sun rises in the west and sets in the east, until the rivers run dry and the mountains blow in the wind like leaves. Until my womb quickens again, and I bear a living child. Then I will forget Drogo, and not before.

She did not see Tyrion Lannister on his palfrey until he was right beside her. “Your Grace,” he said, “if I might offer you some counsel?”

Dany kept her eyes on the dusty road. “That is what you are here to do, Lord Tyrion.”

He smiled. “Well, then. I would advise you not to aggravate Daario Naharis any further, Your Grace.”

“Aggravate him?”

Lord Tyrion frowned. “Forgive me for being so blunt, Your Grace, but the loyalty of sellswords is notoriously fickle. They always have a price.”

“And I have more than paid the price for Daario Naharis’s loyalty.” In blood and love and gold.

The dwarf shook his head. “That is what anyone who hires sellswords thinks, until they are betrayed.”

Yes, but I know betrayal well, Lord Tyrion. She is almost an old friend of mine. Three fires must you light, the Undying had said, one for life and one for death and one to love; three mounts you must ride, one to bed and one to dread and one to love; three treasons you will know; once for blood and once for gold and once for love.
“Very well,” she said. “I shall think on your words, Lord Tyrion.”

“Your Grace.” The dwarf withdrew, and she was alone with her thoughts and her doubts and her prophecies. Three fires must you light, one for life and one for death and one to love. She had lit Drogo’s pyre and burned his body, and Mirri Maz Duur had perished among the flames, and the dragons had been born again from the smoke. Could they all have meant the same fire? I burned Drogo for love, brought death to Mirri, and life to my dragons. One fire with three flames. The dragon has three heads, but it is still one dragon.

The sound of marching feet drew her from her daydreams. “Left, right, left,” someone was shouting in the Valyrian of the Free Cities, and then, “Halt!” A column of Unsullied waited before her, five abreast, forty of them in all. Grey Worm emerged from the front of the group and went to one knee. “Your Grace,” he said.

“You may rise,” Dany told him.

“Does Your Grace have need of these ones?”

“You are patrolling outside the walls?” That surprised her.

“There are many refugees outside the city, Your Grace. This one thought it prudent to keep them safeguarded as well.” He pointed to his men. “These are the new recruits that Your Grace commanded us to draw upon.” These new Unsullied were young men from King’s Landing, and while they kept their male parts, they would be raised to fight as the Astapori slaves had. Grey Worm had doubted that they would be as useful as his fellows, but made no argument against her. He never did.

“Good,” the queen said. “You have done well, Grey Worm. Only... why not allow these refugees into the city, instead of having them crowd outside?”

Grey Worm looked at his feet. “Perhaps it is not for this one to say, Your Grace.”

“Speak freely,” Dany commanded.

“This one has seen the gold cloaks turning folk away,” said Grey Worm, sounding strangely ashamed. This one has seen the captains of your City Watch and of the Golden Company asking for a bribe on the gate. This one has seen—”

“Lord Varys warned as much,” she murmured. “Tell me, why do they do these things? Is there not room enough for all of them inside the walls?”

Grey Worm shook his head. “They say that the city is overcrowded, Your Grace... that they would only bring plagues into the city.”

“And do they?”

“This one does not understand.”

“Do they bring plagues?”

“This one thinks not, Your Grace.”

“Then I have a task for you.” She turned around to face her retinue. “Grey Worm, you will take Maester Marwyn, Moqorro, Haldon, Lord Tyrion and my handmaids, and you will go among these refugees and see what news of you can find of these rogue gold cloaks.”
“Now, Your Grace?”

“Now,” she confirmed.

Grey Worm bowed and turned back to his Unsullied, shouting orders that Dany barely heard. His battalion of Unsullied soldiers turned a quarter-circle and marched off to her right. Dany marvelled at their discipline and grace, not for the first time. Her counsellors followed them in an untidy column.

Dany was left with Ser Jorah, Daario Naharis and half of her own personal guard. It was not exactly what she had wanted, but she had kept Daario by her side in the hope that he would not be slighted as he would have been had she sent him away, and she kept Jorah because… because… well, she did not know why she had kept Jorah, but here he was.

*Three reasons you will know; once for blood and once for gold and once for love.* But what had Jorah betrayed her for? More importantly, *had* he betrayed her at all? Indeed, he had proclaimed his forgiveness upon returning to her. Surely that meant he was not part of her prophecy.

Dany straightened her shoulders. It was unwise to spend too long dwelling on the words of Quaithe and the Undying. That was all part of her past now. *If I look back, I am lost…*

...*but to go forward, I must go back.*

The Dothraki were encamped on three ridges about a half-mile from the city walls, among patchy grasses and tall sentinel pines. The camps were separated by hills and small streams, each housing about a thousand men. None of them were more than couple of hundred yards from the Blackwater Rush. Dany was riding among the tents looking for a familiar face when she caught sight of Aggo, wrestling another man on the muddy riverbank. A crowd of Dothraki were cheering both fighters on.

She did not want to intervene, but it seemed that she might have to until she spied Rakharo as well. Her bloodrider was sharpening his bronze-handled *arakh* on a whetstone, the same curving blade that had been her gift to him when the dragons were born. On his knee sat a young Dothraki woman of about eight-and-ten, braiding the bells in his hair. *Best that Irri and Jhiquí are not here to see this,* Dany thought.

Rakharo looked up when he saw her, laid his *arakh* down and bowed his head. “Great Khaleesi.”

“Ko Rakharo,” Dany said in Dothraki. She rode ahead of Daario and Ser Jorah to greet them.

“Mother of Dragons,” said the woman on Rakharo’s lap.

Dany smiled at her. “And who might you be?”

Whomever she was, Dany’s words made her blush. “I am Kari, Khaleesi,” she said. “Ko Rakharo’s… I hope to be moon of his life, but...”

It was a moment before Dany understood. The realisation made her grin. “*Ko* Rakharo is blood of my blood. I am sure that he will treat you gently, so long as you do the same for him.”

“We are to be married at the next full moon,” Rakharo told her, “so that we might wed on earth as the moon and sun come together for their coupling.”

Dany nodded. “I wish you every happiness.”

Kari’s eyes went wide. “Will you come to the ceremony, Khaleesi? There will be a great feast.”
“Perhaps I will.” But Dany knew that it could not be so. Lord Varys and the others on the small council had been worried at her intention to merely visit the Dothraki, thinking that the common people would look upon her unfavourably because of it. She could not afford to be seen revelling with them.

Rakharo was sharing words with Ser Jorah. Dany was about to join them, but Aggo’s shout drew her attention. “Khaleesi!”

Dany dismounted from her silver and went to him. “Ko Aggo. I trust I find you well.”

The Dothraki bloodrider smiled broadly. “And you, Great Khaleesi.”

_They have both called me that. “I am not so great as all that, surely.”_

“You are Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons. What are you, if not great?”

“I do not know,” Dany thought aloud. “I suppose there is only one way to find out.”

“What brings you here, Khaleesi?” asked Aggo.

“I will not lie,” Dany said to him. “My news will not please you.”

“But any news of yours would please us, Khaleesi.”

“I am not such a fool to believe that.” She sighed. “You must cease with these raids on King’s Landing, blood of my blood.”

Aggo looked confused. “Khaleesi?”

Rakharo returned to her side. “You are mistaken, Khaleesi. These are not our raids. Ko Lomo’s, perhaps.”

Now it was Dany’s turn to look uncertain. “Who is this Ko Lomo? I have but one khalasar... I do not seem to recall making this Lomo a bloodrider.”

“Khaleesi...” Aggo told her, strained, “your khalasar... while it claims to be one, there are more _kos_ among us than a man can count on one hand. Every day a new _ko_ appears. Some of them are content to graze these new lands... while others...”

_Others are content to raid King’s Landing_, she understood. Dany turned to her escort. “I will need to see these rogue _kos_. Ser Jorah, if you would send word around the camp, and have them brought to me. Take Aggo with you.”

“As you command, Khaleesi,” said Ser Jorah. Aggo ran to his horse, jumped into the saddle, and the pair rode away into the dusty afternoon.

Rakharo remained at her side. “Would you like refreshment, Khaleesi?” he asked. “We have persimmon wine from a trading caravan, and sour green from the land of Andalos.”

“Yes,” said Dany. “I am parched.” The afternoon’s riding out in the hot sun had left her tired, though it was not the heat that troubled her now. _My khalasar is breaking apart_, she thought. _What was once one is now only the first of many_. How long would it be before even her bloodriders rode in their separate directions and any semblance of loyalty ceased to exist?

Another worry soon presented itself. Daario came to her as she was sitting under the awning of
Rakharo’s pavilion with a cup of wine in her hand. *Three treasons you shall know*, she thought, as he walked towards her. *Once for gold…*

“My queen.” Daario sketched a bow.

Dany met him with cool courtesy, nothing more. “Captain Naharis.”

That brought raised eyebrows and a smirk from the Tyroshi. He stroked his purple beard. “Surely I am more than just your captain?”

*You are. You are my lover, my fighter… but are you my betrayer?* “Not here,” she said. “Here you are Captain Daario Naharis of the Stormcrows.”

He nodded. “May I have a seat?” He was moving towards a stool already, drawing closer to her, closer still…

“No,” Dany said.

“No?”

“No. You will stand, and you will say what it is that you have to say.”

“As Your Grace commands,” Daario said, a little haughtily. “If I may speak frankly—”

She laughed. “Don’t you already?

“Perhaps I do,” he said with a shrug. “But only because I have to. So, Your Grace, I must speak frankly now, and from the bottom of my heart.

“Speak, then.”

He bit his lip, trying to look unsettled, even worried. Dany did not believe his performance for one second. “These… false counsellors you surround yourself with… the eunuch, the dwarf, the mad maester...”

“They have given me sound counsel,” she said. “They have not betrayed me. What more should I ask of them?”

“Brown Ben has betrayed you in the past. And it seems unwise to claim that the cockless wonder is loyal to you.”

“And who are you to counsel me on loyalty?”

Daario shook his head. “Being a sellsword does not make me disloyal.”

“It does not make you honest either.”

That was something he could not argue against, so he changed the conversation. Such was the way of Daario Naharis. “Sometimes I wonder how you decide who is worthy of trust, and who is not. I have given you my heart, my body, my soul, and yet you mean to send me away, and—”

He might have said more, but then Kari appeared at Dany’s elbow. “Khaleesi, your Andal knight and Ko Aggo has returned.”

Dany rose quickly, but Daario was faster. His hand locked around her wrist. His fingers were so slender, yet so strong, so quick, so perfect. Those were the lover’s fingers that stroked between her
legs on sweet nights, the nights that she would be giving up if she sent him away. *He could capture me in an instant, and I would be powerless to stop him.* His voice was hoarse and husky. “Jorah Mormont has betrayed you already, my queen. Do not make the same mistake twice. I urge you to be wary—”

No. Dany shrugged out of his grip. “And I think it wise to be wary of sellswords.” She could see the place where Rakharo, Aggo, Ser Jorah and a dozen others were sitting on their horses in the dust. Dany climbed onto her silver and rode to them, her bloodriders and Daario behind her.

“*Khaleesi,*” said Ser Jorah, “I have brought the men you requested.”

She counted nine of them, some short, others tall, fat, thin; all with the almond skin of the Dothraki and bells braided in their thick dark hair. They rode red steeds with long amber-coloured manes.

“What are your names?” Dany asked them.

Each man spoke his name in turn. The fat one with the drooping moustache was Huro, the one with the blue paint on his nose and cheeks was Qorro, and the brutal-looking one with a hooked nose and cuts all along his forearms was called Lomo, son of Tomo.

“What would you have of us, blood of my blood?” Aggo asked her.

“Your loyalty, for a start. I know you all now, but I do not trust you all. *Ko* Huro, how did you come to rise to your position as the leader of one of my *khas*?”

“My fellows raised me up, *Khaleesi,* as one of the strong men of the *khalasar.* I fought the false *ko* Moro for this position.”

“And yet I had no knowledge of fights among my *khalasar.*”

Rakharo said, “*Khaleesi,* your *khalasar* is ninety thousand strong, twice the size of Khal Drogo’s, and *Ko* Jhogo has near as many on Dragonstone and in the Sunrise Lands. Your three bloodriders cannot watch over the horde alone.”

“Plainly not,” Dany said. “But this is my *khalasar,* and I am taking command here. I will not have other *khals* or *kos* roaming free without my leave. I will *not* have them raiding the city.”

“There is nowhere else,” said *Ko* Lomo. “This land is dead and dull, and our horses have eaten nearly all the grass, yet you forbid us to leave. The city is ripe for the taking, full of women and riches and bounty. Spices from the Summer Isles and wines from Qarth, carried among soft pink men who cannot defend themselves—”

He rode a few paces forwards, and Ser Jorah interrupted his path.

“This city is mine,” Dany declared. “It is my right, by all the laws of the realm, my kingdom, the seat of my blood. And you will not steal from it, *Ko* Lomo, and neither will your feeble *khas.* No, you will not, else I will relieve you of your *khas* and share it among the others, as your riders shared the women that you raped.”

Other Dothraki were emerging from their tents now, men and women and children, all stopping and turning to look. A score of Dothraki warriors emerged from somewhere near the river, standing in a ring half a hundred yards from Dany and the *kos.* Horses whickered against their reins, and the glint of steel shimmered in the sun.

“So promise me, *Ko* Lomo,” Dany said. “Promise me that you will not rob and rape my city. For if you disobey me, I will do to you as I did to Khal Jhaqo on the Dothraki Sea, before the Mother of
Mountains.”

For a moment, it seemed as though the ko might agree. Then his expression turned dark. “You cannot do this, woman,” he said, indignant. His fingers twitched at the hilt of his arakh. “If you would deny me this, I will start my own khalasar. My people named me ko; they would fight and die in my name.” He spat in the dust. Aggo pulled his great dragonbone bow down from his shoulder, and Ser Jorah’s steel emerged a half-inch from its scabbard.

“Aye,” Dany replied, “and they would die in vain.” The wind whistled through her hair, whipping it around her face. If I look back, I am lost, she thought. She stared Lomo down, daring him to defy her again. I am the blood of the dragon.

And then, from somewhere far off, there came the rumbling of thunder, and a low mournful screeching.

In the sky above, a shadow flitted across the sun.

Nearly one hundred feet from one wingtip to the other, he was a ghost circling on wings as black as night, his voice a fiery howl that drowned out everything else. Even from here, Dany could see the red flames flickering along the underside of his wings, the golden patterns scratched upon his talons.

Blood of my blood, she thought.

Drogon came down screaming, descending lower and lower over the Blackwater Rush. His great wingspan seemed to swallow the city entirely for a moment, and the sky darkened. The air hissed at his coming, and when Dany closed her eyes she saw flames flickering across her vision. Three mounts you must ride, one to bed and one to dread, and one to love. The dragon flew a wide circle over the camp, his wings stirring up a mighty tempest as he did so, and crashed down through a bough of redwoods close to the camp border. For a moment he was gone, but then he emerged on the hill, his scales aglow. Reddish-gold stones burned like sunbeams in his eyes. Smoke vented from his nostrils. Fire made flesh, Dany thought.

Drogon let out another massive roar, one that echoed across the camp. The tents billowed like a sea of cloaks, the leaves shook free from the trees and scattered themselves among the Dothraki and their horses like drops of blood in a summer rain. Dany felt a hot wind across her cheeks, and her silver began to whinny, half in terror, half in awe. Ecstasy overcame her, better than any touch, better than any kiss, better than anything.

Yes, she thought, yes, yes, oh, yes.

Then, suddenly, the world was silent and still. Everything was quiet, save for the grasses stirring in the hot wind, as they had on the Dothraki Sea. You are the blood of the dragon, they said in her brother Viserys’s voice, you are the dragon’s daughter, Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt, the Mother of Dragons.

“I am,” Dany whispered, “I am.” She glanced back to her champions and her foes on their horses, pathetic beneath the dragon’s glare. Ko Lomo’s eyes were wide - was that fear she saw in them? She thought so.

Behind the Dothraki kos, the red priest Moqorro, Tyrion Lannister, Haldon Halfmaester and Maester Marwyn appeared, their eyes transfixed on the dragon as they fell in at Dany’s side. The air smouldered and crackled.

“Your Grace,” Marwyn breathed. “My… my queen.” His eyes were wide with wonderment,
moving between Dany and the vast dragon as though he were a man possessed.

“Not a queen,” said Ser Jorah Mormont, “a Khaleesi. The blood of the dragon. Fire and blood.” He dismounted and knelt in the dirt. Moqorro followed his lead. “You are…” the red priests said, “you are everything that was promised.”

The horselords were all around her now, hundreds, maybe thousands. A sea, Dany supposed. And she knew that all across King’s Landing, all across the Crownlands, to Driftmark and Dragonstone and beyond, men had heard the dragon’s calling. And they would hear her. All of them. All.

“Every khal who ever lived chose three bloodriders to fight beside him,” she shouted in Dothraki. “Three bloodriders to watch over his khalasar, three bloodriders to guard his way.” Her eyes went to Jorah, to Daario, to Aggo and Rakharo and all the others whose names she did not know. “I will not choose three bloodriders. I choose you all!

“I ask your oath, that you will live and die as blood of my blood, as my champions, as my people. I will have your loyalty, I will have your promise, I will have your lives and your deaths! I will be your mother, and your sister, and your daughter, and you my children, and my siblings, and my fathers! You are all blood of my blood!

“So I ask you now, will you bring my words to the people all across these Sunset Kingdoms, to poor and rich, to great and small, in whatever way you see fit? Will you be the first of my people, of my flock, of my Great Khalasar?”

Three fires must you light, she thought. “Blood of my blood, when I went before the crones at Vaes Dothrak when Khal Drogo still lived, they promised that my son would be the Stallion that Mounts the World, and I told you that his name would be Rhaego! But there… there…” She gestured behind her, to where Drogon still snarled atop his high hill. “There sits the Stallion that Mounts the World! His name is Drogon, and he is fire made flesh, born from the flames when my khal and my son were given to the night lands! And those who are his enemies shall have the same of him as they will have of me! For as swift as the wind he rides, and behind him his khalasar covers the earth, men without number, with arakhs in their hands like blades of razor grass. Fierce as a storm this prince will be. His enemies will tremble before him, and their wives will weep tears of blood and rend their flesh in grief. The bells in his hair will sing his coming, and his foes will fear his name.”

Drogon roared again then, shaking the ground. The choking dust rose in a cloud around Dany. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks and smoked and burned away before they reached her chin. When the dust cleared, she found them on their knees, Dothraki and Tyroshi sellsword alike, exile knight and red priestess and grizzled archmaester. Her heart swelled in her chest. They are mine.

“Will you fight in my name, blood of my blood?” she asked them. “Hash yeri m’anhoon, ma jinne, m’ayyeyaan?”

The grasses settled and stilled. Drogon’s smoke was in the air, and his roar echoed through the skies. There were thousands of them now, not just Dothraki, but the Second Sons too, and the Stormcrows as well, Unsullied and refugees beyond number, stretching back as far as she could see. At first it was a whisper, then a rustling, then it rose, and rose, and rose… and Dany raised her hands with it, listening as the tumult thundered around her, two words echoing like a drumbeat. “Qoy qoyi!” they shouted. “Qoy qoyi!” Blood of my blood! Blood of my blood!

She turned to her left. The dwarf was the only one still standing, alone among the rest. Curiosity twinkled in his green eye, and something that was almost terror burned in the black. “And you?” Dany asked quietly.
“Blood of my blood,” Tyrion Lannister murmured under his breath, and went to his knees.

Chapter End Notes

Drogon-ex-machina, I suppose.

Not that Dany was in any real danger from Ko Qorro, since he'd have been cut down trying to attack her, but with the presence of her dragon she managed to secure the allegiance of the Dothraki, Daario Naharis, Jorah Mormont and (probably) Tyrion Lannister in a single move.

In terms of size, Drogon is larger than he was in Season 5 in the show, but not as big as he was in 6x06, when Dany makes her speech from dragonback in that episode... also entitled Blood of My Blood, as it happens.

Anyway, that should fulfill the epic speech quota for now. And yes, it's meant to seem a little surreal - something which is even more apparent when we go back to the Red Keep in the next KL chapter and we have a small council meeting (with Lady Olenna - sorry for not putting her in this chapter) where everything has essentially returned to normal.
They had been in the dark for two days when Lord Bloodraven returned to them. While Bran and his mentor had slumbered through green dream after green dream, Jon, Hodor and the Reeds had squatted together in the eerie blackness under the hill, listening to the sounds of the fighting above. The Children came and went, flitting through the half-light of the cavern so quickly and so quietly that they might well have never been there.

They had slept too, though Jon did not know for how many hours each of them had rested. Meera had slept the least, he knew that; instead, she had sat sharpening her knife and frog spear on a rock, scrape after scrape after scrape. He could see the tiredness in her eyes.

She shook Jojen’s shoulder and helped her brother to his feet. Oddly, the Reed boy was looking less ill with every hour that passed down here, which made no sense to Jon. On occasion, he would rise to briefly venture into the tunnels that surrounded them, only to reappear minutes later in another place. The Children of the Forest were down there, though he was not sure what Jojen wanted with them.

Now, the rustling from the tunnel was louder than it had ever been before. He knew that it was Bran and Bloodraven waking, but some strange fear made him grip Longclaw’s hilt more tightly all the same. He felt the cool leather of the crossguard between his gloved fingers and ran his hands over the likeness of the white wolf on the pommel.

The white wolf in the corner was roused as well, along with his brother. Ghost and Summer padded a few tentative steps into the centre of the cavern and squatted down, snarling at the dark. “The wards will not last forever,” Lord Bloodraven said ominously. Bran crawled across the dirt to return to his companions. Jon urged him along, while Meera took a skin out of her belt and offered it for him to drink from.

“What did you see?” asked Jojen to nobody in particular.

Lord Bloodraven’s eyes bored into Jon’s. “The army of the Others. They are descending. If you listen close, you can hear them.”
“Hodor,” said Hodor. The echo of his voice went on forever; Hodoooodoooodoooodoooodoooorrrrr…”

The cavern quietened into silence once more. For a moment, Jon heard nothing, saw nothing… and then he noticed the trickles of pale white frost dropping from the ceiling, drifting down just like snowflakes. And somewhere far-off, a gentle thunder, reverberating throughout the cave. When he put his hand to one of the walls, he could feel the vibrations coming through.

“Jon Snow.” He was not sure what was more surprising: the fact that it was Bloodraven who had spoken his name, or the fact that the old man seemed to be standing now.

He moved forwards, curling his fingers around Longclaw’s hilt. “Yes?”

“You can hear them advancing?”

A moment’s pause. “Aye. I hear them-”

“Good.” He turned to the rest of them, and then took a searching glance upwards into the darkness. The Children. He was certain that the yellow-eyed creatures had been watching them the entire time, and he was sure that Meera and Jojen had realised it as well, but none of them wanted to draw attention to the fact.

“Hodor,” Hodor said again.

“Quiet, Hodor,” Bran told him. “We have to be ready.”

Meera Reed shifted uneasily. “Ready for what?”

“For when they come,” her brother told her uneasily, glancing upwards. For a long time, they all stood in silence, listening to the steady fall of the snow. “The Children will not hold the wards forever.”

“Jon Snow,” the old greenseer repeated, beckoning with a twisted finger. “Come.” He looked back to the rest of them. “Brace yourselves. Winter is coming.”

Lord Bloodraven shuffled away across the cavern. Jon reached up to put an arm around his shoulder to help him, but the old man held up a hand. “Best not,” he said, “There are things that cling to me that someone such as yourself would not do well to come into close contact with any longer than you need.” He steadied himself against the wall and climbed over a tangle of roots, up onto a weirwood shelf where the twisted branches formed a sort of throne. The darkness had consumed the cavern where Bran, Meera and the rest of them awaited, and they were alone.

“Jon,” the old man said, moving over and patting the tree stump, “come and sit beside me.” As he did so, Jon was certain that he heard the sound of scrabbling, somewhere in that infinite void of darkness into which he could not see. They are here as well.

Lord Bloodraven turned to him, his ancient hands upraised. His nails were pale and cracked, and dried blood ran down the pale digits sticky as sap. With a slow trembling hand, he reached out and placed his fingers on Jon’s cheek, then ran them down over his jaw and his chin, and up again to his mouth and past the ridges of his nose and brow, as blind Maester Aemon would when he was making his way down an unfamiliar hall. “Yes,” he said, taking a handful of Jon’s hair in his fingers. “Indeed.” His voice cracked a little. “You remember what I told you about myself?”

Jon shifted awkwardly, unsettled by the old man’s touch. “You are Brynden Rivers. Lord Bloodraven.”
“I was. But now I am the three-eyed crow.” The old man smiled, his lips pulling softly outwards. “The three-eyed crow, though… that is not just a name, Jon; that is a title. One crow follows another, and another follows him, and so forth.” He glanced around the cavern. “The blood of wargs and greenseers makes the Children of the Forest stronger, Jon, and that makes their powers stronger. That is why I have been here for so long, to feed them everything they need. But now my time is nearly done, and a new three-eyed crow must take my place to nourish them for another generation. The wards… they are not only here to keep the Others out, but to keep the three-eyed crow in.”

“And… and…” His voice broke with sudden anger. “That’s why you brought Bran to the tree, isn’t it? So that he could… so that his blood could feed them?”

Lord Bloodraven smiled sadly at him. “Yes. That was Bran’s purpose.” His fingers dug suddenly into the skin of Jon’s arm. “But first, he had to learn.” His eyes went searching to the ceiling. “Do you see them all around us? The Children. The old ones.”

Their eyes were growing brighter now, just a little, but it was enough for Jon Snow to make out hands, claws, faces…

What are they?

“Old things,” Bloodraven said, as though he had been reading his thoughts. “They do not concern themselves with the realms of men… as your vow would command you.”

I am the shield that guards the realms of men. ”We fought,” Jon said, realising.

“We did.” And all at once they were away from that place, whisked out of the darkness into the light, both of them stumbling along a snow-dappled path away from the things that watched from the shadows. The sky was a bright, cloudless blue, but the ground was stained red with man’s blood and blue with the ichor of the Children. The corpses lay everywhere across the land, pierced by arrows and swords, while weirwood trees burned all around them, smoke rising from their husks.

Lord Bloodraven led him on, to where the last lone sentinel of the weirwood grove remained, a single tree at what seemed like the end of the world. Before it, a man knelt in the snow, blood matting his hair, naked and straining against the bindings that held him fast. And in front of the man, Jon could see two Children of the Forest, each dressed in a motley of twigs and leaves that was queer to his eyes, wielding shards of… dragonglass? He squinted to get a better look – and gasped when they thrust their blades into the man’s chest. His feet tapped a drumbeat in the snow, blood poured down his torso, and the blade – dear gods, the blade was inside him now, disappearing deeper and deeper beneath the skin.

Then his eyes turned to purest blue ice, and Jon Snow understood at last.

“The Others,” he gasped, turning his eyes back to Bloodraven, suddenly returned to the cave. His voice was scarcely more than a whisper. “They made the Others,” he said.

Bloodraven nodded his head slowly. “But why, hmm?”

Jon let that mystery move around his head for a moment. “Because… we were fighting them. The First Men and the Children, they were fighting a great war, and… they made the Others to stop us…”

Bloodraven prompted. “But…”

“But it went wrong somehow… and their own creations… they turned against them, and against us.”

The pale lord nodded his head in acknowledgement. “That they did. A mistake which they sorely
regret, I’m sure.”

“How… how…”

“How did I come to learn this?” It was not what Jon had been meaning to ask, but he let the old man continue anyhow. “In return for my blood, they show me certain things from my past… it would take too much of what remains to me to show you more, and we will need everything we have to succeed.”

“What do you mean?”

“My hours are fading, Jon Snow. Why do you think the wards are weakening? Very soon, I will expire entirely, and the Others will swarm this place. The Children of the Forest, having none of my essence left to them, will kill all of you and imprison your brother inside the roots of this weirwood. As I was. Only this time, the world outside will not continue in peace.

“I have not had time to teach Bran all that he needs to know, but if he stays any longer, none of you will ever leave this place alive. And then the Others will march on the Wall at long last, for the cold winds are rising and the time is now.”

“But…” Jon stammered. “Do you know why they are coming this way?”

Bloodraven shook his head sadly. “Would that I did, but knowing such is not within my powers. But I do remember my vows, the ones I swore to the Night’s Watch when I came to Castle Black for the very first time. The shield that protects the realms of men. Whatever I have become now, trapped beneath this tree, I still remember when I was once a man.” He paused a moment, and Jon was certain that tears were threatening in the corners of the old greenseer’s pale red eyes. “The time is now, and the realms of men will need their prince of the green again.”

“Bran,” breathed Jon. “But isn’t he – you said-”

“Aye,” said Bloodraven, “your brother will become the three-eyed crow when I expire. But he was born with blood that will keep the Children of the Forest alive for a thousand thousand years, blood that is more powerful than the thousand greenseers that came before him put together. Only one man in a thousand is a warg, and only one in a thousand of those are a greenseer, but only one in a thousand greenseers has his powers. The Children will take him and drink his blood until the end of time, and leave neither a droplet nor a care for the realms of men that will wither and die all around them.”

Jon paused. It was all piecing together around him, so slowly. Bloodraven grabbed him by the arm. “You must take Brandon south, and you must listen to his green dreams.” His eyes drifted upwards. “They will not let you leave, but…” His fingers curled downwards, nails pointing towards a hidden alcove beneath his weirwood throne, where the faintest glimmer could be seen. “I have my own secrets too,” said Bloodraven. “They fear dragonsteel just as their creations do.”

Jon knelt at his feet, his fingers rummaging through the leaves and bark and wet sap, and his hand closed around something hard. He shifted his hand and pulled sharply towards him, and the whole thing slid free in one swift motion, clattering to the chamber floor. “What-”

“A stick,” Bloodraven told him. And so it was: a completely unremarkable piece of wood about four-and-a-half feet in length. “A very important stick, mind you. But it must remain hidden until you leave this place, else the wards will… shatter it somehow. Do not lose it.”

*Odd,* Jon thought, wondering if the old man’s wits had deserted him suddenly, but he tucked it into
“Good.” A brief smile crossed Bloodraven’s lips. “One last thing before we go,” he said. “Brandon must never know the full extent of his powers, Jon. I have convinced him that he is the three-eyed crow, nothing more… if he knew… if he found the whole truth, it would surely destroy him.”

Jon gave him a wary look. “Why?”

“The truth would destroy you as well, Jon. I would sooner that you never have to live in apprehension of it.” He stopped for a long moment. For the first time since their meeting, the old greenseer looked almost hesitant. “There was a red priestess at Castle Black, was there not?”

“Melisandre of Asshai,” Jon confirmed.

“Melisandre.” Bloodraven nodded, tasting the name on withered lips. “A bleeding star, she said…” His voice trailed away as they wandered back towards the cave, Jon with Longclaw in his hand and the ‘magic stick’ sheathed at his belt. He cast a cursory glance around the darkness, and for a moment a pair of slitted yellow eyes met his own. Then he turned away and went to join the rest of them.

The cave was busier than when he had left it. Leaf and Ash and Scales had reappeared from the dark, speaking in an old tongue with one another, whispering things he could not hear. It sounded almost like a song, but Jon neither knew nor understood the words.

“Hodor,” said Bloodraven, “pick up young Brandon, good giant.”

The stableboy bent to his task, lifting his charge gently into the air. “Why?” Bran asked as he was hoisted onto Hodor’s back. “Where are we going?”

“Away from here,” said the pale lord. “Meera Reed, lead the way.”

Leaf advanced into the clearing, taking careful paces towards them, her footsteps muffled by the carpet of wet leaves and spines underfoot. “My prince,” she said, turning towards Bran. “The danger has not gone-”

“And yet we are still leaving,” said Meera. She took a step forward, brandishing her frog spear. Jojen stepped up close beside her. A new light glowed in his eyes.

Bran turned from his position on Hodor’s back. “Meera, you shouldn’t-”

“Be quiet,” she said fiercely, turning back to the Child of the Forest ahead of her. “We’re leaving. Your lord said it himself.”

They were closing in now. The circle was filling out, more of the Children darting in. Jon could see the dragonglass shards they hid between their fingers, shining in the half-darkness of the cavern. “Bran,” he said softly, “we need to leave.”

His brother turned to face him now. He said nothing, but Jon saw the concerned look of fear that crossed his face, then his brow relaxed and the strange gaze was gone in an instant. Bloodraven moved to the head of the column, standing there with his arms outstretched. “Stand aside,” he commanded the creatures.

Leaf whispered something to Snowylocks, and turned back to them. “You must stay,” she told Bran.
“You still have so much to learn, prince of the green.”

Bran hesitated. “She’s right,” he said evenly, in a voice that was not quite his own. “I have so much to learn. I am the prince of the green.” There was a strange look in his eyes; Jon saw, an odd light that should not be there. That’s wrong. He turned to look at Bloodraven, caught the old man’s almost imperceptible nod.

He drew Longclaw, the Valyrian steel slipping free of its sheath, the blade familiar in his hand. Ghost bared his teeth in a snarl, and Summer rose beside him. Then the knives were out. The Children held the dragonglass daggers out in front of them, snarling. ”You must stay,” Leaf whispered, ghoulishly quiet. A gobbet of sap dripped down from the roof of the cavern, falling onto Jon’s fingers, sticky as…

Blood. Oh, gods. It is blood.

On Hodor’s back, Bran’s eyes were beginning to turn, losing their grey colouring and gaining strange green spots. Then his fingers began to shake, and then his legs. Jojen was the next to notice. “Jon,” he said, urgency ringing in his voice. “You… we have to go.”

“You must stay,” Leaf said again. The other Children joined her chant: ”Prince of the green, prince of the green, prince of the green.” Bran’s lips were starting to move, almost imperceptibly, joining the same song. Then the circle was moving forwards, closer and closer. Meera gripped her spear so tightly she seemed like to break it in two. “Jojen,” she said quietly, “get behind me.”

The Children of the Forest advanced, hissing. Bran’s arms and legs were jerking now. “What’s happening?” Meera asked, pointing towards him with the sharp end of her spear. “What’s happening to him?”

“Calm,” Bloodraven said as he turned to them, lifting a hand and gazing at it piteously. Jon could see what little colour remained draining from his skin, turning it dry as old paper, blood seeping out through his broken nails like ink. A blotchy wine-red birthmark was appearing on his cheek. In the shape of a raven, Jon knew. “They are changing me,” the pale lord said. His eyes met Jon’s. “It must be now.”

“Prince of the green,” hissed Black Knife and Coals and Leaf, showing yellowed teeth. The points of their claws shone with an unearthly glow. These were never men. Never our friends. Jon gripped Longclaw tightly in his frozen hands. Jojen had found a dagger somewhere and was thumbing it uncertainly as his sister prodded at them experimentally with her spear. Hodor turned to them, innocent fear in his eyes. “Hodor?” he asked. When he turned around, Bran faced them from the basket on his back, and the boy’s eyes had gone white as milkglass. The direwolves howled a long low cry that echoed through the dark.

“And now it begins,” said Leaf.

“No,” said Jon, “Now it ends.”

Lord Bloodraven’s eyes met Jon’s, and he mouthed a single word. The knives were out. The Children struck. Jon pivoted, swinging Longclaw in a wide arc. And the man who had once been the three-eyed crow burst into golden flames when the blade passed through him.

 Afterwards, what he remembered most clearly was the whiteness that seemed to engulf everything, the ground shaking, and the feeling of Longclaw almost slipping between his fingers as the world spun all around them.
Then everything burst asunder all at once. Red sparks and golden smoke filled the air, and Jon was thrown violently into the air, away, away, away, boneless, like a ragdoll spiralling into an abyss. Darkness closed around him for the barest second, and then he saw light, and Meera was pulling at his arm, screaming “Up, up, up!”, forcing him along the length of a dark tunnel. Ghost and Summer were howling. Bran was in Hodor’s arms, Jojen was staggering down towards the light at the end of the distant bleakness.

*How? Where?* But plainly there was no time for explanation.

Whatever magic Lord Bloodraven had worked upon them had not been enough to see them entirely away from here. Between the bright light at the end of the world and here was a thousand yards or thereabouts of tunnel, the floor swept with leaves and brush and pine needles. Jon staggered upwards, ignoring the pain in his left side, and started down the passage, limping his way into a run. He passed Hodor with Bran on his back, and lent an arm to Jojen as they went. It slowed them both, but he would not leave his friend behind.

And in doing so, he turned and took a look back.

He could hear them. *Not the Children this time.*

*The dead.*

They came shambling, snarling, screaming down the tunnel, all weathered bones and maggot-eaten flesh, in black cloaks and grey cloaks and white cloaks, in boiled leather and torn rags and a few oddments of plate, shrieking the shriek of the undead pursuers. In their hands they held shattered swords, broken axes, knives, spears, rusted pikes, whatever they could lay hands upon; not that it matter, most of them would be content to tear and rip apart the living with teeth and claws. They clambered over root and tree and rock, on the walls, the ceiling, everywhere, a great grey tide.

Jon flexed his fingers. "*Come on!*" he screamed at Meera, taking her by the arm as well and dragging her onwards down the passage. "*Run, damn you!*" His feet beat with hers and Jojen’s, and Hodor overtook them once more, giant feet resounding off the passage floor.

Jon kept running, Longclaw ungainly in his hands. *Fire. Fire kills wights, but Valyrian steel is little and less to them. Thank you, Samwell Tarly.*

Then fingers and hands and bony arms burst out of the ground ahead of him, and they were coming up through the floor, clawing at bracken and branch and boots. Jon raised Longclaw and hacked off one head, then another. A second wight spun into him, but Ghost leapt upon the creature and tore it to shreds. He raised Longclaw in a parry to block a third wight’s attack, then struck left, right, right, slicing one of them through the ribcage. A fourth wight leapt at him, biting at his face and missing. Jon twisted round, pushed it off, and shoved his sword into its gaping mouth. The wight squirmed, worming its slow way up his blade until its mouth was at the hilt. He kicked it off and stomped it on the back. *Fire,* he thought desperately, *we need fire.* Meera was wrestling a wight to the ground and thrusting her spear through it; Hodor knocking the dead men aside as though they were little more than figurines to be toppled. On the giant stableboy’s back, Bran’s head bobbed to and fro, his eyes opened only to the world of greensight.

The wights careened down the tunnel. Other dead men rose ahead of him, but Longclaw plunged through them, one, two, three. *What did you say, Ser Alliser? I wouldn’t last a day out here?* Jon hacked and cut and ran until he was out of breath, but the distance to the tunnel was only halved. Jojen Reed had fallen in the leaves, sprawled, struggling to stand. He hauled him up from the floor as he ran, enduring the grip of Jojen’s clammy hand as it twisted into his arm. The boy was muttering something about an end to the world, but Jon did not care.
The light was growing. Meera was fending off three wights them with her spear. Occasionally they lunged for her, but to no avail. Jon came to her aid, flanking two of the wights and breaking them into bones, while she took down the third. He could hear shouting now, closer by the minute. One of the voices sounded like Hodor’s calling. *Bran is safe,* he hoped. *Bran is-

He turned Longclaw in his hand, feeling the muscles tense from the weight of it. Summer ran up beside him, then continued, while Ghost loped to his side and snarled at the oncoming wave of dead men. Jon could hear them giving chase, their bones clattering along, an eerie howl joining him.

“We can’t run forever,” he gasped. He was already tiring, sweating through his furs, hair clinging to his face and getting in his eyes. He pushed it back with his left hand, wiping frozen sweat from his brow, as the fires and the winds danced around them. Bloodraven’s stupid magic stick was flapping in his swordbelt, and Jon wondered how it could be worth so much. *Unless this stick makes me a wizard, it can’t be worth half of what it’s costing me now.*

“We can’t run forever,” Meera agreed, yelling over the wind. In that moment their eyes met. “So we’ll fight.” She turned and raised her spear, and Jon stood with her, holding his breath, for one second and then another, taking each moment of rest as he could.

Meera was pressing something small and round into his hand, about the size of a large walnut. “I got it from them!” she yelled at him, not explaining whom she meant. ”*Throw it back!*”

Jon threw the nut-thing into the crowd of wights. There was a moment’s pause, Meera shoving him violently forwards, almost tripping him, and then bits of bone and flesh were flying through the air, and a fire was roaring. The smoke burned his eyes. “Have you got any more?” he screamed at her, feeling for Longclaw’s hilt in the dark.

“I’ve only got so many!” she yelled back at him, but threw two of them over her shoulder all the same. The nuts burst into vibrant red-gold flames, and then the tunnel was falling apart, the ceiling collapsing, wights rising and dropping all around them. Jon lost Meera’s hand, fumbled, stood, lunged and ripped a dead man in two. Another one of the nut-things hurtled over his head, and then Ghost was there, a white flash darting out to take down another wight. The world collapsed beneath his feet, he fell, sprawling, could see the ravenous fingers of the dead men below him. Somehow, he had a tree branch between his fingers and he clung to the weirwood bark, his legs dangling as the wights climbed up towards him.

Longclaw hung in his other hand. Maybe if he let it go, he could use both hands to pull himself up… but that was the Old Bear’s sword… *promise me you won’t lose it. Promise me, Jon.* Then someone’s hands were on his own, and he almost panicked and swung at them – but they were Meera’s, and she pulled him up. They went rolling down the tunnel together as the wights came barrelling after them.

“Throw one of them in the leaves!” he shouted at her. An instant later, the ground was afire, red and yellow sparks climbing behind them, the wights screaming inglorious deaths. Smoke clouded his eyes.

And then, quite simply, without reason, light.

“Meera!” he called into the brightness. “Where-

The Other rose from nothingness, tall and graceful in the light of dawn, blue beads of ice shining off its frosted black armour. *You were a man once,* Jon thought oddly. This was anything but. As the light changed so did the colouring of its glassy skin, and that of the icy sword it wielded in its hand. For a moment, they stared at each other, saying nothing, listening only to the winds of winter as they
howled out of the cave mouth. Then the blade whipped towards him from the left, faster than Jon had thought possible. He twisted and raised Longclaw in a high parry, just barely deflected the sword thrust towards him and turned. The Other came at him again. Jon was pouring sweat and blood inside his leathers and more had frozen on his skin, but the Other was as calm and cool as anything as it attacked. One, two, three; their blades rang across the sparse snowy plain. Jon took two wary steps back, faltered, almost fell. The blade came down and he rolled aside, back towards the cave mouth, swinging the sword low.

There came a sound like the cracking of glass, and suddenly fragments of translucent ice were littering the snow. Jon stared down at Longclaw in his hand. He could hear Meera calling him from somewhere just behind him, where the hill sloped steeply downwards into a wide valley. *Get Bran away from here,* he wanted to scream at her, but he was too weak, too shocked, too frightened to do anything. A chill went through him.

Three Others were standing inside the mouth of the cave, regarding him with a flinty look, blades slung across their back. For a moment they shared the glance between them, a stare that seemed as though it would be everlasting, and the army of wights rose up behind him. Jon clutched Longclaw in his hand, curling his fingers, preparing himself.

A sound like a thunderclap split the air. The cave mouth fell in on itself and collapsed with a loud *crack,* as stones and rocks and bits of ice came tumbling down and buried everything in the tree beneath the earth. The tree itself was coming down as well now, fragments of branches and bark and trunks splintering and cracking as everything fell, deeper, deeper, deeper, a pit forming in the earth where the greenseer’s cave had once remained under the hill, the wights and the Others buried along with it.

Jon stared at the whole thing in mute wonder. Then he dropped Longclaw to his side, swayed on the balls of his feet, and fell backwards, toppling, turning, rolling down the steep sides of the hill. The snow pillowed around his head.

The next thing he knew Hodor was standing over him. “Hodor?” the giant wondered aloud, extending a hand to Jon to help him to his feet.

“Hodor,” Jon replied, leaning on the stableboy’s shoulder. There was an intense burning pain in his left side, searing all across his chest, but he did not know how or when he’d gotten it.

Meera was squatting down between Bran and her brother, but when she saw Jon, she leapt up and wrapped her arms around him in what might be the world’s most unexpected hug, brushing snow from his hair. “You’re hurt,” she said quietly, and it was only then that he realised she was crying.

Then he saw why.

Jojen was lying in the snow in a fading red pool of his own blood. His fingers hung limply, and his rags were torn through. And he was covered in more cuts than Jon could understand. Hundreds of them, red scars weeping eyelets of blood all over his pale skin and the snow around them. The moment he saw him Jon knew that he would not survive. *The wights never caught him,* he thought, confused. Meera fell down in a heap beside her brother, sobbing into his hand. “How… how…”

“The blood,” Jojen was saying faintly, barely a murmur, “the blood soup. They needed… greenseer… something to keep Bran’s powers… they… I had to… I knew that this would be… only the magic of the tree was keeping me…”

“No,” Meera was saying, pulling at her brother’s hand. “No, no, no, Jojen, look at me, no, you don’t.” Tears streamed down her cold cheeks. “You don’t die today, no, you don’t.”
Jojen reached up a hand to his sister’s face, touching his hand to her cheek, then to her hands. “Oh, Meera,” he said, “I do. I’m sorry, but I do. I love you.” One last breath, and then he was gone.

The stunned silence that followed seemed to last an age. Meera had collapsed into Bran’s arms and the pair were hugging beside the body of her brother, united in their grief. Jon sat there on the cold hard ground, staring at the sun and the place where the three-eyed crow’s tree had once been. Ghost and Summer were staring at him, and in their eyes he could see that they felt the loss too. The wards are broken, he thought solemnly, and we cannot stay here forever. “Hodor,” said Hodor, rocking back and forth on his haunches, “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor.”

Jon turned to look, and then he looked properly. Sitting there on the cold hard ground was a sword. Silvered steel, with a wicked edge that caught the morning sunlight and refracted it as a thousand beams. Glamoured, he realised suddenly, Bloodraven glamoured it, just as Melisandre glamoured Mance Rayder… By the gods, for how many years was it with him?

A fair few, to judge from the state of it. The blade had kept its edge – which could only mean one thing – but tangleweed and roots clung to the leather crossguard, and mud and soil had clumped together and grown into a crust on the flat side of the blade. “Old gods,” Jon swore, as he picked the longsword up by the slender hilt, chipping dust and silt away from the scratched surface to reveal a gleaming red ruby set in its hilt, almost the size of a pigeon’s egg. The pommel was in the shape of a golden flame, each tail rusted with age.

“What is it?” Bran asked, somewhere between wonderment at the sight and sorrow having lost his friend.

“Hodor,” said Hodor.

For a moment Jon did not answer. He merely turned the sword in his hands, admiring the fine craftsmanship, the design, the metalwork, and the blade, the blade most of all. Valyrian steel, he thought, the stories did not lie. “The sword of Visenya Targaryen, and a dozen great warriors after her,” he told the onlookers, still astonished by his own discovery. “The sword of Prince Daemon Targaryen the Rogue Prince, of Prince Aemon the Dragonknight and of Brynden Rivers, whom men named Bloodraven.” Then he stood up, turning the sword to catch the light of the rising sun. “Dark Sister,” he said. “This is Dark Sister.”

CONTAINS GOT 6x05 SPOILERS
then again, why are you here if you haven't actually watched the show and/or read the books?

“And now it begins,” said Leaf.
“No,” said Jon, “Now it ends.”

This was an afterthought, actually, but I thought that it was poetic that Jon should echo Ned's words, even without knowing.

Onto the chapter as a whole: of course, those of you who watch the show (probably most of you) will see huge similarities to episode 6x05, 'The Door', particularly in the ending sequence of both the episode and this chapter. I considered calling this chapter 'The Door', right up until I realised that there was no titular door. And let's be honest,
any GOT fan who sees a chapter called 'The Door' featuring Hodor knows exactly what is about to happen.

Then again, I didn't actually kill Hodor. *shrugs*

I had actually planned the escape from the cave way back before the episode (the big Jon/Bran escape was actually one of the first things I wrote outside of KL) but back then it was some high fantasy fight in the cave involving Bran standing up and doing ice magic, thus somehow regaining the ability to walk (idk?), Bloodraven doing a self-destruct thingy, and also Melisandre, through reasons that would take too long to explain here.

It might have sounded cool, but it was a chaotic, confusing mess, and the elegant simplicity of 'The Door' seemed like a much better idea. You might be breathing a collective sigh of relief since I didn't kill off any direwolves, much less ASOIAF's resident big friendly giant (RIP Sweet Hodor, you were too good for the world), but I did kill Jojen.

The 'nut-things' that were mentioned are, of course, exactly the same as those that the Children of the Forest used in the show.

Jojen Paste has always been one of the more realistic fantheories, but I wanted to put a little twist on it and crush all your dreams of Jojen ever having any sort of happiness.

Meanwhile, Jon Snuh found Dark Sister and killed an Other. YAY JON.

Also, big round of applause to fic!Bloodraven, who
a) saved everyone while going out in a blaze of glory
b) gave Jon a sword he needs to defeat the Others
c) installed a self-destruct system inside the cave instead of just leaving that stupid door

Rant over.

On a general note, this chapter is the end of the first act (though it is not quite a third of the way into the story) of The Sunset Kingdoms. All of the characters have been set up going into the second part of the story, which is a lot more exciting than the setup chapters, particularly on the Casterly Rock and King’s Landing fronts.

As we end the first act, I'd be interested to know which parts of the story you guys have enjoyed most and which part you enjoyed the least. And ratings out of 10 so far would be appreciated if you don't have time for a long review.

I'll shut up now.

Thanks to everyone for reading.
The stone is hard, as you well know. It may be undesirable, but it is all that remains after everything else is gone, the only thing that continues to endure. As have I.”

For those unfamiliar with certain book-only characters, Mya Stone is the eldest bastard daughter of Robert Baratheon, sired when a young Robert was still at the Eyrie. In A Game of Thrones, Mya leads Catelyn Stark and her party on their way up to the Eyrie, where she is a mule driver. In A Feast for Crows, she helps guide Sansa Stark (in her guise as Alayne Stone) and Robert Arryn back down the mountain.

In this fic, Mya has left the service of the Arryns and joined with Stannis (as mentioned in one of the Davos chapters earlier in the story).

“Are you sure you’ve done this before?” Mya asked mockingly. She saw that his fingers were quivering as they unlaced her bodice, so she took his hands and guided them slowly to the strings. “Try not to tear it, my lord.”

His breaths were heavy and hearty, his face angry and flustered. “Are you sure you’ve done this before?” she asked him again.

“I’m the stag here.” At last it became too much for him, she could tell, and with that came the release, and his seed was all over her hands. He was a handsome lad, she could not deny it, and strong too, but he was still a good four or five years younger than her, and he didn’t know what he was doing here.
“Relax,” she told him, kissing his chest. His fingers rubbed her breasts, and Mya moaned at that, and then she was on him, riding back and forth as she rode a mule. His fingers slipped away from his sides and convulsed with pleasure. At last Blackwood rolled off and swathed himself in the coverlet. Mya lay astride him, rubbing circles on his chest as he touched her dark nipples. Her hair was a dark, sweaty tangle, and his too, and they seemed almost one where their parts nearly met. “So, boy,” she said, sitting up. “Have you?”

“H-have I what?” he asked hoarsely.

“Ever seen a woman like this?”

He grinned stupidly. “No, my lady.”

_Aren’t you the courteous one?_ “I’m glad you experienced something new, then.”

“And you?”

“Me?” She laughed. “I’ve seen plenty of lustful lads like you, my lord Blackwood.”

“Lord Blackwood is my father.”

“Not in this bed.” She took his hand in hers, and guided it down towards her wetness. A quiver went through him. _Hush now,_ she thought, _you’ll be fine, just another step-

“No.” He pushed her over, to take control for himself – or tried to, at least, but Mya pushed back. She folded her legs and twisted, turning him around, forced him back down into the bed and began it again. “If you… want to… fuck me…” she said between breaths, “you’re… going to… have to… try harder.”

Blackwood squeezed his legs together, trying to force her off, but Mya was stronger. She rolled, put one arm tight around his neck, and pumped his cock with the other. She wrapped her legs around his own tightly and watched as he writhed and struggled beneath her, both for breath and power. When he was almost purple, she let him up for air at long last, leaving him choking and spluttering for breath. He finished in the same moment, and sat there, red-faced, staring at her with a half-murderous, half-wondrous gaze. “Damn you, bastard woman,” he said, gasping.

“Not bad, my lord,” she replied, “but you’re no Randa Royce.”

“Randa… isn’t she a woman?” He looked equal parts confused and bemused.

“That she is,” said Mya, “if you limit yourself to the one sort, my lord, you’re missing out on half of it. You’re better than Bracken’s daughter, at least.”

She smiled and he laughed at her. “Where in seven Hells did you come from, Lady Stone?”

_From the Storm King’s loins,_ she thought, but as she was about to tell him a chilly breeze opened over her and she was forced to hide herself in the folds of the coverlet. “Y-you shouldn’t be here,” Blackwood was stammering. “I am a knight of-

“Relax, my lord,” said Mya. She kissed his forehead and turned to face the flap. “What do you want of us, ser?”

Stannis’s knight had at least shown the courtesy to turn around when he realised what was happening in here. “His Grace would like to see the bastard girl,” he said.
“The bastard girl,” she said, slipping out of bed and throwing a robe hastily around herself, “is called Mya Stone. Can you say that name, ser?”

*Ser Godry,* she remembered, *he is Godry the Giantslayer.* He was a big man, with big hands, but plain-looking, if a little brutish. “Mya Stone,” he muttered.

“Can you say it to my face?”

Ser Godry did not baulk. He turned round, faced her, and said, “Mya Stone.” Even more impressively, his eyes did not linger on her for too long. The bastard girl nodded and pulled on her jerkin, lacing the ties over her small breasts. It smelled a little of Blackwood, she thought, but mostly of her. Then she pulled on her breeches and her fur boots, threw on her cloak, and did up her belt. The Giantslayer watched her all the while, with more irritation than interest. She gave young Blackwood a last wave before leaving.

“How did you know to find me here?” she asked Ser Godry.

“I asked one of Ser Edmund’s companions. He said he dragged you off, but I’d wager that it was the other way around.”

“And why would you think that?”

Ser Godry smiled. “You seem like that sort of woman, Lady Stone.”

“I’m no lady.” Mya nodded at him. “And am I your sort of woman, ser?”

“Perhaps you are.” The Giantslayer bowed his head. “Not too dissimilar to my own wife.”

*Oh,* the bastard girl thought. “We are happily married,” Ser Godry continued, “she gave me a daughter only last moon.”

Mya nodded back, giving the knight a small smile. “You should return home to them, you know. Spend some time with your daughter. She is your first, yes?”


They walked a little further in silence. “I think she would be proud of you, Ser Godry. Her father, the Giantslayer. Some girls take after their fathers, you know.”

“I hope not. That is what sons are for.”

Mya shrugged nonchalantly. *Someone should have told that to Lysa Arryn.* She was convinced that the Arryn brat had inherited his mother’s opinion of ‘the stinky mule girl.’ Lady Lysa had been of the opinion that her Sweetrobin would benefit from a teat to suckle all of his life. Mya was of the opinion that the best anyone could have done for Sweetrobin was smack him across the face… yes, Robert Arryn was plain evidence that sons did not always take after their fathers. Jon Arryn had been good to her, as much at his own initiative as at the insistence of Mya’s father. She had been saddened greatly when the old man had suddenly died, and another blow had come again with King Robert’s death.

*The Lannisters did that,* she knew, but she was just a bastard girl, so what could she do to stop it?

Stannis Baratheon’s camp was in the valley below the Golden Tooth, in the shadow of three high peaks, ringed by tall redwoods which his men had cut down to build watchtowers and palisade defences. Several mountain passes led out of the clearing, and the river road was grey and snowy
where it passed through on its way up to the Tooth. The tents were crammed together in a disorderly fashion, all shapes and sizes, Rivermen pressed close next to Northmen and Stormlanders. The king’s own pavilion was not particularly grand, and it was decidedly ill-maintained, but it was large enough for five men.

Ser Godry left her at the door, so it fell to Mya to make her own way inside. She found King Stannis Baratheon standing over a map table, glance down at the markers with eyes as cold and blue as ice crystals. “You are Robert’s bastard?” he asked, without looking up.

“I am,” she replied, “though I prefer Mya.”

“What you prefer is no concern of mine,” said Stannis.

A boy who wore a cloak decorated with onions thrust a flagon of wine at her. Mya waved him away. “I will call you Lady Stone,” the king said. “Will that suffice?”

“Well, it’s not what I asked, and I’m no lady, but it should-”

“If you mean to waste my time with japes, I will send you back to Riverrun.”

“You had no interest in me until now. That means you need my help. And that means that you cannot send me back to Riverrun.” She smiled. “May I call you uncle?”

Stannis looked as though he wanted to slap her. “No,” he said.

“You are my uncle, though.”

“Aye. I am. And doubtless there are others like you. Robert’s bastards.”

Mya shrugged. “Oh, for certain. I’ve met one or two of them myself.”

The king did not care. “You were a mule driver in the Mountains of the Moon.”

“The mules lead themselves,” Mya told them, “I just help them along.”

Stannis glared at her. “I should think that constitutes leading them, then.”

Mya gave him her sickliest smile. “What do you want of me, Your Grace?”

“You are my uncle, though.”

“Aye. He was a good man.”


“I know.”

“And then you served the young Lord Robert, and Jon Arryn’s widow?”
“Lord Robert hated me,” Mya told him, “as did Lady Lysa. But yes, I still served them.”

Stannis acknowledged that with a wordless grunt. “I am well aware that the child has a sickness of the mind, but what reason did he find to hate you?”

“The mule girl smelled bad, apparently. Probably because she was working with mules.”

He clenched his jaw so hard it seemed his teeth might shatter.

“Did Lysa Arryn dismiss you, or did you leave of your own volition?”

“I left. I saw no point in working for people who despised me.”

“Perchance you chanced upon Lord Petyr Baelish while you were at the Eyrie?”

“I did. I led him up the mountain. He was a nice man, truth be told, but his courtesies were so false that he made me feel ill.”

“Hmm.” Stannis seemed uncertain what to make of that, though Mya doubted he was ever uncertain of anything. “Well, you will be no use there, then.”

“You already knew that,” she said. “If you thought that I could convince them, you would have sent me to Harrenhal instead of bringing me with you.”

“And you would have come with me regardless, if you are Robert’s daughter. Baratheons are known for their stubbornness… which occasionally manifests itself as stupidity. If nothing else, Robert was a fine example of that.”

“And what are you, Your Grace?”

The king moved around the table and sat down heavily. “Stubborn, I hope. Take a seat, Lady Stone.”

“I’d rather stand.”

“As you wish.” Stannis took the wine flagon from his squire and poured himself a cup. The flesh had melted from his bones on the long march, so she could see his throat working as the wine ran into his mouth, red as blood. “I have been sending parties to attack the Golden Tooth every morning and every evening for five days now, and for five days in a row the Lannisters have defeated my assaults. Continuing with such a foolhardy conquest would be the very definition of madness, I think. We will never break that garrison by marching up to the main gate, even with the whole of our host.

“There are other ways up to the Tooth, of course. Some of those passes will be well-guarded, but others will be impassable to all but the hardest men. The Lannisters will not have bothered to block these routes, even the ones that circumvent their own lines. If we can get behind them and hit them from both sides…”

“You will be able to take the castle,” Mya finished for him. “It sounds a good plan, Your Grace.”

Stannis snorted. “Most plans sound reasonable until you carry them out. My army could take a wrong turn and become lost in these mountains for weeks, or they could encounter avalanches, rockfalls, or even wild beasts. And so someone must scout ahead of them.”

“Who better than me?” Mya said hollowly.

“Indeed,” said King Stannis. “A girl accustomed to navigating difficult terrain, raised in the Vale. My
own flesh and blood, and trustworthy, I hope. Now, Lady Stone, I trust that you do not have any plans.”

*Blackwood is still probably lying in his bed with his cock hanging out, waiting for me to return.*

“No,” she said, “I have no plans. So I’ll be leaving in an hour.”

“An hour?” The king sounded more amused than surprised.

“Well, I have no intention to waste my time here,” said Mya. “Meaning no disrespect, nuncle, but waiting around doing nothing in your camp is dreadfully dull.” So was Stannis himself, but she was probably better off not saying that.

“Very well,” the king said. “How many men will you need?”


“And they won’t settle for you, if you mean to command them like that.”

“I don’t mean to command them. I mean to fight alongside them. Now, nuncle, will you be wanting a kiss goodbye, or can I go?”

His mystified look gave her all the answer she needed. “Devan,” the king called to his squire, “see Lady Mya to our horses and give her what she needs. Assemble a small force of earnest men. Loyal ones.” He turned away from her, deaf to the world.

Mya followed the squire out into the night. *Seaworth,* she thought, his name is Seaworth, like the onion knight. Snow was drifting down over the king’s camp, and her footsteps left crisp new prints as she followed the light of Devan Seaworth’s torch. The boy’s pace was a little too brisk, as though he feared her. “Is he always so serious?” she asked.

“My lady?”

“Is your king always like that? So... boring?”

The squire dipped his head. “His Grace is on a very serious undertaking, my lady. Jokes don’t amuse him.”

“He should get himself a new fool, then,” she muttered. She granted Devan the mercy of her silence until they reached the baggage train. Mya asked the squire to point out the king’s horse to her, a great black stallion with a suspicious look in its star-grey eyes. “Noble,” she observed, “yet wholly unremarkable. The horse takes after his rider.”

Mya’s own mount was the same. Smokefoot was a foul-tempered rounsey named for the colour of his coat. But she would not be taking him up into the mountain passes; the roads were too steep and too treacherous to risk him, so she found a shaggy-furred garron not too different from the mules she’d had in the Vale and found a saddle. Devan hovered around aimlessly, unsure of what to do.

“My father is the Onion Knight, yes?” she asked.

“Aye,” he said, a little warily. “Ser Davos Seaworth. Admiral of the Narrow Sea, and Hand of the King.”

“And smuggler, Shorthand, onion knight. I’ve heard all the stories.” Devan looked disgruntled. “He sounds like a good man.”

“He is,” the boy mumbled, though he looked less than happy. At first Mya thought she had insulted
him, but the way he averted his eyes and looked down his feet spoke to the contrary. *He is ashamed of him*, she thought. Part of her wanted to slap the boy for his impudence. “Without him, you would have been much worse off,” she murmured tiredly. “As you well know. Be grateful for your father, boy. Sometimes the people we love can be stolen away so quickly.”

She hoped that Devan would take her words to heart, but Mya had never been a philosopher, and so she did not much care if he ignored her entirely. “I can ready my own horse,” she told the boy when he tried to help her, causing his cheeks to redden. “I’ve been doing this for years.” After that, she went about her task alone.

It was full dark over the camp by the time she had saddled her horse, found her longbow and donned her riding clothes. Stannis had promised her twenty men, but when Mya arrived at the gate she counted only three-and-ten. *No matter. Too many will get in my way just as easily.* There were several old, experienced faces among them, but Mya saw younger men too, and even a few who she wouldn’t mind sharing her nights with.

“You,” came a rough, gravelly voice, “bastard girl.”

“I prefer-”

“I couldn’t give a rat’s arse what you prefer,” the knight said. He was a big man with a bald head and foul teeth, cursed with possibly the stupidest coat-of-arms Mya had ever seen; a winged pig.

“Pray pardon, ser,” she said acerbically, “my feeble woman’s ears did not chance to hear your name.”

“That’s because I haven’t told you it, you stupid bitch.” He looked to the other men around him, eliciting a brief mumble of approval. *So this is the fool they have put in command.* The man’s behaviour was so pathetic that Mya felt like laughing. So she did.

That only pissed him off even more. “What are you laughing at, cunt?”

“You, ser,” she said, still chuckling. “I thought that would have been obvious. I’m afraid if you want me to stop, I’ll have to know your name.”

“I am Ser Clayton Suggs,” he said, “and you-”

“-are Mya Stone. The daughter of King Robert Baratheon and King Stannis’s beloved nephew. Meanwhile, you, Ser Suggs, are no one, other than the sort of man who likes to hurt women, from what I’ve seen. If you try anything, I assure you, I’ll not hesitate to geld you myself.” She looked at the others, who seemed unsure whether to be Ser Clayton’s cronies or his foes. “And that goes for each and every one of you.” She turned her horse away from them, and set off down the trail, leaving them in bewilderment.

The first few hours were the hardest. It was dark, so Mya had some difficulty finding footholds and ledges to clamber over, and she had only the moonlight to find the glimmer of ice that could lead to her death. She shouted back warnings for the others, though she would not have been too upset had Ser Clayton fallen and broken his neck. Mya roamed ahead of the rest, with Suggs’s shouts of “*Slow down, bitch,*” or occasionally “*I said slower, cunt,*” fading to the back of her memory.

Dawn came early, outlined in a reddish-pink glow. For a moment Mya rested, crouched atop a rock, watching the eastern sun rise. Somewhere in its shadow was Stannis’s camp, where the king’s soldiers were probably preparing themselves for another pointless attack on the fortifications of the Golden Tooth. She could make out a few stone ramparts jutting out, but they were too far away to be
seen. It was only the Lannister sentries that posed a danger to them, and they were few and far between. The snow was fresh-fallen, unblemished by footprints; no one had passed this way recently… which was a good thing, as it seemed to suggest that the path was unknown to their foes.

Ser Clayton caught her arm, his fingers digging deep into her skin. His smile belied his pleasure at hurting her. “Do you know where you’re going, wench?”


He spat. “Don’t mock me, bitch.”

“Try and be a little less easy to mock, then.” That left the brute clueless, as expected.

They had an hour’s rest there; Mya kept her distance from Suggs and ate her cheese and bread in silence. The rest of the soldiers cowered around him, unsure whether to speak in his favour or to challenge his authority. Stannis promised me loyal men, but these lot all look terrified. At least Ser Clayton did not lack for courage. The rest of them had plainly never seen work like this before; their faces were red with exhaustion and dark circles were under their eyes. Mya was tired too, but she did not care, and she did not let that stop her. Ser Clayton threw snowballs at her back and called her a dumb bitch until Mya got fed up and pulled her crampons on and walked the trail alone, half-determined to leave them behind. It made her smile to watch them scramble after her.

The day was cloudless and rather boring, save for a heavy snowfall around midday that lasted the better part of an hour. They had been rather fortunate with the weather on the march from Riverrun to the Golden Tooth, but Mya knew that their luck would not last forever. She had been at the Eyrie when the late autumnal snows had come tumbling down, and little Lord Arryn had fled the Giant’s Lance. The northern clouds brought the same promise of winter. If we are not in Lannisport when the snow starts…

She had never known winter, not truly. The two winters that had passed since her birth had been mild and all she remembered from her girlhood was hot tea and lemoncakes and her father’s hugs. Robert Baratheon had been so strong back then, capable of carrying Mya on his shoulders while swinging his warhammer at the same time. It had been a stupid idea to put a young girl so near to a warhammer, but that was what she had loved about it.

The last time she had seen her father was about a year after his coronation, when Lord Jon brought her down from the Eyrie to spend a few weeks at court. There had been talk of keeping her there, Mya knew, but Cersei Lannister had put an end to those plans long before they came to fruition. Not that she minded. The Vale was her home, and her mules were her best friends. But she would have liked to see her father again before his death. Even if it was only once.

Much as it had dawned early, dusk came early too. Above them, the Golden Tooth was reduced to a black shadow lit by flickering orange lights, but unlike yesterday, she was not entirely sure which way to go, and she did not want to risk a trek in the dark. Ser Clayton must have had the same idea, for he climbed up to a stony ridge overlooking the valley floor and stopped abruptly. “We’ll camp here,” he said loudly, “and then—”

“Shut up, you idiot!” Mya hissed at him, shoving him roughly aside and pointing. “Down there, in the valley.”

Suggs spat in the snow. “Lannisters,” he said contemptuously. “But there aren’t many of them.”

“That’s because you’re not looking, fool.” Mya ducked behind a rock for fear of being seen.
She had not seen the camp until they had mounted the ridge, but it was definitely there, and the Lannisters outnumbered them for certain. A village of bleached red tents, flecked with snow, and sentries armed with torches patrolling the perimeter. The once-snowy ground around them had melted into a muddy slush under the hooves of horses.

“Shut up, _bitch._” Ser Clayton crawled forward to look. “There are only about twenty of them.” His fingers went to the longsword in his belt.

_Is he really such a fool?_ Mya thought. “Yes, ser,” she told him slowly, “and we are _thirteen._ Tell me, which is the bigger number, twenty or thirteen?”

Suggs did not deign to answer that. He made a vague grumbling noise under his breath, then looked away. Mya rose from behind her rock, crouching as she flitted through the copse of trees on light feet. Carefully, she unslung her bow from over her shoulder, and took a red-feathered arrow between her fingers, pressing it to the string. Ser Clayton and the others scrambled up behind her, kicking up a wave of snow.

“Careful,” said one man, “they might be sleeping.”

Mya shrugged. “Not any more, with the way you lot move. I wouldn’t be surprised if you managed to wake the dead running everywhere like that.” She took the arrow away from the bowstring. “You are right, though. There must be twenty of them there, so there’ll be as many sleeping, if not more. We cannot take forty men.”

Doubtless Ser Clayton Suggs would argue, but one of the others got there first. “No… but twenty men? _Twenty?_ You only need five or six to keep watch.”

“It appears not all of you are as useless as Ser Suggs,” Mya muttered, “aye, this is no ordinary patrol.” She crept forwards a couple of paces.

One of the men followed close beside her, so near that she could feel his breath on her neck. _Arthur,_ she thought, _his name is Arthur._ “What are you doing?”

“Coming with you, my lady.” He was perhaps five-and-twenty, with freckled cheeks and a pointed nose. “I’ve got my longbow too.”

“We’re not going to _shoot_ them,” she said. “Thirteen against twenty or more, didn’t you hear me?”

“Sorry, m’lady.”

She took a glance back to where Ser Clayton was sitting on the edge of the ridge, running his fingers idly over the crossguard of his longsword. She pointed. “That man _is_ an idiot, isn’t he?”

Arthur was hesitant to reply. “That he is, my lady.”

They crawled higher, up into the brush, and Mya rose onto her haunches and crawled forwards. She looked down into the camp below, with its specks of colour flickering through the darkness. The leaves brushed softly against her breeches, leaving muddy imprints, and thorns pricked her skin, though not enough to draw blood. “So,” she said, more to herself than her fellow archer. “The Lannisters must have come down from that way… which means that they probably came from the Golden Tooth, or someplace on the goldroad west of it.”

“Couldn’t they have been east of the Tooth when they left the goldroad?”

Mya shook her head. “They’d have to go out into the high passes to get this far south of the road;
your king has archers stationed there. Assuming that they are escorting someone important, it seems risky to send them through Stannis’s lines. So, then…”

Arthur smiled. “This road will lead us back to the Golden Tooth, then?”

“Aye,” she replied. “I hope. Well, that was easier than I thought it would be.”

“Me too, my lady.” He slung his longbow back over his shoulder. “I suppose we’ll just wait for the Lannisters to pass us, and follow their tracks back up. We’ll have to be wary, though; they’ve probably posted scouts back on the main road.”

“Hmm,” Mya said, “we might be better riding back to the king. He could get someone to tail these Lannisters down into the Riverlands whilst the rest of his army follows through the mountains.” She jerked a finger down into the valley. “If they set off at first light this morning on horses, Stannis’s men will only have three or four days marching before they reach the Tooth.”

Arthur turned around and stood up. He took two steps away, then turned back to Mya. “Lady Stone, don’t you think we should try and find out who the Lannisters are escorting? He might want—”

“Oh, he almost certainly will. Which is why I intend to stay behind while Ser Clayton and his friends go back to the camp.” She gave the archer an appraising look. “You seem less insufferable than those lot, so I guess you can stay. Anyway, it might be cold tonight. I’ll need someone to keep warm with.”

Clearly, Arthur the archer had never received such a brazen offer, from the way his ears and nose went redder than cherries. “Well,” he said, “I suppose I could—”

“Make up your mind.” Mya left him there. She strode through the drifts until she found Ser Clayton, who was scraping his sword on a rock. Idiot. “Ser Suggs,” Mya said, in her sweetest tone. “I’m sending you back to King Stannis.”

“You do not command me, woman,” the knight said, though something in his voice suggested that he was only arguing for argument’s sake and that he simply did not care about what she intended.

“No,” said Mya, “I do not. But since you seem incapable of commanding your own men, ser, someone must take charge. I will remain here and tail this Lannister host into the mountains, while you will go back to King Stannis and tell him the news of what we’ve found. Don’t look so dour. At least it will get you away from me.”

She expected Suggs to reply with his customary grunt. He did not. “You do not tell me what to do, bastard woman!” he hissed, in a voice that was far too loud. His hands were huge on her shoulders, and his breath smelled of rotted meat. “You are—”

His voice was cut off by a low whistling sound. The next thing Mya knew, Ser Clayton had an arrow under his gorget, and blood was running down over his mail, staining the rings red. “Bastard,” he muttered, then collapsed sideways into the snow with a heavy crash, jerking convulsively.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Mya said, then dove to ground as another arrow whistled above her head, missing by inches.

“Archers!” someone was shouting. If the Lannister camp had not woken already, that had certainly done the trick. Another arrow split the tree trunk beside her head, and a fourth took flight and sprouted in the leg of one of Ser Clayton’s cronies. Arthur reached out and pulled Mya behind a bush, knocking her down. The snow was freezing cold on her lips. “Fucking Suggs,” she said, spitting up chunks of ice and stumbling to her feet.
Arthur yanked her along. “We need to shoot back,” he said hurriedly, forcing her back up the hill she had only just descended. “Your bow, Lady Stone!”

Mya drew it forth, her fingers slipping over the string for a moment. It was dark, and there was little she could see. But she loosed the arrow into the darkness all the same, and received a second in answer. Snow blasted into her eyes from where the arrow had hit. In the valley, torches flickered through the dark. Mya scrabbled across the snow, went to one knee, raised her longbow, aimed and shot. A torch guttered and died.

Another arrow thundered into the air above her, missing by a whisker. *Whoever he is, he is a good shot… and in a better position than I am.*

She did not know what had become of Suggs’s men. Perhaps they had already fled. She did not care either.

Mya took two running steps, dragging Arthur with her, ducked past an arrow, then launched herself over the edge of the ridge into the snow. The torches grew brighter and brighter in the valley; Lannisters pennants were being hurriedly hoisted down and dragged away. She drew closer and closer, and her eyes caught the glimmer of steel. *They have knights.*

She rolled over again and sat upright on a rock, and then she saw him, standing atop a low jut of stone opposite her, his longbow in hand, hawkish eyes scanning the trees for a sight of her. He was about one hundred yards away, yet the light from the torches blinded her to his position. Mya drew an arrow from her quiver, raised it back to her chin, and took aim. From overhead came the loud crackle of thunder, echoing through the valley. *I do not fear the Storm God’s fury,* she thought, *for ours is the fury.*

She did not know which happened first: the arrow flying or the lightning striking earth. Either way, as she let go of the string the world flashed white, and for that moment she was entirely blind, staggering, and she would have fallen had she not grabbed hold of a root growing out of the snowdrift beside her. She blinked, tears sparkling at her vision, and looked up. The archer was lying across his rock, an arrow in his leg, but he was still moving, scrabbling across the ground in his attempt to find a safe place. Mya gave an indignant sigh, picked the bow up again, reached for her quiver-

Then her target was gone, surrounded by… was that a girl? And with her, a knight in shining silvery-white enamel. *A Kingsguard knight, for certain.*

And then she knew. *A princess.*

Mya Stone lifted her bow a little higher. Something stirred in her heart, but she was not sure what it was. In that instant, hesitation overcame her, and then-

-the white knight moved back in front of his charge, and the moment was gone. Lannister men were climbing the slope now, armed with torches and swords, but Mya had neither the time nor the strength to deal with them all. She smacked Arthur’s elbow. “Come on,” she said, “we’re going back.”

Wearily, they trudged their way back up the hill, back to the ridge from whence they came. The Lannister host was departing already, forging a road through the passes to the south of here.

*I hesitated,* Mya thought. But she did not understand why. If that was who she thought it had been, Stannis would want to know. *We make an interesting pair, the daughters of King Robert, the bastard and the feigned.* She wondered if her father had ever felt anything for his false children that
the Kingslayer had sired. Perhaps that was the root of her reluctance to shoot. But why would it be? She had no love for the princess Myrcella, and doubtless the princess had no love for her.

*Stannis will want to know, either way.* She trudged her way up the hill, Arthur following. That useless bastard had been no more use than Ser Clayton Suggs, but at least he wasn’t a complete and utter arsehole. *I daresay nobody will miss Ser Clayton. Least of all the people who knew him.*

It was an hour later before they came upon the remnants of Ser Clayton’s force, eight of them. With Mya and Arthur, that made ten, so they had only lost three men. *More than we expected to lose.* “We frightened the Lannisters off,” she said, “I don’t think they remembered to send a man back up to the Tooth with word of the fighting. Which is lucky, I suppose.” She trudged past them without another word.

They came upon Stannis Baratheon’s camp at dawn, after two lonely days and two lonely nights trekking back the way they’d come. Ser Godry Farring admitted them at the gate, and went to Mya first. “His Grace wants to see you.”

“I doubt that His Grace wants anything, and certainly not that,” she replied wearily, “but I will go to him, nonetheless.”

She found Stannis as she had the last time, leaning over his map table with furrowed eyebrows and a concerned look. Two squires stood with him, Devan Seaworth and a boy with Ser Godry’s coat-of-arms on his breast. When the king looked up and saw her, he picked up a pair of yellowed letters and spoke to them. “Find the ravens. Devan, this one is to your father. Bryen, to Lord Edmure Tully of Riverrun.” He turned back to Mya with a frosty look. “Lady Stone.”

“Your Grace.” She did not curtsey.

“Have you found my path to the Golden Tooth?”

“Aye. Most of it. We encountered a large Lannister patrol coming down the same route, so it must go up to the Tooth in some way.”

Stannis ground his teeth together. “I fear your efforts might have been in vain. Tytos Blackwood has broken Deep Den, and the Lannisters have retreated five thousand men from the Golden Tooth to Oxcross with Ser Forley Prester, to deal with the other invasion in the south. We will find a much easier conquest of the Tooth… even so, we may need to use your road.”

“Well,” said Mya. “I’m glad that my quest wasn’t entirely pointless.”

King Stannis made a face that was almost a smile. “Where is Ser Clayton?”

“Dead,” she told him.

He nodded. “Well, we shall call that a small victory, then.”

“Your Grace?”

“I have no need for a man like Clayton Suggs leading my armies. He was ill-respected, and ill-liked. Lady Stone, you shall take command of Ser Clayton’s eleven.”

“They are eight now.”

“Very well. I’ll give you another twelve, and you shall have your twenty men, as promised”
“I want to choose them myself,” Mya insisted. “Ser Clayton’s men were hardly brave or loyal, as you promised me.”

Stannis shrugged. “You shall not go stealing my knights, but other than that, be my guest.” He looked at his map again. “You and Ser Godry Farring shall take five hundred men up the road to the Golden Tooth, while the rest of my host attacks by the river road. The castle will be ours inside two days. Now, Lady Stone, if there is nothing else…”

Mya turned to leave, then stopped, half inside the tent and half out. “There is… something, my lord. When we were on the road… this Lannister patrol we came across, they were escorting someone. Princess Myrcella.”

“The Kingslayer’s daughter,” Stannis said stonily. “Headed east, you say?”

“Aye. Beyond the mountains, I think.”

“Into the Riverlands.” Once again, the king threatened to smile. “The Lannisters may not be as strong as we thought, then, if they are this desperate for allies. It would not be Karyl Vance or Lord Piper, both are too cowardly. And if they are sending the girl, then…”

“Marriage,” Mya said.

“Marriage,” confirmed King Stannis. “Tully is married, and the Stark boy has Shireen, but… young Lord Arryn… and in Littlefinger’s power.” He sat back down behind his desk, and began to write.

Ser Brynden, Mya read. “You mean to tell the Blackfish?”

“If they strip away their armour and everything that identifies them as Lannisters, those men can pass discreetly through the Riverlands,” said Stannis, “and their princess with them. But with Brynden Tully on the lookout for them, they will find a much harder passage. Once the girl is captured, she will be returned to Ser Davos’s custody at Riverrun, to await my judgement.”

Mya stared at him. “You are a lot more cunning than my father,” she observed.

Stannis sighed and put his pen down. “Renly once told me that life was a proverbial peach. If so, he and Robert ate away all the flesh and left me with nothing more than the hard stone in the middle and the fleshy parts that cling to it. But the stone is hard, Lady Mya, as you well know – it is in your name, after all. It may be undesirable, but it is all that remains after everything else is gone, the only thing that continues to endure. As have I.”

Chapter End Notes

Mya will probably have two POV chapters, maybe three, though Stannis might actually get one himself. I had to search around a bit before finding the right character to show Stannis’s side of the war: options included Godry the Giantslayer and Devan Seaworth, but both of these sounded pretty boring, IMO.

In a way, Mya is a substitute for Asha Greyjoy’s role in A Dance with Dragons, where she follows Stannis's host on its march from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell.

TIL it's very awkward to make cuts to sex scenes. A lot of stuff sounds good on the first draft, but... um... er... unnecessary on the second.
**Valar Dohaeris**

**Chapter Summary**

“No one is always someone when someone is with no one.”

**Chapter Notes**

This chapter will make a lot more sense if you read the Author's Note at the end. Additionally, you may want to refresh your memory of Arya's story; this chapter is a continuation from Chapter 13: Valar Morghulis.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**THE ORPHAN GIRL**

She measured her mornings by the sound of the Sealord’s bells.

As the first bell left the rafters of the attic room ringing, the orphan girl awoke, alone and cold. Patches of gooseflesh rose all along her arms, and droplets of cold sweat trickled down the back of her neck as she threw the coverlet off. She had dreamed that dream again. The wolf dream.

She did not open her eyes straight away, afraid of what she might see. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Slowly, she moved towards the window, listening with her eyes and feeling with her hands. It was no burden to her. She had been blind once, and she knew how to use her other senses to see. She smelled the stink of pickled fish, ruminating in barrels down on the quay, and she listened to the wet sploshing sound of a pail being emptied into the street from the next house along. Wagons and wayns rattled along the riverfront. In the common room below, old Herthe was shouting that breakfast was ready. The orphan girl smelled their half-familiar smells. Honeycakes, she thought, with blackberry jam. Some of that smoky cheese that the Myrish captain brought for supper yesterday. A loaf of black bread, half-stale. And hot lime cordial to drink.

At last, the orphan girl opened her eyes. She blinked twice, just to make sure that she was not dreaming. To make sure that these were her eyes and not those of the night wolf..

The orphan girl was neither pretty nor ugly. She did a good job at remaining completely unremarkable if you did not know her, but if she was familiar to you it would not be difficult to find her in a crowd. She wore a jerkin of undyed wool – the brown today rather than the grey – and over that a patchwork coat with long tails. The coat was a little battered and torn at the edges, with a couple of fraying strings and a button that did not fasten. But she did not mind that. This jacket had been her father’s last gift to her, before his death.
She brushed out her hair with a bristly brush, then tucked it behind her head in a somewhat crooked knot. Hopefully, Enyo would not beat her for looking too scruffy today. And maybe the old man with the smelly beard would say she looked nice, and give her an extra copper for her trouble.

*Who are you?* the face in the mirror asked her.

“Enna,” she whispered to her reflection. “My name is Enna. The orphan girl. No one.”

Downstairs, she realised that her nose had been deceiving her. *Lemon cordial, not lime. Lemon smells sweeter.* Herthe was a reasonable cook when it came to soups and stews, but honeycakes were not her speciality. They were so hard that they hurt your teeth unless you took small bites, and you had to slather them in blackberry jam to get them to taste of anything. The orphan girl did not complain, though. There were plenty of girls on the streets of Braavos with nothing at all to eat. She had a roof above her head, safe lodgings away from rapists and thieves, and a warm bed to return to when the night grew cold.

And hopefully, Herthe would cook something better tonight.

The second bell was tolling in the air as she crossed the street and headed out into the maze that was Braavos of the Hundred Isles. She weaved through this alley and that, past the Happy Port where the Sailor’s Wife stood waving at the arriving crewmen from a high balcony. She had known Cat of the Canals, and the ugly little girl, but never Enna the orphan girl, so she did not notice her.

Enna walked on past the Mummer’s Ship – advertising Izembaro’s newest play, one of his own creation (entitled *The Mummer’s Dragon* and featuring two dwarves as the main actors) – and crossed the Canal of Heroes into the better part of Braavos. Here, dusty walkways gave way to proper cobbled streets, ramshackle red terraces to tall whitewashed townhouses. There were pavements too, so the orphan girl did not have to fear being run down by a stampeding horse or out-of-control litter. The air smelled of violets and sweet sea air, instead of damp and smoke and sweat as it did at Ragman’s Harbor to the south.

Commoners were not allowed into the Purple Harbor, so she had to weave her away to the plaza by an awkward route, passing bankers and insurance salesmen and all sorts of haughty types who gave her a suspicious eye, no doubt thinking she were a cutpurse. Other girls had stolen other people’s money in places near here, so she could not say that their suspicions were unfounded. But those were *other* girls. Here she was Enna, she was the orphan girl, she was no one.

Enyo stood at the threshold of the bakery, glancing up at the big round clock that counted the hour on the wall of the bank opposite. “You’re late,” he said.

“I came as fast as I could,” she told him.

“Oh?” Enyo raised a bushy eyebrow. “No excuses today, then?”

“No.”

He clapped a heavy baker’s hand on her shoulder. He smelled of flour. “Go on, then,” he said. “In the back.”

She found Loree in the back, busying herself over a basket of buns. The buns had currants in them and a little of the spiced honey Enyo brought in every fortnight from a Pentoshi smuggler. “Take this lot out to the stall,” Loree said, passing her two trays of buns, “and start selling them as soon as you can. Else Enyo’s going to beat you bloody.”

“He’ll beat you bloody,” Enna said.
Loree snorted. “He might try, but he loves me too much.”

The street was almost deserted, as always. Usually they had few customers until the Iron Bank gave its counters a break, after the third bell rang. For the best part of the hour she sold apple fritters from the back of the cart. Enna sneaked a couple herself when nobody was looking. Enyo made them with black sugar and a little ground ginger, so they were sweet, but left a spicy taste on the tongue.

She spent the rest of her time watching the square. Look with your eyes. Listen with your eyes. Calm as still water. A gull shat all down the sleeve of a Myrman with a stupid velvet hat, and she could hardly keep herself from laughing. An obese man with watery eyes and a triple chin bought two cheese rolls, slumped down on a bench to eat them, then bought two more and stumbled off into the sun. A half-naked drunk was chased down the street and into an alley by the city watchmen, whereupon they beat him with clubs and dragged him away to a cell.

Then the bells tolled, and they were busy once more. They worked in shifts, with Enna sometimes working the stall and sometimes the bakery, rotating back and forth with Loree and Selessa, who turned up an hour late to Enyo’s fury.

“She was with another man last night,” Loree told her during a lull in the busy period, rolling her eyes.

“Another? That’s three in this week-”

“Four.”

Despite that, Selessa sold the most of any of them. I have to be like her, Enna told herself. Well, not entirely like her – she was still a maiden, and she would like to keep it that way, but-

They came down the street in a flock of ten. All the girls stopped what they were doing - both on the street and in the windows above - to watch them as they came along. None looked over eight-and-ten, she reckoned, and all were handsome. It seemed to Enna that being handsome as much a part of being a prospective bravo as actually being skilled with a sword, which she didn’t think was fair.

I was never as pretty as-

But I was never good with a sword either, she reminded herself. I’m Enna, I’m the orphan girl. I’m no one.

They were all lightly garbed, in whisper-thin silks that displayed their well-muscled shoulders. Yet they had an easiness to their gait, a lightness in the way they moved. They wore bright red and lemon yellow and sky blue, or a motley combination of all three, the colours brighter than anything else in the street. Some were dark-skinned, others light, all Braavosi-looking. All noble-born, the orphan girl thought. Perhaps this was an opportunity… but it seemed as though they would all run past. And likely they would have done, were it not for Selessa.

“My lords!” she called out, in a swan-song voice. She was a buxom young woman, enough to turn most heads. Some of the bravos went running past, but about half of them stopped, shared some sort of muttered conversation with Selessa, and then approached the stall. Enyo stared out from the window of his shop, dumbfounded with disbelief. Then he ran outside, almost sprawling in his haste to make himself known to them.

The bravos were at the stall now, and Enna could feel her heart thumping fast. This is the time, she thought, they are rich, they have money, they have names… but which one?

In the meantime she busied themselves with their orders. Three apple fritters for the tallest and
broadest of them, cheese buns for two who appeared to be twins. Enyo was smiling at her over their shoulders, beaming wider than she had ever seen him. A cinnamon roll, a blackberry bread.

The last of them to come to the stall was neither the smallest nor the youngest, but he seemed the most timid. He had thick curly brown hair and big green eyes that reminded her of a cat's. I was a cat once. Cat of the Canals. He seemed sheepish when ordering, almost stammering, and he gave Enna a shy white-toothed smile as he waited for her to give him two spiced honey cakes. “They’re Enyo’s best,” she said, as she handed him his bag. “I hope you enjoy them.”

The young bravo smiled. “I-I’m sure I will.”

Him, the orphan girl knew, watching them leave. By then Enyo was running up to the stall, clapping loudly. “Oh, very good, my dears,” he exclaimed, kissing them all on the cheeks with his rubbery lips. “I think I can forgive you for being late now, sweetlings.”

“Do you know his name?” asked Enna. “The last one, I mean.” The other girls made mockery of her with whistling noises, and she felt herself blushing.

That is good.

Enyo raised an eyebrow. “As a matter of fact, I do. In my seafaring days, I knew his father. Marto Oterys, who came second in the contest to choose the First Sword of Braavos about thirty years back.”

“Who came first?” the orphan girl asked. But she already knew.

“Syrio Forel,” said Enyo, his face turning to a small frown. “Anyhow. That boy you seem so fond of would be his son, Aresto, I think. Yes, he has only the one.”

“You seem to know a lot about these bravos,” Loree teased. “Are you certain you weren’t one yourself, back in the day?”

“I think I’d remember if I was. Someday I’ll tell you my story, girls.” He turned to Enna alone. “I hate to be so blunt, Enna, but a highborn lad like that won’t fall for a… well, a commoner.”

Selessa smiled. “If you know how to act, anyone with a good sense of dress can pose as a highborn girl.”

Yes, she thought, smiling. And let us hope you are right, Selessa.

That night, instead of returning to Ragman’s Harbor, she crept through the streets of the city, clambering up walls and along rooftops, over arched bridges and through dark tunnels, crossing to the place that orphan girls, bread bakers and bravos-in-training all knew as the House of Black and White.

In the sanctum, the kindly man was busy giving a sermon to a group of worshippers, but when he saw the orphan girl he wandered away and came to her side. “I did not expect to see you here so soon, girl.”

“Yet here I stand.”

“Yes. You do.” The kindly man smiled. “Does a girl remember our usual custom?”

“A girl never forgets. Three pieces of news, as always. Donesto Tromel is hosting a party in his manse, trying to outdo the Sealord, but foreigners are not allowed in.”

“And what do the people on the street think of this?”
The orphan girl smiled. “They are no longer surprised by his words, only by the ignorance of them.”

“What else?”

“The lady who is running for Sealord got accused of bribing some of the courtesans in the Purple Harbor.”

“This is well known, girl. But it is news, nonetheless. What else can you tell me?”

“A baker’s girl by the name of Enna has met with a bravo’s son named Aresto Oterys,” she told him, “and perhaps her interest in him will continue.”

He cuffed her about the head, smiling all the while. “You are becoming insolent, girl.”

“A girl’s insolence is only healthy,” said an accented voice from behind them. “A mindless servant is a useless one, after all.” Jaqen H’ghar stood half in the shadow of the Black Goat’s statue. “And yet a wilful servant can be far worse.”

“A wilful servant is no servant at all,” the kindly man said, “though all men must serve.”


“Valar dohaeris,” the orphan girl repeated.

The kindly man smiled, and beckoned her towards him, then turned and began to walk down the hall. Jaqen H’ghar held her arm for a moment. “A girl is doing rather well for herself, is she not?”

“A girl is doing only as she was told.”

“And yet a girl inspires eyes everywhere she goes. Today, No One was watching a girl from dawn until dusk, and a girl never saw. A man did not merely chance upon a girl in the sanctum by luck.” Then he faded away into the shadows, soft as summer silk, and was gone.

The orphan girl hurried her footsteps to catch the kindly man. He gave her a concerned look as he beckoned her inside, then closed the door flush behind them. “You know this place, of course?” he asked, as they descended a flight of stairs.


The Hall was dim, but the orphan girl had been a blind girl once, and she knew this place only too well. Their names slipped over her lips. Cat of the Canals. Blind Beth. Mercy. Missandei… Nan. Weasel. Squab. Arry. And-

The kindly man took a candle and held it aloft. “See how the shadows flicker, girl? Each night the shadows are different, and each shadow has a story of its own.” He placed withered fingers against the fleshy cheek of one face. “Sometimes the faces are more than just guises, though. We servants of the Many-Faced God clad ourselves in our true colours half of the time, and in false guises the other half.” He stepped into the pool of shadow, and then back out. In that intervening moment, his face changed, his hair grew long down his back, and he stood half an inch taller. “No one is always someone when someone is with no one,” the kindly man said, smiling.

“Who will I be on the morrow?” she asked him.

“Enna the baker’s girl ought suffice until you are certain of this Oterys boy. But you will need a
different face to get into the Sealord’s ball. A pretty face, unblemished by age or hurt. There is one…” The kindly man strode through the darkened hall, followed by the echoes of his footsteps. “We do not take faces from the living,” he told her. “The servants of the Many-Faced God have a face that is their own, always, as do you, child.” His smile was a sorry thing. “Were that untrue, I might have the perfect guise to suit you; a sad girl, who lost everything that she was to the woes of her home land, and gained only silver and gold for her troubles.”

She did not understand. “Only silver and gold?”

The kindly man tilted her chin upwards. “Sweet child,” he said. “Silver and gold can buy wonders, yes, but it can also buy horrors. This girl… she was not too unlike yourself, only she came to this place in despair rather than by choice, and the price we asked was too much for her to pay. So she refused us.” Crocodile tears welled in his eyes. “Later she returned, and settled for a different price, a kinder price. Only death can pay for life, sweet child, you know that… but love can pay for hate too, as she proved. Death and life. Love and hate. Black and white.” He stopped at one of the pillars and drew a face down, concealing it in the shadows. “On the morrow, you will wear this.”

She squinted through the darkness, but could not make anything out. “What does she look like?”

“Pretty, by all accounts. A courtesan once, mayhaps, a long time ago, or just a particularly comely girl of noble birth. A dignified chin, smooth cheekbones, slender. No one will recognise you, but men may stop and stare, and they will not always be thinking innocent thoughts.

“She is a girl of noble birth, the heiress to a small house whose father has died.”

“And which House is that?” she asked.

The kindly man raised an eyebrow. “The House of Black and White.”

“Does she have a name?”

“I do not know,” he replied. “Does she?”

The last time she had chosen Beth, for someone she had once known, and the time before that Cat. A few names circled her mind, but only one of them felt right. “Lyanna,” she said, “her name is Lyanna, or Lya for short.”

“So she is,” the kindly man said, “and so are you. On the morrow, after her morning as a baker’s apprentice, a girl called Lyanna will go to the manse of the Oterys’, to seek out her young bravo, and to make him an acquaintance of hers. And in time, as they grow closer, he may come to seek her affection.” He smiled. “It is said in the Sunset Kingdoms that it would be a cause of great shame for a noble girl to woo someone who is not her betrothed. But we are not in the Sunset Kingdoms, and a girl is no one. She has nothing to lose.” He passed the face into her soft hands. “Come.”

She followed him back up the stairs into the sanctum. Candles flickered in the Lord of Light’s eyes and before his altar. The Stranger watched her through the deep black hollows in his hooded face as they walked. The kindly man drew her once more to the pool, the surface shimmering in the milky half-light. “Three drinks you must have. It is time for your second, girl.” He produced a cup and moved it through the water. “Who are you?” he asked her, passing the cup into her hands.

No one, she thought, and drank. On her lips was the salt taste of tears, and then the rich red scent of blood in summer. The taste collected in the hollows of her teeth and rolled into the back of her throat, sticky and warm. This is wolf blood, she thought, and I am the night wolf.

She did not remember falling asleep, but she dreamed the wolf dream again. This night she roamed
north of the great river, around the circle of tall standing stones where forgotten kings had once built their castle. Her pack prowled with her, cutting through the wet green grass. She smelled rain and blood and snow, and for a moment she was waking and dreaming at the same time. *The pack survives*, a voice told her, *when winter comes, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives.* She padded softly forwards. Leaves *squelched* beneath her feet. No, she thought, *I am a girl, not a wolf.* But the hoarse growl rising in her throat denied that. *You are a wolf. The night wolf.*

There was a woman there too, she saw. She dressed in a hooded cloak of flowing black and blue, her face hidden from sight. Beside her, a stout man in pinkish-red robes and several other men stood as still as the standing stones. *Who are you?* the wolf girl wondered.

*Only Cat,* replied the wind, and the lady turned away. *Only Cat.*

A wolf howled a cry through the night. Aaawhooooo, it cried, and a dozen others answered, aaawhooooo. Then the night wolf howled as well; her call was louder and loger than any of her brethren. On the grassy hill above Oldstones, the hangwoman took two steps forward. Her breath came out in a rasp, chilly in the night air. *The things we do for love.* The night wolf stepped forwards, leaving prints in the wet black mud that surrounded the hill. Above, from the limbs of a broken tree, three men hung, their bodies bloating and turning black as they kicked in their dying breaths, swinging as the hooded woman watched.

In the morning, she could not remember who she was. For the longest time she stood in front of her mirror in the room above Herthe’s shop, until the Sealord’s bells started to ring and the time had come for her to make her move. She dressed in silence, drunk on confusion, and staggered her way downstairs. Her hands were shivering. Herthe saw that, and passed a hot bowl of porridge into her grasp. “Are you alright, child?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, “I don’t know…” It was only as she sat sipping lime cordial in the seat beside the window that the memory came back to her. The drink was cold and sour, and her eyes threatened to spill tears. *Tears.* She remembered the taste of the cold water from the day before. *I am Enna,* she thought, *I am the orphan girl, and I am no one.*

She walked through the cobbled streets of Braavos like a maiden in a dream. Outside the Happy Port, a blue-cloaked man she had served before waved to her, but she did not wave back. *How can I remember you, when I can hardly remember myself?* She passed the Gate theatre and the signs still advertising Phario Forel’s new play, *The Bloody Hand.*

*Forel.* She ought to know that name, but she could not remember why. On the street in front of the bakery, a boy was selling hot pies from a wagon, shouting *“Hot Pie! Hot Pie!”* at her. She ignored him and walked on, alone with her thoughts.

She was early that morning, something which Enyo seemed pleased by. Other than that, the day was no different to the one which had come before. The *bravos* came past the bakery at midday, a fact which pleased Enyo to no end, as he seemed to think that he had gained some regular customers. And Selessa went out on the street and flirted with them and charged double for their wares. The *bravos* were none the wiser.

After, the orphan girl went a hundred paces from Enyo’s shop, then ducked into a side alley. The darkness grew and grew all around her, and for a moment she thought she heard howling, but it was just her imagination. *Quiet as a shadow,* she thought, *calm as still water.* *Fear cuts deeper than swords. Fear cuts deeper than swords.* She did not remember who had taught her that, not anymore, but she was not afraid.

She found a ladder on the side of one of the buildings, the iron rungs clinging to the stone like a
coarse tangle of ivy, and mounted the steps slowly, testing each with her feet before going up. At the top, she fell into a crouch and shimmied along the roof, her back to the wall, then dropped down into a small hidden alcove tucked out of sight from the alley below.

From the pocket of her gown, she drew forth the face. When she looked back again, she was the Lyanna, the nobleman’s daughter. Rising from the darkness, she rose to her feet, and turned her head in the direction of the School of Swords, where at this hour a young bravo named Aresto Oterys would surely be training among his peers. Raindrops had started to fall, plummeting like a storm of wet daggers. They felt cold upon the nape of her neck and scattered themselves through her hair. “Valar dohaeris,” she said quietly.

“Who are you?” came a sudden and sharp voice from behind her. “What have you done with Enna?” She whirled round and saw Selessa, her hands still dusted with flour from the ovens. “Who are you?” the baker’s girl repeated.

The nobleman’s daughter could not answer. Her mouth was dry. How is she here? Why? What did she see? A thousand fearful thoughts whirled through her mind. “I’m… I’m-” For a long moment, she could not remember her name.

Selessa smiled. It was not the friendly smile she had given the orphan girl when she’d arrived, but a different one, a malicious one, a… familiar… one. When she looked up again her face was different. I should have known, Lyanna thought, he told me, Jaqen H’ghar told me that No One was watching, and-

“It’s always difficult to remember a false name when you’ve had a surprise,” the waif said, still smiling. “You truly are a stupid girl, aren’t you? And a worse liar.”

Lyanna could only stare at her. “You were Selessa all along?”

The waif nodded. “And you are not No One.” Her fingers brushed along the girl’s cheek, tucking a stray strand of dark hair back behind her ear. “You are but a mummer, and a poor one at that. And that is all you ever will be.”

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, this one was a nightmare to write. Arya's Braavos chapters are the hardest bits of the fic for me as a writer since that horrible Jon Connington chapter back in A Coat of Gold.

There's a lot of stuff happening in this chapter that's implied rather than said explicitly. For example, we know that Arya is now on a mission as Lyanna the nobleman's daughter, attempting to acquaint herself with a young Braavosi nobleman, so that she can get into the Sealord's palace when he holds his party. Jaqen H'ghar told us in chapter 13 that Arya will be assassinating the Sealord, so she's currently trying to find the necessary cover to get into the party.

Note that at the start of this chapter, 'Enna' has already been working at the bakery for several months, and she will continue to do so for several months after this. However, I think this would be very boring for you as the readers to be shown everything that Arya does.
The kindly man says that Arya needs to drink three times from the fountain in the HoBaW in order to become 'No One'. She's taken two drinks now, one in her first chapter and one in this chapter. As we see her, taking the second drink leaves her disoriented and makes her forget things. However, the effect is not necessarily permanent: while Arya forgets who Syrio Forel is, she does remember his mantras: fear cuts deeper than swords, and calm as still water.

On the waif - in the books, the waif is a lot less malevolent than she was in the show. However, despite basing this fic on the books, I will be incorporating some aspects of the waif's character into her portrayal here, particularly her distaste for Arya. However, she is a priest of the Many-Faced God, not just an acolyte as she was in the show.
Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken

Chapter Summary

“With luck, the castle will be ours by midnight.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

QUENTYN

From the road below came the wails of dying horses and the wet thudding of quarrels. The Dornishmen plunged through the undergrowth, tangled nettles and thorns lashing at the flanks of their horses.

Quentyn dug his heels into the flanks of his horse. On his lips he sensed the bitter taste of fear. In his heavy leather arming doublet and mail shirt, with a helm weighing down upon his head, he was sweating profusely, though not only from the effort.

Drink and Cletus drew ahead of him, spurring their mounts faster and faster, but Arch dismounted and went down into the valley afoot, unslinging his massive spiked warhammer. Quentyn rode down slower still, swaying in his saddle, sickened by all of it.

By some sweet mercy the battle was done by the time he finally reached the road. One of the scouts was hobbling away slowly with an arrow through his leg. Nym Sand raised her bow, tugged the string, and loosed a shaft into his back. “Should have stayed down,” she told his corpse.

The dead and the dying were all around them. The Dornishmen went among them, slitting the throats of any with their entrails hanging out already, hauling others up from under felled horses and wagons. “Look,” Cletus said, tapping Quentyn’s shoulder and pointing.

A young squire had fallen under his dead horse; his leg was twisted round far more than it ought to be. Every new attempt to free himself brought stifled cries of pain. Cletus clambered over the wreckage and placed his dirk against the boy’s throat. “Who are you?”

“Beesbury.” The boy flailed about, eventually thumping his hand down on his scratched wooden shield, painted with three orange bees. “Harlen Beesbury. Lord Harlen Beesbury. Please don’t kill me.”

Cletus waved the dirk threateningly, then looked back to Quentyn. “What say you, Quent? Should we let him live?”

Quentyn swallowed. “I see no reason to kill him.”
“He’s our enemy,” said Obara Sand, spear in hand.

“No!” the fallen squire shouted. “No, no, no! I’m his squire, Lord Tarly’s squire!”

“Stop.” Cletus held up a hand to ward the eldest Sand Snake off. “Tarly’s squire, hmm. We’ll take him back to Prince Oberyn, and see if he can get anything from him.”

“My leg hurts,” the boy said, pained. “Can you—?”

Obara hit him in the face with the flat of her spear, silencing him. “Drag him out,” she told the men, before turning to Quentyn. “My prince.” Her voice was acidic with mocking.

“Obara. None of them got away, did they?”

She spat. “Someone probably did. Which means we must advance quickly.”

It took a lot of effort to shake his head. “Back to the camp first. We need to hear what your father has to say, and hear how the others are doing down at the Old Gate. If it’s as the Tyrells said it would be, they’ll be inside the castle by now.”

“As you say.” She did not even pretend to be pleased. “Father should have given me the command.”

Aye, Quentyn thought, he should have. But Prince Oberyn had forced the responsibility on him instead. And here he was. “We’re going back to your father’s camp,” he repeated stupidly.

Obara grunted, climbed back onto her horse, and rode off without another word.

Prince Oberyn’s command tent was about a league away, so their ride gave Quentyn plenty of time to think. First his gaze drifted to Highgarden itself. Torches glowed along the battlements and flickered in high tower windows, but the castle looked almost untouched by fighting. They could have already taken it by now, though we would not see it. Ser Willas’s letter had detailed many of the underground passages leading into Highgarden, but Oberyn had used only two, in places hopefully out of sight of Tarly’s army.

The lord of Horn Hill would have been powerless to stop the four thousand Dornishmen invading the castle from the cellars. His garrison were outnumbered inside the walls, and the wildfire that Ser Willas had mentioned was stored in Lord Tarly’s camp across the Mander river – his lordship had not been such a fool to bring it inside the castle. With the camp and its huge trebuchets now under assault by a secondary Dornish contingent, Tarly’s men would be too occupied by their separate forces to unite under a single standard.

Already the fighting had turned against Lord Randyll and his dwindling allies. Lord Varner had been the first to turn his cloak, followed by Lord Ashford of the orange-and-white sunburst, then the Costaynes of the Three Towers. And with the capture of their lord, the Beesburys would likely switch sides too. All that remained of the Tarly invasion force were Horn Hill’s levies, the men of Starpike, a few small lords and some of Garth Greysteel’s troops.

Quentyn’s cohort had spent the better part of the evening forcing a wedge between Highgarden’s walls and Lord Tarly’s camp, stopping the enemy from moving across the river. The battle had been hard-fought and bloody, but eventually the Dornish troops had succeeded in cutting their foe in two straight down the middle. Obara Sand had led the way down into the muddy riverbed, with a thousand following behind them. The Reachmen had come at them from all sides. Quentyn remembered seeing the fear in their faces, and the horror reflected in his own as he swung his sword left and right and sent blood spilling out all over their leather and ringmail. He had been so afraid of the fighting, but the real terrors came after, with the realisation of what he had just done.
War makes monsters of us all.

He did not know how it ended, but it was almost dark, there was smoke in the air and the wounded were being dragged away screaming in pain at their maimed limbs. Then the rain had come down, and the blood of the slain had washed into the soil, staining the world a muddy red. Leaves fluttered down over the battlefield and lay there like wet, waterlogged corpses. Quentyn tasted ash in his mouth, and the sickly sweet smell of men releasing their bowels had left him gagging.

Arch had taken a crossbow wound in the fighting, leaving a shallow wound in the meat of his arm. “It’s nothing,” he’d said, but Quentyn had insisted that he see a healer rather than just yanking it out himself. Will Wells had not feared nearly so well. The Dornishmen had fewer dead than their foe, but it was still too many, and the shock of seeing his friend borne away on a stretcher by the silent sisters had been almost too much for Quentyn. “Unfortunate,” Cletus said sadly, “he fought well, and honourably. I’ll drink to him tonight.”

“He’s dead,” Quentyn replied. “He won’t hear you.”

Cletus shrugged. “He’d want us to remember him like that, not with days and days of mourning.”

How can you know? he wanted to ask.

Someone had killed Lord Norcross during the battle. His head was mounted on a pike, hoisted high above the column and carried back to the Dornish camp amid shouts and cheers. All the while as tears of blood trickled slowly down the dead man’s face like sticky red raindrops. They had been given an hour to rest, but after that they were riding again at Prince Oberyn’s command, to take one of Tarly’s outposts on the eastern side of camp.

Tiredness flooded Quentyn’s limbs all at once. He almost spilled from the saddle. He was sweaty and the clothes under his armour were plastered to his skin, but he could do nothing to alleviate that. I must keep fighting, he reminded himself. For the sake of Dorne.

Serve. Protect. Obey. And that was all he knew.

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to find me. I will be gentle, given that today has been stressful for both of us. But if you did desire something more—"

“I said no,” Quentyn repeated. *How can you say something like that?* he wondered. *After so many have fallen, how can you stand there and make jokes?* Perhaps that was Nym’s way of dealing with grief and death, but somehow he doubted the horrors of today would haunt her tonight as they haunted him. The faces of each and every man he had killed were etched onto his eyelids.

“‘No?’” Nym pretended to look hurt. “There are but two truly sweet pleasures in life, Quentyn. Fighting and—”

And just then, Quentyn’s mercy finally came, in the form Ser Barristan Selmy. The squire Edric Storm followed the white knight’s horse. “Prince Quentyn,” Ser Barristan called out, raising a hand in greeting.

“‘Ser,’” Quentyn returned the courtesy.

“Prince Oberyn has requested that I escort you to him,” the old knight said, “if you have no immediate concerns, or wounds…”

“No,” Quentyn said. “No, I don’t.” He was only too grateful for Selmy’s interruption. He spurred his courser up to a trot, and rode with the white knight and his squire to a place some two hundred yards ahead of the column before slowing.

“Your uncle’s men are inside Highgarden,” Ser Barristan told him, “it will only be a matter of time before they hoist the Martell banner over the ramparts.”

“And the Tyrells?”

“They have brought their men out to fight beside Prince Oberyn. Ser Garlan Tyrell leads inside the castle walls.”

“The battle is won, then?” Perhaps it was too much to be hoped, but…

Selmy shook his head. “No. It will be a few hours before we can declare even the slightest victory. Randyll Tarly will not yield, sadly. And so more men must fall in this conquest.” His blue eyes locked with Quentyn’s, half frost and half mist. “But I think you understand loss, my prince.”

Quentyn bit his lip. “They always say… they speak about honourable war—”

“There is no such thing as honourable war, my prince. To go to war, thereby starting terrible violence and bloodshed, is among the most dishonourable things a man can do. Take Rhaegar Targaryen.” Ser Barristan smiled a sad, longing smile. “He was brilliant, but he was flawed too, and all the world suffered for his flaws. The war that started between the Starks and the Targaryens never need have happened…”

“My uncle went to King’s Landing to avenge Princess Elia by killing Ser Gregor Clegane,” Quentyn said, “and the Starks rode south to their murdered Lord Rickard. Most fights are done with vengeance and justice in mind.”

“And there is no limit to how far men will go,” Ser Barristan answered solemnly, “to find the justice they want.”

The camp came upon them suddenly. They went up to Prince Oberyn’s tent, a tall cone of silk the colour of blood oranges. Quentyn ducked in through the tent flap with Ser Barristan following close
behind.

Inside, four men sat around a map table, watching his uncle pace back and forth. Selmy cleared his throat. “I have brought your nephew, Prince Oberyn.”

“I can see that,” Oberyn said, “Quentyn, you may take a seat, but I wouldn’t bother. You won’t be here long. We are going on a march.”

Another? Quentyn groaned inwardly, and his uncle saw the look on his face. “Don’t look so disillusioned. It’s better than sitting in this tent holding court. Remind your father never to put me in charge of an army again. There is a limit to my boredom.” He gestured around the table. “You know Lord Yronwood and Lord Jordayne, but have you met our guests? Mace Tyrell, the lord of Highgarden, and his son, Ser Loras, the Knight of the Flowers.”

Lord Mace Tyrell was a thickset man of about fifty years, with a stately moustache. On his head he wore a ridiculous helm with two silvery-blue feathers in it, and the rest of his armour was equally ornate. “Prince Quentyn.” He extended a thick-fingered hand, and Ser Loras offered the same courtesy. The Knight of the Flowers looked every bit as elegant in his gleaming silver armour as Quentyn had heard.

“As I was saying…” Prince Oberyn strode across the tent, twirling his spear. “Another sortie.”

“Is the castle ours?” Quentyn asked.

Tyrell nodded. “The fighting is nearly over,” he declared. “Inside the castle, at least. The traitor Randyll Tarly has broken, but thanks to your blockade across the river there is nowhere for him to flee. It is only his war camp that remains.”

“That will be no easy skirmish,” said Ser Loras. “There are close to ten thousand men inside that camp.”

Lord Tyrell waved a hand. “Most of them will surrender when they see our cavalry thundering down on them. Just like in the songs. Ten thousand will dwindle quickly, mark my words.”

“There are still four trebuchets to be dealt with,” said Lord Yronwood. “And of course, if what Ser Willas said about the wildfire is true, we must be cautious.”

“I am the very spirit of caution,” Lord Tyrell said. He reached for his wine cup and knocked it over. The Dornish red spilled across the table like a tide of blood.

“Yes,” Mathis Rowan said acerbically, “no one can deny that.”

Prince Oberyn finished gazing out into the night and returned to the table. “How many men do we have against these ten thousand?”

“We brought five thousand,” said Ser Loras. “Of which eight hundred are mounted men, the rest afoot. Lord Rowan brought another thousand and Ser Horas eight hundred.”

“So that is sixty eight hundred in all,” said Ser Horas Redwyne. “Not enough to outnumber them, but once Ser Garlan mobilises inside the castle, our force will be near doubled. And if the Hightowers turn as we suspect, then we will outnumber Lord Randyll two-to-one.”

Oberyn held up his hand. “Lord Jordayne?”

Lord Jordayne shrugged. “With the return of Prince Quentyn’s cohort, we should have about six
thousand Dornishmen ready to ride. They might benefit from a few minutes’ rest, though, to see to
injuries and the like.”

“Give us thirty minutes,” said Lord Yronwood. “That should be enough to see that the wounded are
treated and the able are refreshed for the next assault. With luck, the castle will be ours by midnight.”

Prince Oberyn whistled through his teeth. “As you will. My lords, see to your men and your horses.
Quentyn, remain.”

They filed out grumbling and arguing. Once they were gone, Oberyn jumped up suddenly and
picked up his spear. “What do you think, Quent? Basilisk’s venom or widow’s blood?”

“Poisons?”

“Aye. Knights will tell you that poison is a coward’s weapon, but if I should fall during battle I want
my foes to remember me long after I am gone.”

Quentyn frowned. “Wouldn’t you rather just… not die?”

“I don’t ride into battle with the intention of dying. I don’t think anyone does. But when I do fall, I
want to have an end that is memorable. They don’t sing songs for men who die boring deaths. How
did Aerys the First die again?” Oberyn smirked. “You don’t know, and neither do I. But none of us
will ever forget how the Kingslayer drove a sword through Aerys the Second’s back.”

“I don’t like this,” Quentyn said abruptly.

“The battle?” Oberyn stretched across the table and found the wine-flagon. “Have a drink, nephew.
You’ll need it.”

“No. I don’t want to be slow when I’m fighting.”

Prince Oberyn shrugged. “Your choice, nephew. Best work on building up your courage, though.
You’re supposed to be a leader, remember?” He tilted the flagon towards Quentyn, teasing him, then
pulled it back and squared his shoulders. “Alright, never mind that. We ride in half an hour. Best use
that time to prepare yourself. Find some enjoyment in the night, Quent… there isn’t long left…”

He found Drink and Arch near the baggage train, sitting in the back of the wagon with a bottle of
whisky. “I bet you can’t get another seven of them,” Drink said.

“Eight, I bet,” said Arch. He looked up and saw Quentyn. “What?”

“Where’s Cletus?”

Gerris snorted. “Where do you think?”

He’d suspected already, but he’d harboured a small hope it wouldn’t be as he’d thought. “One of the
Fowler twins?”

“Jeyne,” said Arch. “Or Jennelyn. Or both. The girls love him.”

_They always have._ Oberyn’s words rang in his head. _Find some enjoyment in the night._ Sighing as
he did so, he hopped up beside them onto the wagon. Mayhaps having a drink or two before the last
battle wouldn’t be so bad.

The stars were coming out. Around them, knights and squires and common soldiers rushed to and fro
between the tents, carrying mantlets and heavy shields under their arms, lugging pikes and spears.
Grooms calmed their lathered horses and fed apples to knights’ mounts. The tents whistled in the gathering wind, and the camp rang to the sounds of shouting. But in the midst of it all, Quentyn Martell, Gerris Drinkwater and Archibald Yronwood sat on the back of a cart, sharing stories of days gone by.

Then a horn blew.

“What’s happening?” Arch asked, jumping to his feet.

Drink only shrugged. “The war,” he said, running across to his tent. “Is it half an hour already?”

They were already wearing their armour and their swords were nearby, so there was no need to bother with endless straps and clasps. All that remained was to fix his halfhelm over his head and pull his mail gauntlets over his fingers. The night was warm already, so he was thankful for the opening in the front of his helm that let the cool wind blow onto his face.

“I’ll go and find Cletus,” Arch said, unsheathing up his greatsword. “Quent, Drink, you go see what’s happening.”

There was no mystery there, but Quentyn was surprised to find Lord Mace Tyrell among the Dornishmen, fighting to be heard over the sound of trumpets. His horse turned and whickered impatiently as he made his speech. “My friends!” he shouted, the feather in his helm waving in the wind, “the hour has come. Madness has overtaken the Reach, and grasped in its claws my castle! But now we must drive it back under the rocks whence it came! MADNESS HAS HAD ITS DAY!”

That brought halfhearted cheering from the Reachmen, who at least had the decency to act as though they had been inspired by their lord’s ridiculous call to arms. The horns trumpeted as loudly and as blusteringly as Mace Tyrell himself.

And then they were off. Quentyn had his back turned, but he heard the thunder of hooves churning up the grass. Mace Tyrell was singing ‘The Dornishman’s Wife’ at the top of his voice. The infantrymen followed down the hill, falling further and further behind the cavalry with every passing second, but soon they had disappeared into the woods too.

Quentyn found his own horse and mounted up. He drew his sword in his left hand, gripping the horse’s reins with his right. He was right-handed, but he was more afraid of falling from his horse than of failing to cut people in half. Some of the Dornish lords were already on their way; Lord Qorgyle’s banner had disappeared into the woods, and Lord Allyrion was gone too with all his horsemen. He could hear Prince Oberyn shouting.

His men’s eyes were on him, expectant. Perhaps they wanted him to make a speech, but his mouth was dry, and he only remembered one thing. Serve. Protect. Obey. “For Sunspear!” he called, as banners fluttered above him. “For Dorne!”

“For Dorne!” Gerris shouted, pointing his sword skyward. Others took up the chant. They beat on their shields and made their horses stomp the grass all over again, and as the shouting rose, so too did Quentyn’s heartbeat. He did not know if it was because of fear or excitement.

The next thing he knew they were thundering down into the woods. Gerris was to his left, Arch and Cletus somewhere behind. It had started to rain, and the ground was mushy underfoot. Mud sprayed up and struck Quentyn in his face. A spurt of madness went through him, as raindrops fell from the boughs of the trees and licked at his face like salty tears. The Tyrell men were fanning out into the valley. The brush fell away ahead of them, and the Dornish banners went ahead across the dirt road. One of the flagbearers plunged into a Tarly archer and rammed his banner clean through his foe’s
chest, all without dismounting. Arrows took flight and licked at the sky on all sides. Quentyn switched his sword into his right hand, his steed twisting and jostling beneath him. He no longer felt the same fear as he had earlier.

And he was not sure what that made him.

Drink was the first to score a kill, splitting one of Lord Peake’s footmen from navel to skull from his position ahorse. They raced onwards through the trees, screaming a war cry that all men knew, a song with no words.

Suddenly something buckled beneath him, and then his horse was gone, and he was flying, spiralling, smashing back to earth. He hit the ground awkwardly, and felt a bruise blooming on his left side. He spat out mud and blood and worms, and struggled to his feet.

“Quentyn!” roared Arch. “Behind!”

He wheeled about just in time. The archer who had brought down his horse had darted in to finish the job, his dirk upraised. Quentyn spun aside, drove his mailed shoulder up and sent the man reeling. Sword, sword, I need to find a—

His fingers locked around the rain-wet hilt. The archer reared back – not nearly enough. Quentyn’s sword went through his leather jack and through his skin and buried itself in his stomach. When he drew the blade away, things were slipping out, slimy like sausages. “No,” the man muttered.

Yes, Quentyn thought, afraid to look away. The man’s eyes rolled back and he was still.

He wiped his blade clean on a fallen standard. Arch came running up from his left, lugging his massive two-handed greatsword. His footsteps splashed up the sodden grass. “Got him?” he asked.

Quentyn nodded mutely. “Where’s—”

“I left Drink and Cletus together. They were still on their horses last I saw.” He thumped Quentyn’s back. “Come on!”

Quentyn followed, not knowing where they were going. From all around came the sounds of dying men and horses. He saw his own steed, whimpering feebly as it died a slow death beneath an oak tree. Arch approached it slowly and drew his greatsword across the beast’s throat. “They’re ahead of us,” he said. “Lord Allyrion and Lord Tyrell have gone for a trebuchet, maybe we should—”

His voice was cut off by the sound of shrieking. Quentyn turned and saw three men descending on them. “Sword!” shouted Arch, lumbering forwards. Quentyn checked that his visor was still down before following. His helm smelled of iron and blood.

The man thrust at him with his spear; Quentyn turned it aside, then forced the point of his weapon upwards. A snake is nothing when you chop off its head. He turned back, went to the man’s right as he lunged left, then brought his blade down, knocking off the head of the spear. Then he charged his foe with all his strength; Quentyn was broad, if a little slow, but still strong enough to topple his foe. “Yield!” he shouted over the sound of the rain. “I said, yield!”

His foe did not yield, but drew a dagger instead. Quentyn plunged his sword down into his breast. The man shuddered and fell still. Arch was fighting off two men with his back to a tree. Just then horses came thundering past him, and when they were gone, one of them was unmoving in the ground and Arch was fighting only one. Quentyn ran up and smashed a sword against the back of the man’s helm, and he crumpled unconscious in a heap. “No use killing him,” he muttered, “it was that sonofabitch Tarly who chose this war.”
Lord Randyll’s remaining trebuchets were difficult to miss. Seventy feet tall, they towered over the camp like giants. Quentyn pushed Arch in the direction of one and together they fought their way up the hill. Not that there was anyone left to fight — most of their foes were lying dead or routing as they came up. “Looks like this fight is already won, Quent,” Arch muttered.

They faced a challenge at the top of the hill, though. Lord Randyll’s trebuchets were each ringed by a low palisade wall, with archers at the fortifications. The Dornishmen were finding no easy conquest forcing their way through, though with such sheer numbers they would soon prevail. Against his own better sense, Quentyn forced a path to the front. “YIELD!” Arch shouted at every man who came near, swatting away their swords, “YIELD!”

It isn’t them we need to kill, thought Quentyn. It’s their bloody trebuchet. He shouted as much, but no one heard, no one listened, no one cared. The circle pressed tighter and tighter, Dornish spears winning out over their foes with bows. A half-hearted arrow glanced harmlessly off his vambrace and was trampled into the grass. Quentyn poked his sword out when one of the Reachmen tried to break the line, stabbed him in the side. “I yield!” the man all but screamed. Quentyn took him by the gorget and dragged him down back behind their lines. By the time they got there the man’s guts had leaked out and he was dead.

He yielded, Quentyn thought hollowly, but he was distracted by the loud cracking of wood, louder and louder, then the trebuchet came crashing to earth.

Quentyn glanced across the ridge to the next trebuchet, which was coming down too. “Cousin!” came a shout, and he looked to see Nym Sand tugging on his arm. “You’re here? I thought you were… nevermind.”

Quentyn shrugged. “I—”

“No matter!” she called over the sound of the rain. “Two trebuchets down, Father’s gone to take another. The Tyrells might have already finished with the last one! So what’s our plan now?”

He stared at her aghast. “What?”

“My father commanded you to command, didn’t he? So command!” As she spoke, Quentyn became aware of more and more men crowding around him. Nym and Obara, Drink and Cletus, Ser Ulwyck Uller, Ser Mors Blackmont, many more. My men.

Serve. Protect. Obey. “The Tyrells will have those trebuchets down soon!” he shouted “We’ll go to the main camp instead, see what we can find of Lord Tarly! We… we’ll kill the man who started all of this!” He felt strangely drunk.

“Why couldn’t you be like this more often?” Nym asked, even as she sprinted past him. Quentyn followed, surging his way down into the valley, a mass of Dornishmen following behind him. Dalt and Allyrion men, Santagar and Toland. And all his friends, save for poor dead Will; all running to the end of a war with hope in their hearts and minds.

Perhaps this was not so bad after all.

The Reachmen were coming down the opposite hill; Quentyn saw Lord Mace Tyrell in his ridiculous feathered helm. Highgarden’s lord seemed only too content to let his knights do the fighting for him. Swords and shields beat angrily in the air, and over their heads arrows swooped like fiery hawks. The flames guttered out in puddles of black water as they landed.

Gerris shouted something inaudible in his ear. Quentyn saw where he was pointing, to a glimmer of
steel amid the crowd of their foes. A knight. A shiver went through him. He had never fought men in full armour before.

A pennant of orange and white flickered behind the knight’s helm, and a fox was painted on the his square shield, ringed by flowers. Florent, thought Quentyn as their swords met. The first meeting of blades jarred his elbow, and nearly sent him reeling, but Gerris was there to back him up, checking the knight’s arm for blow as Quentyn recovered his balance. More men came sprinting in towards them, and Gerris turned his back to fight them, leaving Quentyn with the knight.

He attacked this time, his blade biting into the wooden edge of the knight’s shield. Armour. He is wearing armour. He is slow. Speed had never been Quentyn’s strength, but he had no choice.

The Florent knight’s blade came left, and left again. Quentyn checked his first blow and ducked away from the second. For a moment the knight’s arm was exposed to the elbow. Quentyn brought his blade up in a wide, clumsy strike. The steel raked over his lobstered gauntlet, leaving a bright slash. Then Gerris returned and took the knight from behind, forcing him to turn. Quentyn brought his blade down hard, shearing the plume from his helm. It fluttered into a deep muddy puddle and rested there. Then his shield was gone too, but so was Gerris, back to fighting two spearmen.

Raindrops shimmered brightly off the knight’s armour. Quentyn saw his fearful face reflected in the breastplate. Florent scythed his sword sideways, stepped back, blocked Quentyn’s return thrust, and brought his blade across. He turned his hand inwards, took the sword on his right, then…

A gauntleted punch met his helm, making his whole head ring as he stumbled. Knights are supposed to be chivalrous, Quentyn thought. But life is not a song. The second punch knocked him into the grass. The third threatened to crack his skull… but the fourth never came.

When he looked up, bleary-eyed, Gerris Drinkwater was standing over him. His sword was red with blood halfway to the hilt, and the knight was sprawled across Quentyn’s feet, jerking in his death throes. Behind the trees, flames were rising, probably from one of Tarly’s tents. “Not all your wars are like that, eh, Quent?” said Drink, smiling.

He saw the spearman before Gerris did, running up from behind. Quentyn yanked his dagger from his sheath, then kicked out at his friend’s leg. Gerris tumbled into the grass.

Quentyn’s single hurried thought was to throw the dagger.

So he did.

The knife shot out of his gauntleted hand, and there was a wet thump as it made its mark. The spearman staggered back a couple of paces, then fell.

Quentyn pushed the dead knight’s arm off him and picked up his discarded longsword. The rain caemd won heavier than ever. For a moment it seemed that his foe was drowning in the puddle of reddish water.

He staggered forward to the spearman… but found no man waiting for him, only a boy, not more than eleven, dressed in his squire’s clothing, a dark stain spreading out across his darker tunic. The spear lay forgotten beside him. The boy looked up, glanced into his eyes, and choked out his last word. “F…Father?” Then he was still, and dead.

“His father,” Gerris murmured at his side. “Well… that stinks.”

Quentyn fell to his knees and promptly threw up in the grass. He wiped his mouth clean and rose, unsteady on his feet. Nym and Arch had come up behind Gerris now. “Is he all right?” the Sand
Snake asked.

“Fine,” Quentyn muttered. “It’s nothing.” He stumbled on without them, towards the flaming mess of the enemy encampment.

“Obara and Cletus went ahead,” said Nym, “and Lord Tyrell. He seems to think that he can kill Randyll Tarly all by himself. The man’s raving mad. Entertaining, though.”

“Entertaining,” Arch agreed, leaning on his greatsword as they wandered through the battlefield. “Trebuchets are all down, though, so this is it.” He smiled. “The final battle.”

*The final battle.* It did not feel like that to Quentyn, not in the slightest. “Where is my uncle?” he asked, coughing.

“Went back to summon the reserve with old Ser Barristan,” Nym told him, “though he’d rather be here, I’m sure.”

*I’m only too willing to switch places with him,* Quentyn thought, as they lumbered into camp. The flames were dancing higher and higher, Tarly’s men were screaming, running without a fight, some on fire, others wounded, many seeming perfectly uninjured. “Fly, you fools!” one screamed as he ran past.

“Cowards!” Nym shouted at them as they fled.

Quentyn saw Lord Tyrell’s splendid warhorse riding among the tents unchallenged, flanked by a dozen knights. A wagon driver was attempting to flee the burning place, but Cletus and Obara were chasing him down. Mace Tyrell circled one of the burning tents, then took an offering from his nearest companion and raised something into the air, a dark shadow amid all the flames. Quentyn could not see it, but Gerris told him. “A Tyrell standard.”

“So, then.” Arch planted his sword in the grass and breathed a sigh of relief. “Victory.”

*Aye,* thought Quentyn, for that one instant.

*Wait...*

And he remembered.

Lord Yronwood’s half-forgotten warning, a word from Willas Tyrell, the very reason they had come to help Highgarden in the first place...

The flames rose higher.

He saw it all in that instant. Cletus running towards the wayn, his sword upraised. The thick green liquid dripping from one of the carts, spilling out across the ground like tar. Braziers burning, flames and sparks flying from the burnin tents, arrows taking flight, fire, fire, *wildfire*—

“Cletus!” he screamed, reaching out hopelessly with his sword hand.

The green flames leapt from nowhere, consuming the yellow instantly. They spread through the grass like a plague, incinerating canvas and leather. Splinters and stones flew in every direction, and the world blackened for an instant. Then blood was spilling down his face, over his cheek and into his mouth. Everything tasted of fire. His longsword was thrown from his hands. And Arch and Gerris dragging him away, but ahead of them, only a few hundred yards away, Cletus was still burning, *all of him* was burning.
Quentyn’s trembling fingers went to his face, and fixed around something hard and sharp. His eye, his eye was gone.

Oh, he thought. Then he began to scream.

Chapter End Notes

A Coat of Gold had Blackwater II, Oldtown, and the Tumblestone: three very different battles with very different strengths. However, none of these three battles really capture the visceral fighting in the way that this chapter does, IMO.

They always say that a good fight scene is the hardest thing to write; you can't overdescribe, but you have to give some guidance as a writer and let the reader fill in the blanks themselves. Hopefully, the element of balance in this chapter worked for all of you.

Obviously, something very important happened in this chapter... Mace Tyrell's moment of glory. We shall never see his like again. And now his watch is ended.
The Broken Man

Chapter Summary

“Is a broken man an outlaw?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

JAIME

North of Stoney Sept the hills died down, replaced by an ocean of green grass and trickling rivers, dotted here and there with cornstalks. On the fourth day, they passed through the village of Tumbler’s Falls. The smallfolk hailed their horses and a few crones treated Lem Lemoncloak to news.

“Stannis’s men have Riverrun,” he told them afterwards, “but Lady Sansa’s brother and Brynden Blackfish are headed for Harrenhal, to besiege Petyr Baelish. If it please my lady, we might head there instead. Blackfish Tully will be friendlier to us than whoever holds Riverrun now.”

Lady Sansa consented to that, and Brienne approved, so Lem set a new course to meet the Tully host at the top of the God’s Eye. “They’ll be coming at Harrenhal from the west, so if we make as though we were headed for the river road—”

“Better to skirt around the edge of the lake, if you ask me,” Jaime said, “there are outlaws in these parts.”

“They will be no fewer down by the God’s Eye. Better to head northeast, and intercept the Blackfish on his way.”

For six days they rode without incident. The hills rose again north and east of Tumbler’s Falls, and they followed the snaking downhill course of a tributary of the Red Fork. The pines rose rugged and wild, the branches embracing one another above their heads. The chill was setting in too; and frosty leaves crunched beneath the hooves of horses. Jaime donned a pair of leather gloves he’d found.

Off the Lychester road, they came to a place where three gibbets stood, swinging in the wind. “Is this your work?” Jaime asked Anguy the Archer.

Anguy shrugged. “Might be Stoneheart’s,” he said.

The dead men numbered three. One was balding and pox-cheeked, his face covered with weeping sores. The second was a stringy youth of about seventeen, with a wispy moustache on his upper lip. He reminded Jaime of his cousin Lancel. The third was grey-faced and grey-haired; he wore a faded crimson cloak, and his lion-crested helm rested at the foot of the gibbet.
“Broken men?” asked Gendry.

“Aye.” Lem Lemoncloak rode past them, then back down the line. “If you listen close, you can hear them singing.” The wind wailed through the line of corpses.

“Dead men sing no songs,” Podrick added.

The Mad Huntsman laughed at Brienne. “That’s one smart lad you’ve got yourself there, wench.”

“Don’t bully the lad,” Jaime said, “he’s more loyal than any of you lot. And don’t call Lady Brienne ‘wench’ either.”

Podrick flushed. “Is a broken man an outlaw?” he asked Lem.

“More or less,” Brienne answered.

“More less than more,” said Lem. “There are many sorts of outlaws, just as there are many sorts of birds.”

“We can talk about this later.” Anguy wheeled his horse about.

And so they crossed the river on a rotting oak bridge with planks that seemed like to give way at any second. Afterwards, they rode for three hours until the stars rose and a velvety blackness had fallen over the world like the cloak of a Night’s Watchman. *Or the cloak of a soiled Kingsguard knight."

They set up camp on a grassy sward near Stoney Sept. A one-handed man was little help in setting up tents, so Jaime took the task of fetching water from the stream. It was difficult with one hand, but he managed it. He walked back beside Gendry, who gave him a snide look. “Kingslayer.”

“Bastard,” Jaime replied. “I trust you enjoyed the day’s riding?”

“It’s the same every day.”

“Life’s always the same, lad. It doesn’t change when you get older. As I’ve found in the Kingsguard. The white cloak is more of a white prison.”

“Then why do you still wear it?”

“A good question.” Jaime glanced down at his golden hand. “Because I swore a vow.”

Gendry gave him a knowing look, as if to say, *and how many vows have you broken already, Kingslayer?*

*One,* Jaime thought as he wandered back towards the tents. *But better one than five hundred thousand.*

That night he slept well for the first time in weeks. When he crawled from his tent, Podrick was cooking sausages over a fire, and Brienne was sharpening Oathkeeper with a whetstone. Sparks shimmered off the red-tinged steel. “Good morrow, my lady,” Jaime said.

“And you, ser.”

He coughed. “Beg pardon, my lady. I’m going to take a piss.”

“Did you have to tell me that?” she asked his back.
No, thought Jaime, as he climbed down towards the riverbed, but I had to say something, before somebody noticed how I was looking at you. He coughed, splashed water on his face to clear his head, then waded out a few yards into the stream and pulled his cock out to take a piss. His stream quickly dissolved among the murky reeds. Jaime remembered a time when Tyrion had told him about fish that could smell your piss from five miles away, and then they swam up to you and jumped up onto your-

He shivered and adjusted his breeches once more. The water lapped around the legs of his breeches, soft and silky as Cersei’s lips on his cheek. No, he thought, turning back to the camp. I should not think of her. Not here. Only a fool would lust after something he could never have. Cersei is in Casterly Rock, and I am in the seventh hell. We could not be further apart if we tried.

“Kingslayer,” the Hound growled from the opposite bank.

Jaime was startled. “Clegane,” he muttered. “Most men don’t creep up on others like that.”

“I’m not most men, Kingslayer.”

“No. We’re not. Come to think of it, I don’t really know what we are.”

The Hound’s rough voice rustled across the clearing. “You never used to be so fucking philosophical, Kingslayer. I preferred you stupid.”

“I was never stupid.” Only ignorant.

“You were your sister’s bitch.”

“And you were Joffrey’s. Now we’re free men.”

Sandor Clegane spat in the river, his hacking cough transforming into a laugh. “You think we’re free?” he asked spitefully. “You think any of us are free, Kingslayer? No… some cunt of a god made our fates long ago, and tied us all up in his little game.”

“Well, if you ever end up meeting the Stranger, be sure to give him my regards.”

“Fuck your regards,” the Hound said. He spat again and lumbered back up the hill, leaving Jaime alone on the bank.

That morning there was no rain, and they covered seven miles. But as the day wore on the weather changed, and so did their fortunes. By evenfall, Jaime could barely hear the hoofbeats of his horse over the roar of the rain. “Road’s damn near soaked through,” Lem Lemoncloak said, “but there’s a place we can stay up ahead. I know the innkeep.”

“It seems you know everyone.”

“Everyone knows me,” said Lem. “I’ve been at it for years.”

“Since when?” Lady Sansa asked.

“Since before you were born, begging your pardons, my lady. I’ve wandered from Dorne to the Vale, even gone into the North a couple of times, though it’s too damn cold to make anything out of it.”

“You weren’t with Lord Beric when Father sent him to hunt down Gregor Clegane,” the Stark girl said.
“No, my lady, I wasn’t. I came after that, when I found like-minded men who wanted similar things to me.”

Brienne gave him a sidelong look. “And what is that?”

“Peace. Prosperity. And friendship, I think. It has been so long since I last chanced upon all three.”

Jaime squinted at him. “Who are you? Who did you fight for?”

“I’m the same as you, Ser Jaime,” Lem said. “Same as Clegane here, too. I’m just as young Podrick named me. A broken man.” Then he rode on and left them there. His yellow cloak was the last thing to fade into the rain.

The inn was at Rushing Falls, one of the places where Lord Beric Dondarrion had been slain during the War of the Five Kings. The roofing tiles were stained with age, and soot had bleached the timbers black. “It’s in a bad state,” Brienne said.

“No worse than either of us,” Jaime answered.

It was more promising inside. Candles flickered in candelabras, throwing their shadows up against wattle-and-daub walls lined with tapestries. The main floor of the inn was busy, crammed to bursting with trestle tables. Serving wenches bustled back and forth among the patrons bearing frothy tankards of ale. The sound of boots stomping strained the timbers and set the whole room to shaking. Mead-cups clashed and the sound of merry chatter was in the air. “Busy tonight,” Jaime murmured, but with a storm on the way, he was not surprised.

Some innkeepers would have been wary of such large groups of travellers – they could easily be robbers, for example – while others were only too happy to receive such promising business. This innkeeper was of the latter sort, fortunately, and any glint of suspicion in his gaze faded away when his eyes chanced upon Lem Lemoncloak. “Dear gods, Lem!” he exclaimed, “Is it all of you? And… and Lord Beric too?”

“Not so, I’m afraid,” said the big outlaw, “only the worst of us lot. And Lord Beric’s dead, sorry to tell you. For good this time.”

The innkeeper clicked his fingers at two girls from the next table. “Merry, Layla, this is a business, not a brothel. Get back to work; serve these good men their ale. Will you want rooms, too?”

“You got enough space for all of us?” asked Greenbeard.

“It’ll be the common room, I fear, my friend. But yes, that should do nicely for all of you.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Tom Sevenstrings passed this way three days ago,” he said. “With that pink priest o’ yours.”

“Thoros,” said Jack-be-Lucky. “Where was he headed? Was her ladyship-?”

Lem held up a hand for silence. “I didn’t see no lady,” the innkeep continued, “and he didn’t tell me where he was going neither. But… there was one thing… there was all this complaining between Sevenstrings and some other bloke about going back up Blue Fork way. Some man says it was the fastest way back to that hollow hill, but Tom replies he ain’t headed for the bloody hollow hill no more, begging your pardons, sers.”

Lem gave that a long, concerned look. “You’re a good man,” he said, thumping the innkeep’s shoulder. “Friends like you are what keep us thriving.”
“They were dead quiet, though,” the innkeeper continued, “all whispering and that, like they were when the Lannisters were here.”

“The Lannisters are dead and gone,” said Jon o’Nutten, “but Lord Tywin’s lackeys remain. Some son of Walder Frey has gone outlaw, calling himself Lord of the Crossing an’ all that, and there’s Gregor Clegane’s men running riot without the Mountain to hold their reins.”

“Aye,” said the innkeeper, “it isn’t all plain sailing.” He bowed his head. “But I won’t trouble you with that. I’ll leave you to your drink, sers. There’s hot stew too, if you want some, and roast pork with some crackling. It’ll cost you half a dozen coppers, though; I’m not giving it up for free.”

Brienne somehow grabbed Jaime by the arm and steered him over to a table beside the fireplace. Lady Sansa and Podrick settled onto the bench opposite them, and the Hound sat at the head of the table, staring up at the ceiling. A voice cut in from his right side, “Mind if we join you?”

It was just as he had expected: Ned Dayne, accompanied by Gendry. Jaime was sorely tempted to refuse them, but he found himself scooting over to make room for Edric, while Gendry sat beside Sansa, mumbling his courtesies.

No one spoke until the innkeeper’s girls brought them their tankards. Their gazes lingered a moment longer than normal on Gendry, with his broad shoulders and powerful chest. Jaime remembered Robert Baratheon when he had been a young and strong, on Cersei’s wedding day. He recalled the pang of jealousy that had gone through him… though the ugliest man in the Seven Kingdoms could have married his sister, and Jaime would have felt jealous all the same.

“We could play at cards,” young Ned suggested, drawing a pack from the pocket of his doublet. “I took them from Melly. He doesn’t know.”

“I used to play,” Podrick Payne blurted out, “with Ser Cedric. He drank. If he won. And if he lost.”

“Would you like to tell us how to play?” Sansa Stark asked politely.

That was a mistake, Jaime knew. Podrick took near ten minutes of stammering, blushing and long-winded explanation before any of them had a clue what was going on. The Hound sat out and refused to involve himself, so there were six playing. “I don’t understand,” said Brienne, quizzical.

“When I supposed to say ‘cheat’ before or after he puts his cards down?”

“Before the next person, my lady,” Pod replied. “So after Ser Jaime. Unless you’re Ser Cedric. He used to say that I was cheating, so he hit me. When he was drunk. But you’re not. Not him, I mean.”

“Oh,” said Brienne. “Cheat.”

Jaime smiled. “Pick them up, wench.”

She glared at him and picked up the cards. “My name is-”

“Brienne. I know. Apologies, my lady.” Then it was Jaime’s turn to start.

They went around the table twice until Podrick made such a bad bluff of playing a ‘seven’ that even Gendry was able to call him out. Lady Sansa looked impassive. The girl has spent so long hiding her true feelings that a mere game of cards must seem as easy as sleeping to her. However, she was too kind to call Podrick out.

Another two circuits of the table left Pod with such a ridiculously tall pile of cards that it became impossible for him to win, and soon Edric Dayne was gone too. After that, Ned spent his time
peeking across the table at Gendry’s cards.

The pile on the table was about twenty cards high when Edric played two aces, forcing Jaime to play either an ace, a two or a king on his turn. Of which he had none, so he bluffe and played a queen instead. The queen on the card had golden hair and green eyes, he thought, and she regarded him with a smile as cold as frost. *You poor stupid crippled fool.*

Brienne sat glaring at his newly played card for so long that she seemed like to burn a hole through it. Then her eyes rose to Jaime’s own, staring him out. Her gaze was frosty and cold as a blue star, with the glimmer of sapphires. *Her eyes do not fit with the rest of her,* Jaime decided. They were not especially pretty, but they were much too not-ugly to belong on Brienne’s face.

“I can see you thinking there, my lady,” he murmured, “the Tarths are not known for quick-wittedness.”

“And the Lannisters are not known for their honesty,” Brienne replied coolly.

“Ah, but we have cunning. Lann the Clever gained Casterly Rock through trickery, my lady; I have that same cunning in my veins.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Brienne said, “And yet…”

Jaime smiled at her. “Have I not shown that I can be truthful, my lady?”

He could see it in her eyes: the considerations of every journey they had taken together, of what they had seen together, fought together, beaten together. *She trusts me,* he thought, and in that moment, it was more than just a game of cards. It was-

“Cheat,” said Lady Sansa, turning over his cards.

Jaime stifled his swearing and Brienne held back a laugh. With the new pile added to his deck, he knew that his chances of winning were over. So he simply played intending to make Brienne lose.

He stood a better chance in the second round. Ned and Gendry went out quickly, followed by Brienne, but Podrick suddenly went from stumbling idiot to master player and beat Jaime and Sansa both with little effort on his part. For the first time, the Hound made his presence known with a gravelly laugh. “Boy’s got you both beaten there. Playing dead the first time, eh? Smarter than most.”

Podrick made a vague squeaking noise, and was saved by the innkeeper’s wife arriving with a pot of stew. She gave them all a generous ladle, and a bit more for the Hound, who grunted his thanks wordlessly.

Jaime gave Brienne a pointed look. “You planning on taking that off someday?” She still wore the suit of armour that Jaime had given her back in King’s Landing, though it was scratched to the seventh hell and had gone dull from wear.

“Why?” she asked.

“We aren’t at war inside here.”

“Aye… but that’s what you thought in Fairmarket.”

Edric Dayne leaned across the table. “What happened in Fairmarket?”
“Nothing,” said Brienne.

“None of your business,” said Jaime.

“Ser Jaime… uh… forced me out of a window,” said Podrick Payne. “And uh… the Lannisters… they came… uh, but ser’s a Lannister already, I suppose, and…” His voice trailed off to a thin squeak.

“And what’s so terrible about that?” the Hound grunted. The stew ran down his chin as he pointed at Jaime and Brienne with his much maligned soup spoon. Lady Sansa gave him an uneasy look, but Clegane saw it. “Eat properly, girl. No one’s judging your courtesies here, little bird. Look at me, seven Hells. Half my bloody face burned off, but you don’t see me hiding that away. Then there’s the Kingslayer and his great ugly wench.”

“Her name is Brienne,” said Jaime under his breath.

“And I am certainly not his wench,” she added.

Clegane ignored them. “Eat up properly, girl, and take a good swig of your ale. Drink!”

Lady Sansa picked the tankard up, glaring at it suspiciously. “I don’t like ale,” she muttered with a scowl.

“You don’t drink it for the taste, m’lady,” said Gendry.

“Then why do you drink it at all?”

He frowned. “Most of the time there’s nothing better. Other than the water, and that’s… um…”

“Most of it tastes like piss,” the Hound murmured, “so drink.”

Jaime’s attention drifted across the common room as Lady Sansa raised her tankard. Puddingfoot, Swampy Meg and Twopenny were playing at dice. In one corner, a minstrel was playing a song on his harp and singing. At first Jaime recognised ‘The Rains of Castamere’, but after hearing a few of the lyrics he knew that it was not so:

“But ages come and ebb and fade,

And winter brings new snow,

Now blood rains down on gold-and-red,

Alongside Death in his stark grey robes,

And now in the age of the crimson kings,

Our king avenged upon the wrong,

And the stars in the night are the eyes of the wolves,

And the wind itself is their song...”
“Ser Jaime?” Brienne’s voice brought him back.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “Only…” I betrayed my own family and stabbed my father through the heart. “…nothing.”

She had the good grace to look concerned, at least. But any more words she might have said were lost to the glazed-over look in her eyes, staring into the distance. Eventually Jaime had to look for himself.

The new patrons came into the inn as anyone would, but they were anything but normal customers. “That’s Shagwell,” said Brienne beside him, “and I see Pyg.”

“And Timeon,” added Jaime, “and that cunt Zollo.” He could see the glimmer of the fat Dothraki’s arakh beneath his cloak.

“He was with Hoat, wasn’t he?...” Brienne asked.

“Aye,” said Jaime. “And… seven Hells… Biter. You might be needing that armour after all, Lady Brienne.”

“I hope not,” Brienne said, curling her fingers around the hilt of Oathkeeper.

“Who are they?” Sansa asked.

“The Brave Companions,” Edric Dayne murmured gravely. “We met them a few times on our way between the Mander and the hollow hill. The Footmen, some call them. Or the Bloody Mummers. They were at Harrenhal with Lord Tywin, then with Roose Bolton, but after the castle fell they went running amok in the Riverlands—"

“—and cut off my hand for good measure,” Jaime finished. “Much as I would like to kill them, better they don’t notice us.”

There was a fiery look in the Hound’s eyes. “Aye,” he growled. “They’d better hope.”

Whatever chance there had been of getting away unnoticed vanished in an instant when Lem Lemoncloak drew to his feet. He had the lurching step of a man who’d had one too many drinks. “Where’s your Goat?” he asked.

“Dead,” grunted one of the outlaws, turning to face Lem. He spat. “Lem Pisscloak.”

“And his merry men,” added Shagwell, the bells ringing in his hat. “So good to see you all.” His head turned. “Is that the Kingslayer I spy over there? And his whore?”

Jaime felt a sudden compulsion to defend the wench’s honour. “Aye,” he shouted, “I am Ser Jaime Lannister. The Kingslayer. But this is Brienne, the Maid of Tarth, not some whore. I’d have thought you’d be more knowledgeable of whores, Shagwell, given that your mother was one.”

The fool gave a low hissing laugh. From the folds of his cloak he drew a dagger. “Very funny, Kingslayer. We’ll see who’s laughing soon.”

He heard table legs scraping back as Clegane rose to his feet and pointed into the crowd. “Some cunt’s got my helmet,” he rasped.

“Some cunt called Rorge, I’ll wager,” said Lem, “you never see Biter without Rorge. Might be ‘cos they bed down together.”
Biter answered that with a toothy grin, while Rorge growled obscenities from inside the Hound’s helm.

*There will be a fight,* Jaime knew. Gendry and Ned Dayne rose from their places along the bench. “Podrick,” Brienne hissed under her breath, “go with Lady Sansa, take her upstairs.”

“My lady, I should stay-,”

“Podrick, *take her.*”


“I’m six-and-ten!” protested Ned Dayne. “I’m old enough to fight!”

“Not old enough to die, though. If this goes south, get our horses and ride for Ser Brynden, and-”

A glimmer of pale steel caught his eye. A figure stepped forwards out of the shadows. Coarse red hair hung down over his cheeks and beard like wire, but it was the golden crown blazoned on the front of his armour that caught Jaime’s attention. “Trant!” he called out across the room, “is there a reason why you’re cowering with the Bloody Mummers instead of being in Casterly Rock with your king?”

“Your bastard drove me off and left me for dead on the Tumblestone,” Meryn Trant proclaimed.

“And yet here you are, alive. I always knew you were craven, but I never thought you a traitor, Ser Meryn. Nor the sort to go round raping women and stealing from the smallfolk.”

Trant laughed. “Since when do you care about the smallfolk, Kingslayer?”

“Well,” said Jaime, “let’s say I’ve had a change of heart.”

The innkeep waded into the chaos there, stupidly. “No fighting in here,” he said, stepping between the Brave Companions and the Brotherhood. “Take your swords outside, sers-.” He stopped when Shagwell stepped up and thrust a knife through the back of his neck, and he fell gargling to the floor.

Then everything turned to chaos. Tables were flipped, tankards went flying. Patrons ran for cover and hid under tables as swords and axes and daggers were drawn. Shagwell ran screaming over the tables, slashing his knife left and right, cutting Alan of Oldstream across the throat. Then Swampy Meg hit him on the head with her tankard, and again and again and again…

Brienne and Sandor Clegane pushed forwards to meet Rorge and Three Toes in the centre. Oathkeeper flashed through the air, candlelight glistening along its length. Brienne knocked Rorge’s cudgel aside and brought the flat of her blade down on his helm. Perhaps she had not meant to kill him, but the Hound rectified that. “That’s. My. Fucking. Helmet,” he said, as he shoved a carving knife through the slit in the dog’s head helm.

Jaime found himself beside Jack-be-Lucky, who went down under Timeon’s bulk. Shagwell – not dead, apparently – jumped onto the chandelier, swung, and kicked Jon o’Nutten to the floor, then stabbed down and down with his dagger, blood spurting everywhere. He stopped when the Mad Huntsman ran at him with two axes and scuttled under one of the tables. Lem was fighting Pyg, with Edric Dayne and Gendry weaving in and out between Biter and the Mad Huntsman. Anguy the Archer was trying – and failing – to draw his bow, and would have died to Timeon were it not for Ned Dayne crashing into him, sending stew and ale flying across the timbers.

“Kingslayer,” rasped someone behind him. “Might be I’ll take your other hand.” Zollo stood there,
switching his *arakh* between his hands.

“Might be you won’t,” Jaime said. He brought his sword up in a clumsy block, slashed down again, but found that blocked. He took two steps back, and tripped over a stool, landing heavily on his backside. Zollo jumped onto the table, and raised his *arakh*, but then Brienne came up behind him and thrust her sword through his leg, knocking him over. *Sword, where is my sword?* He found the hilt of something and brought it up as the Dothraki leapt over the table. The blade plunged through his stomach, impaling him. Zollo kicked like a dying fly. Jaime turned the sword over, kicked his foe onto the ground, then brought the blade down on his hand. He smirked. “A Lannister always pays his—”

Then something collided with his legs and he stumbled. His head banged on the floorboards, and he saw a knife coming. He reached up, despairing… and found that the knife had embedded itself in his golden hand, denting the metal. Shagwell’s eyes were wide with confusion. “Well, that’s—”

Jaime backhanded him across the face with his golden hand, sending teeth and blood in every direction. But Shagwell somersaulted onto his hands, drew a second knife, and jumped to his feet, as Jaime was still getting up. Then a sword flashed down, and Shagwell’s head came rolling, the bells still ringing in his hat. A grin was permanently drawn on the fool’s face. Jaime looked up. Podrick Payne stood over him with a sword clutched in his trembling hands, his face pallid. “Pod,” Jaime sighed, “I told you to stay with Lady Sansa.”

Podrick helped him up. His fingers were clammy and pale. He made a strange squeaking noise, then retreated back up the stairs. Shagwell’s headless corpse was still jerking in its death throes. Jaime picked up his sword and kicked the fool aside, lumbering back towards the fight. Lem Lemoncloak was still fighting Pyg, bleeding under his mail. Jon o’Nutten and one of the archer twins lay dead beside Timeon. Jack-be-Lucky was on his knees. Jaime could only watch as Ser Meryn slit his throat.

“Trant!” he called hoarsely over the fighting. “Meryn Trant, you fucking coward!”

The fucking coward stepped over the corpses towards him, and Jaime realised then this had been a bad idea. Trant wore lobstered steel armour, and while it made him slow, it would give him far more protection than Jaime’s leathers.

*And Trant has two hands.*

The soiled knight lunged at him. Jaime jerked back to one side, steadying himself on a table. Trant’s blade flashed down, splitting the wood. Jaime gave him a kick in the back of the leg, but only succeeded in stubbing his toe painfully. He jerked away, crashing into the wall, and ducked. Trant’s sword plunged into the tapestry above his head, tearing through the fabric, and became stuck. Jaime found his own sword just in time to block Ser Meryn’s downward cut, then rolled aside and tried to bring his blade up under the joint of the knight’s armour, but missed. Now he knew what he needed to do. *The joints, yes.* That was when Brienne suddenly leapt to his defence, coming up on his weaker right side.

Ser Meryn slashed at her, but she caught the sword on Oathkeeper’s edge and turned it away. Jaime jerked forwards, lunging for Ser Meryn’s exposed elbow, but the knight turned his sword away and might have killed him were it not for Gendry appearing and forcing his sword through the crack in Trant’s armour under his right arm. Ser Meryn went to his knees. Jaime took his own sword and forced off Ser Meryn’s helmet as Gendry disarmed him.

Trant spat on his boots. “Kingslayer.”
Jaime beheaded him quickly. “Kingsguardslayer now. Doesn’t have the same ring to it. Well fought, Ser Gendry, you – where’s Brienne?”

He turned. Biter was on top of Brienne, his teeth flashing down towards her throat as she struggled to push him off. Gendry shoved Jaime aside, ran forwards and thrust his sword so far into the back of Biter’s head that it emerged from his mouth like an obscenely long tongue.

Gendry helped Brienne up. Whereas Jaime was exhausted by the ordeal, the smith had not even broken a sweat. “You fight like Robert,” Jaime remarked. The lad seemed unsure whether to take that as a compliment or not. He gave a slow nod and turned back to Brienne. “Did he bite you, m’lady?”

She shook her head. “Not quite. Where’s Lady Sansa?”

“Podrick…” Jaime looked around desperately. Had the boy gone back for her? For a moment he was fearful, but then he saw Sandor Clegane carrying Sansa down the stairs and sitting her in a chair. “Podrick saved my life,” he finished, limping off. His leg felt heavy, and it when he looked down he saw that it was bleeding.

“How did that happen?” Brienne asked him, nodding to it.

“I… I don’t know.”

“Where’s Lem?” Edric Dayne said from his side. His eyes were shiny and bright. “We were fighting together, but now he’s gone. But he isn’t dead. You’d see his cloak if he was.”

“Who is dead?” asked Jaime.

“Melly, Puddingfoot, Jack, Rory, and Greenbeard’s sore wounded, but I reckon he’ll be fine. A few others, I don’t know who yet. And the innkeeper. Oh, and all of them, except the ones that ran off.”

“Maybe Lem went after them,” Gendry suggested.

Jaime turned a stool over and sat down on it. Podrick came over to him as though in a daze and pulled another seat out for himself. “I killed him,” he said hollowly, “the fool. I did.”

“You saved my life,” said Jaime, “but… was that your first?”


“You?” He swallowed. “You saved Tyrion?”

Podrick gave an uncertain half-nod. “Y-yes, my lord.”

“Oh.” He felt a sudden pang of sympathy for the boy. “How old are you, Podrick?”

“Six-and-ten, my lord.”

*I was six-and-ten.* “Plenty old enough.” He squeezed Pod’s shoulder, and drew his sword once more. *Hopefully I can use it for good this time.* “Do you know the vows?”

Pod’s face paled even more. “Vows, my lord?”

“The vows a knight has to make. You saved my life. It seems the right way to repay you.”
Podrick glanced up, eyes widening, then back at Lady Brienne. He shook his head. “No, ser. I shouldn’t. Not unless Lady Brienne gets knighted first. S-she… she taught me everything. Almost everything.”

Jaime knew at once that the wench would not allow him to knight her, so his idea was pointless. “Very well,” he said, nodding to Pod. “You’re a good lad, Podrick Payne. I owe you something, for saving me… and my brother. Because a Lannister always pays his debts.”

Then came the sound of hoofbeats from outside. “That might be Lem,” said Edric, standing.

Lem was there, but the men following him drew Jaime’s gaze. They wore the ringmail and cone-helmets of the King’s Landing City Watch, but their tabards were red instead of gold. Their captain came forth, bearing a sword and a scroll. He wore pale plate, and a snowy cloak streamed from his shoulders. Kingsguard. On his breastplate a three-headed dragon was engraved, breathing ivory tongues of fire. Coiled golden dragons sat on his shoulders, holding his cloak. “Everyone in this inn is to come with us,” he told them loudly, “we outnumber you two-to-one, and are far better armed, so any rebellion will be futile. You will not be harmed, and likely you will not be charged… but you must come with us quietly, to Harrenhal.”

“What do you serve?” Gendry shouted.

“The one true king of Westeros,” said the Kingsguard knight. “Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of His Name, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.”

Chapter End Notes

Again, this is one of my favourites. There are a few callbacks to canon here (such as Gendry saving Brienne from Biter), but a lot of it is based on the idea of closure (Jaime cutting off Zollo’s hand after he kills him, for example).

The first half of the chapter is a lot of interconnected one-shot scenes that show the interaction between Jaime and Sandor, Jaime and Brienne, and lastly Jaime and Lem Lemoncloak. After that, the narrative is a bit more cohesive, culminating in the fight at the inn.

For me, this chapter is also about closing up loose ends. It concludes the Part One arcs for Jaime, Brienne, Sansa, Pod, Sandor, Lem Edric, Gendry, and all the characters travelling with them.

Thanks to everyone for reading, and especially to my recent reviewers: VVSIGNOFTHECROSS, DanyelN, 1thy_truth_is_won0, Iuvenal, yyzEthan, aeb, Bragation, JustBNMe, Tommyginger, Thoren Bolt, IKnowWhereWhoresGo and Defiant_furball.
“And then there is you, my lord Tyrion. A very small man with a very large shadow.”

TYRION

“Three Unsullied dead on the Street of Sisters,” Grey Worm told them, “near the Dragonpit.”

Tyrion wondered who would be so brazen as to threaten the queen’s men so close to two grown and unchained dragons. “Well, that is bold.” And stupid.

The queen’s gaze was flecked with ice. “This is no laughing matter, my lord.”

“Of course not.” Tyrion swallowed his words. “Pray forgive me, Your Grace.”

“Spare us your empty courtesies, dwarf,” said Lady Olenna Tyrell, the Queen of Thorns, with a snort.

Varys ignored their quarrel. “Do you think that these sparrows were responsible?” he asked Grey Worm.

“This one does not know.”

Tyrion thought not. Righteousness and murder do not seem to go hand in hand. He would have said as much, but Daenerys spoke first. “Then you must find out,” she said. “I will not have my soldiers slain with impunity. From here onwards, as they did back in Meereen, the Unsullied will patrol the city in pairs, by day and by night.”

Grey Worm hesitated. “Men travelling in pairs can cover only half the ground.”

“And men with no cocks can only satisfy half their needs,” Lady Olenna interceded. “I am sure that you are used to making compromises.”

The queen nodded to him. “Go on.”

“This one lives to serve,” Grey Worm said, and left.

Tyrion glanced out of the window. The bright lights of the city were slowly fading, snuffed out one by one like candles. The gloomy clouds gathering over King’s Landing brought the promise of a rainy night. That was a mercy, he thought. Hopefully the rain would bring an end to drought and
respite to the people of the city, and to him.

Grand Maester Gormon unrolled a scroll. “Other important matters have presented themselves before us,” he told them. “Stannis Baratheon has broken through both the Golden Tooth and the Deep Den. He marches in the Westerlands now. Brown Ben Plumm and Daario Naharis will have a hard time reaching the Baratheon army.”

“Then we shall leave them to do as they will,” said the bastard Aurane Waters. “In the meantime, there are movements to be discussed. Questions to be answered.”

“And debts to be paid,” said Grand Maester Gormon, with a sidelong glance at Tyrion. He drew a scrap of yellow paper from the sleeves of his robe, brushing off the dust. “From Highgarden, Your Grace.”

“Is it Lord Willas’s pledge of fealty?”

“I doubt it,” Lady Olenna said, as the parchment was crossed over, “my grandson is a quick lad, yes, but cautious. He will need time to consider before making such a promise. But mark my words, it will come.”

Lord Varys rubbed his soft hands together. “You have my condolences on your losses, my dear Lady Olenna.”

No doubt the Queen of Thorns had a scathing reply on her lips, but she bit the remark back, for once. “Thank you. So, then… if not word of my grandson’s fealty, then what?”

“Numerous reports on damages and the like, for the eyes of the small council,” said the Grand Maester, “the necessary repairs to the walls of Highgarden are estimated to cost a few thousand dragons, so Lord Willas has seen fit to call in a small portion of the Crown’s debt early, in return for alleviating it later.”

“How much does the Crown owe to House Tyrell?” the queen asked.

“Nine-hundred and twenty-three thousand, seven hundred and twelve golden dragons. Though we are willing to reduce that to seven hundred thousand, as it please Your Grace, in return for our alliance.”

With terms like those, Tyrion could not blame his lord father for accepting a Tyrell alliance in the past. The Reach could field the most soldiers out of all the Seven Kingdoms, and from most perspectives an alliance with House Tyrell would seem like a blessing. Yet he had learned caution when it came to the Highgardeners long ago. “Your Grace,” he probed, “might we confer on the matter of this Tyrell alliance?”

“You may,” the Queen of Thorns said sharply. “I am here. So confer.”

Tyrion arched an eyebrow. “You certainly have a lot to say for yourself, my lady.”

“I do,” said the Queen of Thorns. “I am a very interesting person, or so I’m told. Though I confess, most of you at this table have more interesting stories than me. A cockless wonder who rose to become the Red Keep’s spymaster, serving three dynasties and five kings. A dwarf who not so long ago was Hand to a different king entirely—”

“—and an old harridan who plotted to place her granddaughter on the Iron Throne three times and failed three times,” Tyrion finished for her. “How many times now has House Tyrell turned its cloak? Four? Five? And all without success.”
“Will you both stop bickering?” asked the queen.

Tyrion relaxed in his seat. “As Your Grace commands.”

“Our money troubles do not end here,” Maester Gormon pontificated, as he unrolled a scroll. The words were purple ink on a sheet of fine vellum, sealed with an exact blob of purple wax and bound by a purple ribbon. *Such pomp can only mean one thing*, Tyrion thought, reminded of the time he had received a similar missive during his own tenure as Hand.

“Do tell, my lord,” said Varys.

“The Iron Bank of Braavos has called in half of the Iron Throne’s debt,” the Grand Maester declared. “We—”

The queen sat up sharply. “That is the Usurper’s debt, not mine,” she said, “and it rightly belongs to the Usurper’s heirs.”

“With respect, Your Grace, you sit in Robert Baratheon’s seat now,” Haldon Halfmaester pointed out.

“Do you expect that my sweet sister will volunteer to repay the Iron Bank?” Tyrion added.

“They do say that a Lannister always pays his debts,” said Archmaester Marwyn.

“Cersei is not much of a Lannister, though,” said Olenna Tyrell, her eyes fixed upon Tyrion all the while. “Most of the Lannisters are arrogant and vile people - in that she succeeds, make no mistake - but they know what they are doing. Cersei merely blunders cluelessly from one drunken absurdity to the next.”

*Tyrion grinned.* “Why, you seem to know my sister almost better than I do. All the same, the debt is ours to pay now. Can we afford this?”

“You are the master of coin,” said the queen.

It was strangely easy to forget that. There had been precious little to do in recent days beyond counting coppers, and when there was, Tyrion assigned the task to Numbers instead. The boy could add up massive sums in an instant. “I am the *acting* master of coin,” he told the council. “But in answer to your question... no, we cannot afford this. Not for now. We will need to apply for an extension on the loan. So we must needs send an envoy to Braavos to discuss with the Iron Bank.”

Their eyes fell upon him. Not just the queen and Lady Olenna, but everyone at the table, save for the red priest Moqorro, who sat staring disinterestedly at the torchlight flickering along the walls. Tyrion tried to follow his gaze. A fly was dancing around the lip of the flame, playing a game of cat-and-mouse with the fire, always half a step ahead… but only half a step.

“Perhaps that decision is best left for the morrow,” Varys said suddenly. “It is growing late, and I find myself with a pressing need to attend to my chambers.”

“I agree.” Tyrion said, and rose before anyone could stop him. No one did. As he went Aurane Waters was telling the table about his plans for the evening. “Lady Thorne has invited me to sup with her, and her cook makes the best pigeon pies in the capital.”

“Oh, I am no stranger to pigeon pies,” said Lady Olenna Tyrell.

Tyrion stopped in his tracks. He’d always thought she had killed Joffrey… but was this
confirmation? And why now? He turned back to the Queen of Thorns. “I hear that you are something of an expert on the subject of wines too, my lady.”

She did not answer. And by then Tyrion was already leaving, struggling to keep up with Varys’s strides. It seemed that the eunuch was deliberately trying to leave him behind. “Lord Varys!” he called.

“My friend, I must make haste,” the eunuch said, “what ails you?”

“This matter of sending an envoy to Braavos. Doubtless Lady Olenna should like to send me; my influence is doing no good for her goals on the council. And I would not be surprised if Maester Marwyn thought the same.”

“The archmaester? Why, what have you done to anger him?”

“He has some rather outlandish theories on dragons that I disproved. Nothing political, no; it is more of a friendly rivalry. The sort that you and Littlefinger had.”

“Littlefinger and I were never friends,” Varys warned. “Friendship with Littlefinger comes with a price… and as Ned Stark learned, that price is often too high to pay.”

Ned Stark was not us. He was a fool, ill-suited to play the game. They both knew that. “And?”

“I would hate for you to fall into the same trap of being too trusting, my dear friend.” Varys raised an eyebrow at him as he walked away.

And what of Aegon? thought Tyrion, what of our brave king, gone to negotiate with the mockingbird.

The walk back to his chambers was long and lonely. Tyrion found company only in the sound of raindrops. He passed through the godswood, beneath the weirwood with its profusion of blood-coloured leaves. Tears trickled down from heart tree’s carved eyes and over its lips, wet and thick and veined with red. Nightingales crowed the dusk chorus from the highest branches. On the stairs, he passed Padge the cook, pushing a barrow of neeps and carrots. “Got the winter cabbages coming through, m’lord,” he said, “might be I’ll send you some up later when you take supper.”

“You need not trouble yourself,” Tyrion replied as he ascended the stone steps, “I am not over fond of cabbages… though parsnips are a more welcome sight at my table.”

“Eh, these are for the queen, m’lord. Said she’d never tasted parsnips ‘cross the Narrow Sea, m’lord. She wants to try ‘em now, m’lord.”

He nodded. “Well, give her my compliments.” It was curious to think that the queen had never tasted a parsnip until now, but that only showed how foreign she was. Tyrion left that thought at the foot of the stairs as he climbed. In his chambers, he shrugged off his shoes and left them beside the mounting pile of yet-unpolished boots. The rushes were scratchy against the soles of his feet.

He found Numbers sprawled behind his desk, squinting intently over a heavy book of ledgers as he counted aloud. “Three thousand, eight hundred, twenty-and-two. But where’s…?” His squire had been at this a long time, plainly; his shirt was scruffy and untucked, the cuffs scuffed by wear. His fair skin was mottled with maester’s ink to the elbows.

“Having fun?” Tyrion asked.

The boy shook his head. “No, my lord. The… the adding up is the easy part. But all the revenues
and the taxes and all those things… they’re missing.”

This was not an unfamiliar sight. “Once again, I believe we have Petyr Baelish to thank for that. He seems to have committed the greatest usury of our time.”

Numbers shrugged. “It’s very clever.”

“Clever, but treasonous, and completely unprovable unless Littlefinger’s real ledgers magically reappear.” Tyrion had contemplated asking Varys to locate them, but doubtless the eunuch would be inclined to keep them for himself, and that would only make matters worse. “We’d best get looking.”

His squire looked aghast. “Now, my lord?”

“Not now. I saw Padge on the stairs, yet I do not see my supper.”

Numbers flushed crimson. “I’ll go and fetch it. And… oh… those clothes you sent for from the seamstresses, they’re here. I’ll show you.” He walked to Tyrion’s wardrobe and drew it open. “Here you are, my lord.”

“Excellent…” He’d had them made in colours that were not-quite-Lannister, crimson and cream, though he kept the lion sigil stitched on the breast. Ermine and sable dressed the lapels. His belts were red leather with clasps of silver, his breeches a shade darker, lined with sable just like his black boots. Tyrion shrugged into one sleeve. “That’s too tight.”

“Sorry, my lord,” Numbers said.

“Not your fault. Clothes have a tendency not to fit me. Armour is even worse. If your armour doesn’t fit in battle, well, that can be a fatal mistake.” He said the words as though he were a seasoned veteran of battle, not just some dwarf who had lost half a nose.

“Have you fought in many battles, my lord?”

Tyrion pursed his lips. “My brother Jaime has. Does that count?”

“You… you fought in the Battle of the Blackwater, didn’t you?”

He sighed. “Both of them.”

“I was there too. At the second one, I mean. On the other side to you, my lord.”

“I’m sorry we beat you.”

Numbers looked down at his boots. “I wasn’t really fighting or anything. They gave me a sword to defend myself with, but I was serving Master Edoryen in the command tent most of the time. I didn’t actually fight anyone.” He paused, screwing up his face. “I-I I don’t think I could have done it, though.”

“Done what?”

The boy grimaced. “Killed someone. It... just seems so unfair to steal someone’s life away like that. I saw men executed for cowardice when I was in the Company. That seems stupid.”

You are much too kind for a sellsword company, I can tell you that. That posed an interesting question. “How did you end up with them in the first place?”

For a time, Numbers did not answer, and instead ran his fingers over the stitching of Tyrion’s new
doublet, his gaze fixed upon the floor. When he finally spoke, it was with the voice of a mouse. “They bought me.”

“What do you mean?” Tyrion asked, knowing full well what he meant.

“There’s no slavery where I was born, but they bought me anyway.”

“Where were you born?”

“Braavos.” He swallowed. “My mother was a... she was a...”

“I understand.”

Numbers shrugged. “She died, I think, or we ran out of money. I don’t know. They have black markets there, where you can buy babes and raise them to be… well, whatever you want. One of them... obviously thought that I’d make a good fighter someday.” That made him smile. “Well, I proved him wrong.”

Tyrion was intrigued. The boy had always seemed Westerosi to him, but this completed another piece of the puzzle. “Do you know who it was who bought you?”

“No, my lord. Only—” A knock at the door cut him off. “I’ll get that,” Numbers mumbled, and all but ran to the door.

Queen Daenerys Targaryen entered slowly, casting a look of appraisal at her surroundings. “Your Grace,” he greeted. “How might I help you?”

“Some wine might be a good start,” the queen said.

“Numbers,” Tyrion said, “fetch Her Grace some of that good Dornish red. The second-best flagon we have.” To the queen he said, “I like to save the best wine for long nights with too many ledgers to read through.”

She nodded. “Lord Tyrion, I have come – once again – to request your counsel on a troubling matter.”

“The Iron Bank?” What else?

“The Iron Bank,” she confirmed. “They say that the Bank will always have its due, one way or another. The debts that my predecessors left us with... are they as insurmountable as I think?”

“We shall have to apply for another loan,” Tyrion said. “That much is a certainty. And after that, another loan, and another, and so forth for the next thirty or forty years.” He frowned. “Wars are costly, and in recent times the Seven Kingdoms has seen more than its fair share of them.”

“They are not my wars,” the queen said.

“Very true, but the Iron Bank will not be willing to accept that for an excuse. When you and your nephew took the Iron Throne, you also took the crippling debts that have plagued this kingdom for your own.”

Daenerys took a long, slow sip of her wine. “They say a crown should never sit easy. Well, this one is laden with ten million golden dragons worth of debt, so that is certainly true. There is little point in debating the existence of the debt. It is there, and the sole question that remains is how we will pay it.”
Tyrion sipped his wine. “But that is not what you have come to ask me. Not how, but who.”

The queen nodded. “I suppose so,” she said, her gaze softening. “And you already know what I intend.”

“Forgive my presumption, but you wouldn’t be here if you meant to send someone else.” Tyrion stared longingly into his wine goblet, resisting the urge to refill it. *Doubtless he would need quite a few drinks before the night was done.* “And I can hardly blame you? I am the master of coin. Money is my responsibility. And sending me away would likely improve the opinions of your councillors dramatically.”

“Explain.”

“Lady Olenna has made no secret of her distaste for me. Both Maester Marwyn and the Grand Maester are sceptic of my opinions. And besides that, I am not trustworthy in the slightest. The forgotten son of one of House Targaryen’s great enemies, a twisted dwarf, son of a treacherous Hand, the former lord of a rebel’s small council. Under normal circumstances, I might expect to be in the black cells.”

“And yet here you sit.”

*And yet here I sit.* Tyrion nodded. “I’m sure you have your reasons. So you *are* sending me to Braavos, then?”

“I am,” said Daenerys. “How does that make you feel?”

“Both surprised and unsurprised. Surprised that I find myself so oddly… amiable… to the notion. Unsurprised because this is not the first time I have found myself in this sort of situation.”

“You do not *want* to be sent to Braavos?”

“I don’t know what I want.” Tyrion’s words were nothing but the truth. “But I have learned over the years to take things as they are.” He drained his cup. “When will I be leaving?”

“Soon,” the queen promised.

It was not much of a promise. “Soon. Well, then, I had best prepare myself. I do not love the sea, and the sea does not love me, I fear, but as I say… situations like these seem to flock to me. Is that all, Your Grace?”

Daenerys stood. “It is.” She went out, and her Unsullied shadows trailer her into the night. Tyrion moved to the windowseat and eased himself down among the cushions. Thick pellets of rain danced off the windowpane. He tickled his fingers against the glass, mimicking the sound of the raindrops.

“Numbers,” he said, at last.

The squire stood, still bearing the decanter with a half-inch of red wine still left in the bottom. His hair glimmered a dark golden colour by the faint candlelight. “My lord?”

“Finish that wine, if you want it. Then go down into the castle and look for Ser Bronn of the Blackwater. Lord Stokeworth, that is. You may find him inside the Red Keep; you may have to venture beyond, perhaps to one of the whorehouses. Try Chataya’s, on the Street of Silk. If you leave the castle, take one of the guards with you, by my request.”

“Ser… Bronn.” The boy nodded. “And what should I tell him?”
“That we are going on an adventure,” Tyrion muttered, “and try not to get into any arguments about his pay.” He flicked the windowpane again, causing the glass to ripple. When he looked back, the boy was gone.

He hopped down from the seat and crossed to the bed, a four-poster draped in heavy sheets of cream-coloured silk. The smell of the sheets reminded him of Shae’s perfume, spicy yet sweet, with the hints of sweat and seed that clung to everything in King’s Landing. She would run her nimble fingers through his blond-and-black curls in a bed just like this, and whisper “My lion,” softly in his ear as their bodies tangled beneath the sheets. I am yours, and you are mine.

“My lord.” The eunuch’s soft voice drew him out of the illusion. “I hope you are not busy.”

“Do I look busy?”

“May I come in?”

“No.” Varys was here for one reason only. “Have your little birds delivered the news yet?”

The eunuch made a show of looking shocked. “My lord, you wound me.”

Someday I will wound you for real, Tyrion thought. “Ask your questions and be on your way.”

“I have no questions. But I cannot help but wonder… our sweet sovereign must trust you truly if she is willing to send you to Braavos with her royal command…”

“Explain.”

“Why, Braavos is a vibrant place, my lord. Full of disreputable sellsword companies and freeriders and all sorts of common mercenary. Did you know that Stannis has a man in Braavos even now, recruiting swords? And doubtless your sweet sister has her own eyes and ears there too. In cities like those, there are little birds in every street, rats in every sewer and secret-keepers in every district. Those are the sorts of places where a man can disappear forever… or where he can make himself into a king, provided that he is willing to try. Littlefinger once told me that titles seem to breed titles. But they breed ambition too, and they foment pride and jealousy and power.

“And then there is you, my lord Tyrion. A very small man with a very large shadow, blessed with the name of an ancient Great House and the promises of the Iron Throne, whether they be in coin or parchment.”

“I have had enough of cryptic messages for one evening,” Tyrion said. “Tell me true, what I will find in Braavos?”

Varys smirked that smug smile of his. “Where whores go,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading; please leave kudos/bookmark/subscribe if you enjoyed it!

Admittedly, this is a filler chapter with the sole purpose of getting Tyrion's journey underway. A while back I asked you whether he should stay in King's Landing or go out into the wider world, and I chose the latter option in the end. I think Tyrion sitting in KL would make for a bland storyline and his talents would be wasted. He'll take about
10 chapters to get to Braavos, so we won't be seeing him for a while (unless he appears at the start of Dany's next chapter).

Likewise, Dany's chapters will be somewhat infrequent over the next 20 or so chapters, as will Jon Snow's. Sidelining the 'Big Three' allows me to bring the Riverlands, the Westerlands and the Reach into the foreground, which is something I'm looking forward to.
TOMMEN

Ten Lannister guards and half a dozen knights flanked Lord Brax’s arrival. “We have won a great victory at Wyndall,” his lordship announced. “Their scouts routed at the very sight of our banners. There was fighting, but little more than we had expected. A skirmish here and there along the border of the woods, a few fires lit and vanquished.” He smiled. “Enemy fires.”

“And our losses?” asked Ser Addam Marbrand.

“Eleven dead, and near forty wounded. But make no mistake, Stannis’s soldiers came off worse.” Brax grinned as though he’d won the war single-handed, “and more than that, his flanks look weak.”

“We already knew that,” said Tommen. “Eleven men did not have to die to tell us.”

“Apologies, Your Grace. Lord Tywin liked to be sure of the enemy’s numbers before riding to battle.”

“And?” asked Ser Addam.

“We counted nine thousand, or thereabouts.” Brax took a seat uninvited at the table and poured himself a cup of wine. “There may be more.”

“There almost certainly are,” said Lord Sarsfield. “But if we march now, they may not be able to regroup with Stannis in time. We will outnumber him by three thousand or more.”

“It will not matter whether or not we outnumber Stannis if he has a position as strong as the Golden Tooth,” said Ser Addam. “We would end up chasing Stannis all the way back to the Riverlands, where he will slaughter us. I have said it many times, and I will say it again: we should head back to Lannisport and meet up with Ser Kevan’s men.”

“And leave Sarsfield undefended? And Oxcross and the Redstone Crag? They will sow our fields with salt and burn the harvest.”

“It is winter, Lord Sarsfield. There is no harvest. Let them come to us, I say. They will exhaust
themselves crossing the west and we will be better positioned to challenge Tytos Blackwood’s disappearing army.”

“Tytos Blackwood is Forley Prester’s responsibility, not ours,” said Ser Ormund Payne. “I agree with Lord Sarsfield.”

“We will only see ourselves cut to pieces if we charge into Stannis’s ranks,” replied Tommen. “He wants us to attack him.”

Marbrand smiled. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“We shouldn’t retreat, though. Sarsfield is a strong position. From here we can see five miles in either direction on a clear day.”

Tytos Brax nodded and so did Ser Addam. Neither of them seemed particularly pleased with the decision.

“With your permission, my lords, we will adjourn for the evening,” Marbrand said. “I’m sure you all have better things to do. Best be on your guard, though; Stannis’s raiders will inevitably come for us tonight.”

The western sky was turning to black over Sarsfield as Tommen returned to the King’s Companions on the southern side of the hill. Smallboar sat beside the fire, warming his hands over the coals. The air smelled of roasting meat and wet wood. “We caught a brace of rabbits,” Smallboar said, “want some? Though I suppose you’ll have something better back in your own tent. Goose or swan or venison.” He scowled. “Whatever it is kings eat.”

“Willem’s an awful cook. It’s a wonder he hasn’t poisoned me yet.”

“You should cook your own food,” Smallboar suggested. “Though I’m not much for this either.” He pointed to the fire, where a half-skinned rabbit was smouldering to ashes.

“Well,” said Tommen, “there’s something we can both learn from.”

The carcass of the rabbit was mostly charcoal by the time Smallboar pronounced it cooked. Black ash crackled off the skin. “It’s done,” he said forlornly.

“It’s more than cooked. You should make a stew or something, to hide the taste.”

That made him frown. “Oh, you think I’m a bad cook, do you? Well, then, make this stew yourself.”

“I can’t. I don’t know how.” You were supposed to boil some water, and use some wild onions or carrots or turnips, but Tommen didn’t know where to find those.

“Shut up and eat, then.” Strongboar chewed thoughtfully on a leg of the rabbit, licking grease from his fingers. “Eat, else I’ll take yours as well.” He smiled. “I bet you’re not used to food like this, Your Grace.” He spat out a bone.

“At Winterfell,” Tommen began, then trailed off, “nevermind that…”

Strongboar settled down beside him. “I used to spit on you highborn types and your courtesies, you know. When I met you, I wanted to punch the perfect teeth out of your perfect face.”

“But… but you’re highborn too.”

“The second son of a third son?” Strongboar laughed. “That’s not part of the family, not truly. Not
part of the family. Even then, the Crakehalls aren’t known for their riches or for their power. We’ve got one or two vassals, nothing more, and even then my old grandfather Lord Sumner was always banging on about how much we owed to Tywin Lannister. Having a noble name doesn’t make you a nobleman, nor does it make you better than all the rest.” His face contorted a little, almost a snarl. “But that’s certainly what they seem to think. If you find yourself in trouble in the west, all you need do is say that you’re a son of House Lannister, and they’ll let you go free no questions asked. When you get older, the maidens will go begging from Casterly Rock to the Wall to get with you and that crown you wear.”

“It’s not as easy as you think,” Tommen said, “being king. Knowing that for every mistake, someone will die, and that a dozen more will lose so much because of it. It’s not easy to know that if you’re captured, then the war is over. Stannis would have me burned at the stake. Yes… there are things that I couldn’t give away, but… if they took the crown from me, I don’t think I’d mind.” His voice softened. “Do… do you still want to hit me?”

“Not really. You’re my friend, I suppose.” Strongboar stood up and walked away from the campfire. Tommen sat, considering his words. He’d never really had a friend before Winterfell, save for Myrcella. So he valued the ones he had now.

The world was almost black by the time he returned to his tent, the night air was hazy with the smoke of campfires. Ser Arys Oakheart followed him through the camp, a shadow in white. “There will most like be fighting in the next couple of hours, Your Grace,” he said. “I would tell you to get some sleep, but you have a guest.”

“Lady Westerling,” he said sourly. Tommen pushed through the tent and went to greet her. “You’re later than usual.”

“Am I?” Eleyna had made a habit of seeing him every day, sometimes to break their fast, sometimes to sup with him in the evening. Tommen had heard whispers about the king and his lady and what they did in their tent, all of them untrue. Yet he played along with it all the same, despite knowing that it was all part of Myrcella’s game.

And he was not quite sure why.

He poured himself a cup of wine and sat down in his bed, then rolled up his sleeve and examined the bruising on his arm. It was roughly the size and colour of an overripe berry, dark against his pale skin.

“Does it hurt, Your Grace?” asked Eleyna.

“No,” he replied, “not really. I should have known better, though. I had no hope of beating Ty. I’m lucky I didn’t come away with worse.”

“I can take a look at it, if you’d like.”

Tommen remembered the joke he’d made to Myrcella, before she left for the Riverlands. *Should I get her to check that my smallclothes are fitting properly?* He shrugged. “What harm can it do?”

She knelt down at his side. “Roll up your sleeve, then.”

Tommen was painfully aware of her prodding his skin as he tried to drink a cup of wine one-handed. “So,” he said awkwardly, as she pressed and poked. “How are you finding your new responsibilities?”
“Awkward,” she said. “You know what happened to Rollam, don’t you?”

“Arrow in the knee,” Tommen said. That had happened as they were fleeing from the Golden Tooth. “I did try to send him home—”

She sipped her wine. “He says that he doesn’t want you ending his adventure.”

“War is not an adventure. I don’t want anyone getting hurt or killed needlessly. I could order to send him home, if you’d like. If it would make you happy.”

“If Rollam is angry, then my life is unlikely to be happy,” Eleyna said, “so you might be best leaving things as they are.”

Tommens nodded. “Yes, but are you happy? With being a healer, I mean.”

“Curing fevers and fixing broken bones, yes. I’m a little unsure about the whole matter of cutting off limbs, but we’ve got proper people to do that sort of thing. I’ve—”

A horn blared through the camp, loud and long and clear. Aaaaaawhoooooo.

“That was the Horn of Herrock,” Eleyna said. “One blast means—”

Another blast sounded through the dark. Aawwhooo.

Already? Tommen thought.

Eleyna swore. Then covered her mouth when she realised what she’d said.

“No matter, my lady,” Tommen said, “I feel exactly the same way.” Stannis had come at them every night for the past week now. They had won every battle – the enemy had been weak and outnumbered at least ten to one – but every time they took a few injuries here and there, and every evening the defences had to be rebuilt and repaired. The evening assaults were like an itch that could not be scratched, Tommen thought, though he struggled to work out how Stannis gained anything from this strategy.

“I can help you with your armour,” Eleyna said.

“I can do it myself—”

“Don’t be stupid.” She unfolded his padded brigandine and passed it across, followed by greaves and pauldrons. His squire Willem Frey arrived to help her. “Not the cloak,” Tommen said, “it gets in the way.” All in all he wore two padded undershirts and thick lambswool breeches, steel pauldrons, gardbraces and breastplate, and vambraces for his forearms. A steel gorget fitted neatly around his throat. In a couple of minutes he was ready.

“My sword, please,” Tommen requested. Ripples spread across the Valyrian steel as he buckled on his swordbelt.

“You’ll need your helm too,” Eleyna said.

“No. They need to see my face.”

“Just wear the visor up, then. Better that than an arrow through the eye. Harald Hoare died from an arrow in the eye.”

“Wearing the visor up wouldn’t stop an arrow in the eye.”
“Well, it’s better than nothing,” she said.

Tommen shoved the helm on, and left the tent with Willem at his side.

Whatever fool had said that battles could be orderly either hadn’t seen many battles, Tommen thought. It had been chaos on the Tumblestone even with Lord Tywin leading, and it was chaos here. Bells and horns and drumbeats sounded warning of Stannis’s advance, none of them in time. In the fading light of dusk the world was lit only by torches. No one was in command. “My lord, my lord!” Willem was shouting at him, “we have to—”

“What?”

“You forgot the Kingsguard.”

Tommen glanced around. “Well, the Kingsguard are supposed to be with the king, aren’t they? They’ll catch up with me.” He pushed his way through the press of men and made it to the edge of the ridge, where a tiny army was gathering in the valley below. They looked pathetic from this far up. He counted no more than a few hundred. There were seven thousand Lannisters soldiers in this camp, and another five thousand under Lord Sarsfield’s command on the next hill.

Tommen took another step forward to get a better look at the enemy. At the front they pushed wooden mantlets, and those one rank behind held their shields over the heads of the men in front. A tortoise, he recalled from one of Lord Tywin’s teachings.

“We need to punch our way through,” he said to no one in particular. “If we could use our horsemen, and get through their flanks.” There were no horsemen here, though.

An officer shoved him roughly aside, snarling under his lion helm. “Pick up your bow, or get the fuck out of here,” he growled.

Tommen swallowed a nervous breath. “No. Get back to your post, ser. Or do you not recognise your king?”

The officer looked like to spit in his face, but instead managed an awkward, “Your Grace,” and went back to his men. “They’re in range now!” he called, as Stannis’s soldiers advanced slowly up the slope of the hill under their shields. “Nock… Draw… Loose!”

The arrows flew as a steel rain, peppering shields and steel and flesh. The smell of blood and smoke filled the air.

“Where are my Companions?” Tommen asked Willem.

“Down… probably down near our campfire, Your Grace.” A squadron of archers jogged past them, their footsteps squelching over wet mud.

His Kingsguard knights met him on the way. “Your Grace,” said Ser Arys Oakheart, “I had thought to send Ser Robert out with the first sorties. The mere sight of him might be enough to make some of them flee.”

It sounded like a reasonable idea. “Go, then,” said Tommen. He picked up his pace toward the tents of the Companions, as fast as he could in his armour. He was sweating under his helm, but that was a good thing. If they see me suffering, then they won’t call me a coward.

Among the Companions’s tents he found an ungainly rabble of about eighty squires and pages. Tymond Vance and Smallboar Crakehall were organising them into something that vaguely
resembled units. “Who are we fighting?” Smallboar asked.

“Stannis,” Tommen replied. “As always. They’ve got mantlets and tortoises for protection, so we might have to fight hand-to-hand.”

“Us?” Ty sounded aghast; he had every right to be. “You never said—”

Tommens shrugged. “Not us. Our knights. But we’ll stay in the back, help our men to the healers, try and take any who force their way through. And if anyone’s got a bow, then they should use it.” He pushed hair out of his eyes. “Strongboar, get someone to take the archers up onto the ridge, someone else stay behind to tell the others where to go.”

They followed him, or rather, he followed them. The fighting only lasted half an hour, but by then he felt like dying, running between the knights on the frontline and checking on the archers at the back. At the front they passed messages and water and wine among footsoldiers and officers, and brought the wounded men back to the healing tents on stretchers. Smallboar brought down one man who tried to break through their lines, but save for that the battle mostly did not concern them.

When the enemy tortoise broke for the first time under the pressure of Ser Addam’s cavalry a goodly number of Stannis’s men fled into the trees. Others fell under the storm of arrows and did not get back up. The rest formed back up into another formation and advanced closer to the ridge. They are testing us, Tommen thought as he watched, but they do not really mean to attack. As always. Sometimes Stannis’s men passed the perimeter fence, but by the time of Ser Addam and Ser Robert Strong’s third sortie the army had broken entirely and was in retreat.

A ragged cheer went up from the men. Then it was time to see what had become of the wounded, as Tommen had made it his duty to do. This was always the worst part. There were no fallen horses today, but the dead men were plentiful. They numbered sixty or seventy; nine out of every ten were Stannis’s soldiers. Silent sisters milled among the corpses, giving the last rites, closing the eyes of dead men and taking them away on covered pallets.

“Some of them are bound,” Smallboar said, pointing, “like they were yesterday, and the day before.”

He was not wrong. Tommen saw that manacles bound the feet of some of the dead enemy soldiers. “Prisoners,” he said. “He sent his prisoners at us.” Those might have been our own men once, and we cut them down as our foes. An acrid stench filled his nose, of blood and mud and nightsoil.

Today was worse than usual, though, for one reason alone. When Tymond Vance came to deliver his report, he looked oddly ill. “How many… were wounded?” Tommen asked him.

Smallboar and Tymond glanced at each other nervously. “Seven, Your Grace,” Tymond said at last. “And… and one dead.”

“Dead? How?”

“He broke the line, Your Grace. I’m not sure how, and I’m not sure why. I don’t know what happened, but one of the others found him there after the battle. Someone had put an arrow through his heart. From our own side, most like.”

From our own side… A solitary snowflake floated down adrift from all of the rest, melting on Tommen’s breastplate. The King’s Companion is a sworn brotherhood, same as the Kingsguard, he thought. If one of the White Swords died, the Lord Commander would not stand by and watch. “Where is he. I want to see him.”

“Your Grace… there’s no need.”
“Show me,” he commanded.

And so followed Smallboar across the field, feeling half in a daze all the way. He died for me. For my sake. Under my command.

The dead boy was not more than eleven or twelve. Tommen had never seen a dead body like this. Sure enough, Joffrey had looked in a worse state, with blood spilling out over his lips and from his nose and trickling out of his eyes, but Joff had looked… well, dead. Were it not for the arrow in this boy’s heart, he could have been asleep. A dark bubble of blood turned his lips redder than red.

“What… what was his name?” the king asked hoarsely.

Strongboar looked at Tymond for answers, but got only a shake of his head in reply. “What was his name?” he asked again. His eyes burned with the threat of tears. “What was his name?”

“My… es, Your Grace,” said a boy he did not know. “He… he was just a kitchen boy. But he was my friend. I know he wasn’t one of the officers or—”

“I know he wasn’t highborn,” Tommen snapped. “It doesn’t matter, though. He’s dead, dead, dead. Because of me.” He disguised a sob as a cough. “Someone… someone cover him over. Did… did he have a family?” he asked, not daring to meet the dead boy’s friend in the eye.

“Only a mother, Your Grace. And a sister. They’ll… they’ll…”

“I want to speak with them when we get back to the Rock,” he said. “I want to make sure that they’re looked after. I want to…” I want a great many things. He put his hand over the dead boy’s. Cold, he thought. “Stitch his wounds and dress him in his armour. Treat him as you would me if I had died. We’re taking him back to his mother. We’re taking him home.”

He’ll never see that home again, though, Tommen thought. There were so many, on both sides, men screaming in their death throes and those who were corpses already. May the Father judge them justly, and may the Mother have mercy on their souls. And on mine.

He found Eleyna kneeling over a wounded squire in the foe’s colours. One of the boy’s arms hung limp and broken. “He says that he’s Lord Stannis’s squire,” Eleyna told him.

The boy looked up at Tommen with loathing in his eyes. King Stannis, he said, spitting blood. “The one true king, unlike this baseborn abomination, the spawn of s—”

Eleyna hit him across the face. “We could just leave you to die on this field,” she said coldly. “I would cut your throat and no one would ever know that you weren’t dead in the first place.”

“Do you have a name?” Tommen asked him.

The squire gave him a look that was pure hatred. “Bryen,” he said, spitting blood. “Bryen Farring.”

“You were Stannis’s squire?”

Bryen gave a mute, emotionless nod.

“Why did he send you to this battle where you would most likely die, then? What does he plan to do next?”

The squire did not speak.
Eleyna pulled Bryen’s arm up, causing him to scream out in pain. “What is he planning?” she asked firmly.

The boy whimpered. “I—I don’t know.”

“We can make you tell us…” Then she broke off, looking up. For Ser Robert Strong loomed over them, the rest of the Kingsguard flanking him to the rear. There were dents along the front of his white plate, but the silent knight himself seemed unharmed.

“Your Grace,” said Ser Arys Oakheart. “Ser Addam Marbrand bids me tell you that an envoy has arrived from Ser Forley Prester’s camp to give his report.”

There had been a battle near Clegane’s Keep a few days past, where Ser Forley’s men had fought a force under Lord Tytos Blackwood while out scouting. This would be their first news of what had happened.

“Tell him that I will be there in a moment,” Tommen said. “I… this is Stannis’s squire.” He gestured to Bryen. “He might have something to tell us about his king’s plans.” He closed his eyes and said a silent prayer. “Ser Lorent, Ser Jasper, stay here and see what you can find out. If he refuses to say anything, then… um… hit him. But don’t kill him. I don’t want to kill him.”

It is for the greater good, Tommen thought as he walked away with Ser Arys. If he tells us Stannis’s plans, then hundreds of our men won’t have to die. He hoped that it was true.

As they were climbing the hill Tommen turned to Ser Arys. “Why did Stannis do that? He keeps sending his men to die, but I can’t see a reason for it.”

“I don’t know, Your Grace.”

“It seems so unnecessary. I don’t want to have other people die for me when they don’t need to. They’re not just sons of someone else.” Saying the words aloud helped convince him that they were true.

“Of course not, Your Grace.” Ser Arys’s eyes were red-rimmed.

“You look tired, ser.”

“I am, Your Grace. These long night watches cannot be doing much good for me.”

“Then you should go to bed.”

Ser Arys shook his head. “I am sworn to protect you—”

“You have five Sworn Brothers, and Ser Robert never leaves me besides. Go and get some rest. Stannis will not give you time to sleep when he attacks.”

He watched Ser Arys go and waited for Robert Strong to catch up with him. Around them, knights and squires scurried to their tasks. “It’s busy for this time of the day,” Tommen said.

Ser Robert did not deign to answer. He is stupidly large, his name is Robert, and he does not speak for me, Tommen thought. Like Father all over again.

The lords of the Westerlands had already convened when he arrived. Tommen sat to Addam Marbrand’s left, accepted a cup of mulled wine, and waited.

The messenger looked in a worse state than some of those killed in the battle. His cloak was caked in
mud, and his hair was tangled with gorse and bramble. “My lords,” he gasped out, “Ser Forley Prester, he’s dead.”

“Dead?” Ser Addam frowned. “Dead, you said?”

“Aye, m’lord.” The messenger went to one knee. “It was Lord Blackwood, m’lords, came down in the night with, slaughtered us like cattle.”

“Where is he now?” asked Ser Ormund Payne.

“Up… up on the river road, m’lords – thirty leagues from Lannisport, or so, and—”

Tommen immediately understood what that meant. He is on his way to Casterly Rock. “He will not be able to take the city,” he asserted, “the garrison is too strong. Ser Kevan has seven thousand men to his six, and the high walls of Lannisport to defend from.” And he hoped that was true.

The messenger shook his head. “Beg pardon, m’lords, but he’s not headed for Lannisport. He’s marching east, not west. He’s coming down the river road.”

Lord Sarsfield’s eyes were wide and unblinking. “He’s coming here. Six thousand men, or more…”

“…and Stannis with nine thousand in the east,” finished Tytos Brax. “When the armies converge, they will have enough to outnumber us.”

“We will be trapped,” said Ser Addam Marbrand. “But have no fear. If we can break one of Stannis’s armies first, and shatter him before he can regroup—”

“It must be Stannis,” said Lord Sarsfield, taking a long sip of wine. “If we can capture or kill him, the war is over. The time is now, my lords.”

“It is,” said Ser Addam. “But it is Tytos Blackwood we must raise our arms against. We—”

“They have a defensive advantage;” interrupted Lord Sarsfield. “We will face no easy assault. Hundreds of men will die attacking their positions, even thousands.”

“A necessary evil.”

Tommen looked up. I won’t let the sons of someone else die for my wars. “No,” he said, “they do not have the defensive advantage, my lords. We have held this position for a week now, and every time Stannis has attacked it he has lost ten times as many men as we have. You saw it yourselves today. The ridge here will be enough for all of our archers, and we can prepare the ground in both the east and the west with caltrops to hold up his cavalry, and dig trenches and ditches to slow the advance of his foot. If we send a raven to Ser Kevan today, he could bring three thousand men to this position in a week. Recalling Ser Franklyn’s scouts will give us another five hundred men, and if we can gather the remnants of Ser Forley’s force, we will have another fifteen hundred.

“This is our land,” he said. “And we will defend it, as we have. We will not panic and flee.” We will show them what Lannisters are, what we do to our enemies.

Ser Addam Marbrand gave Tommen a long, hard look. “Do… do you think that this will work, Your Grace?”

The others said nothing.
We have no better ideas. “Our men will die by the thousands if we attack Stannis or Lord Tytos, sure as sunrise, and when battle comes, they will break and flee. This way… this way, defending our land… we may only lose a few hundred.”

Chapter End Notes

*Honor, not Honors* are the words of House Westerling of the Crag. They refer to the idea of your actual virtues being worth more than the titles you can boast, which is something that links itself in very well to Tommen's character in this chapter, particularly in his interactions with Smallboar and his thoughts at the end of this chapter.

However, while there is a place for honour and chivalry in the world, a battlefield like this is not one of them. Tommen's plan at the end is fundamentally flawed because it's based around not losing the battle rather than trying to win it. But with this plan, any hopes of Ser Addam's plan getting passed through the war council has disappeared. The lords of the Westerlands will agree with their king, all desperate to gain favour, or argue for so long over what is to be done that remaining and defending their position is the only viable solution.

In short, this is a military blunder very similar to Edmure's from A Clash of Kings: done with good intentions, but potentially catastrophic in the long run.

We'll see how the Battle of Sarsfield plays out soon, from a new POV perspective.
It seemed the village had been abandoned for years. Jon Snow knelt beside the gate, and waited for the direwolves to confirm his suspicions. Summer’s sorrowful howl rose in answer. “It’s safe,” Meera Reed said, and trudged off without another word.

“Hodor,” said Hodor, and followed, Bran clinging to his back.

Jon remained after the rest of them had gone, waiting, listening. But there was nothing to hear. That ought to settle him, but even in the darkest, quietest time of night there was some sound, be it only the noise of the wind or the patter of hailstones, or even just the passage of time, creeping past on shadowed feet.

The village nestled between two huge crags, half-hidden in the shadow of the mountain to the north of it. Doubtless the name of the place was written down somewhere in Castle Black’s library, but Jon did not know what it was.

Meera glanced around the village square. “There’s a longhall,” she said, “but it doesn’t have a roof. And there are some houses, but they don’t look very warm. Perhaps—”

“We have our cloaks for warmth,” Bran replied. “And that one looks mostly intact, over there.”

He was right. There were a couple of cracks in one of the walls, but the former inhabitants had left behind a meagre supply of peat for a fire, and there was a big wooden door that would keep out the worst of the snow. Hodor settled down in a corner of the room. Jon took off one of his three cloaks and covered a section of the floor with it, creating a makeshift bed.

“Who do you think lived here?” Bran asked.

“Wildlings. We saw villages like this during the Old Bear’s Ranging. All abandoned.”

“What happened to the people who lived here?”

Jon shrugged. “They probably went and joined Mance, or…” The other possibility went unspoken.

Meera curled up with her face to the wall. “I’m not hungry,” she said quietly.


“You need to eat, Meera,” Bran agreed. “Please. I’ll send Summer out to look for something.” He whistled for the direwolf.

“Best send them out a pair,” Jon remarked, nodding to Ghost. “We’re safer when we’re together.” *The pack survives.*

Bran sat watching her for a long time, worry in his eyes. Jon patted his brother’s shoulder. “Get some
rest. I’ll keep watch.”

Very quickly the last slivers of daylight faded beyond the door, leaving behind only the fire, burning
almost white in the darkness. Then that died too, and Jon was left alone among the ashes, listening to
Hodor’s snoring. Outside the house, a wolf howled. *Summer*. Ghost was always silent.

Jon took off his swordbelt and drew Longclaw, watching the steel shimmer faintly. Meera had Dark
Sister, though he had never seen her actually holding it. He turned Longclaw in his hand, brushing
the white wolf on the pommel. *A bastard sword, for a bastard boy.*

*Never forget what you are, bastard. The rest of the world will not.*

But what was he, truly?

*I am the sword in the darkness,* he thought, *I am the watcher on the walls.*

His thoughts drifted to his black brothers, far away. He wondered if the dream he’d seen of Val and
Dolorous Edd fleeing Hardhome had been true, or just some delusion of the weirwood. He
wondered if—

Summer howled again.

“Jon,” said a voice.

He sheathed Longclaw. “Go back to sleep, Bran.”

“I can’t.” Bran’s reply was almost feverish. “I was out there with them.”

“Ghost?”

“Summer and Ghost. They’re fine; there’s nothing out there. I mean, there is, but—”

“They aren’t near.”

“Aye. Not yet.”

Scrabbling on his hands and knees, Jon managed to rekindle a new spark for the fire. “Do you ever
wonder why the direwolves came to us?” Bran asked, as the flames crackled through the night.

“Their mother was dead.”

“A mother wolf, gored by an antler. The Baratheon sigil shows a black *stag*. It seems so obvious
now. And six newborn wolves, for the six Stark children.”

“Even for the bastard,” Jon said gloomily.

“That doesn’t matter. You’re my brother—”

He shook his head. “I’m not a Stark.”

Bran shifted. “Yes, you are.” He put his arms around Jon and they hugged. *You may not have my
name, but you have my blood,* Lord Eddard had said. “And I’m glad you found me in the end, or it
would… it would’ve been worse…” He glanced over at Meera. “I never meant for—”

“I know how you feel about it, Bran… and I know how you feel about her as well.”
Even without looking, he knew that Bran was blushing. “I-I don’t – I swear, I h-haven’t—”

Jon managed a smile. “We both know it’s true, Bran.”

Bran sighed. “Fine,” he muttered. “But you have to tell me…”

“How I knew?” Jon bit his lip. “There was this… I knew a wildling girl. Her name was Ygritte. She had red hair; kissed by fire, the wildlings called it. She wasn’t the prettiest girl in the world, but I loved her. And I stole her, and then I left… and she never forgave me for it… and I never forgave myself.”

“What happened?”

“We should have stayed in that cave,” she said, “I don’t want t’ leave this cave, Jon Snow, not ever.” And she was right. We should have let all our troubles wash away, until nothing remained in the world but the two of us.

“She died,” Jon said. The fingers of his sword hand opened and closed.

“Meera’s always been kind to me,” Bran said, reddening. “I-I don’t think I love her, but—”

Jon stared back across the room towards the Reed girl in question, and the slumbering Hodor. He was fairly certain that only Hodor was actually asleep.

A sudden and loud howl split the night, right outside their sleeping-place. Jon leapt up and hurried to the door, opening it just wide enough for the direwolves to slip inside. “Put the fire out!” he hissed. In an instant, the room died to darkness. Ghost snarled at the closed door. “That will not save us. “Meera,” Jon said. “Take Dark Sister. If it is the Others…”

...then the gods help us. He had been certain they had escaped, so certain he had allowed himself to become complacent. “I can hear them,” Jon murmured to himself. “But that’s wrong… they make no sound…”

He pulled Longclaw from its scabbard once again, and advanced, crouching, towards the door. He could hear the air whistling through from outside. The Valyrian steel glowed in the light of Ghost’s red eyes.


Outside it was snowing. Ghost and Summer were both speckled with the stuff, the flakes melting off their fur onto the baked earth underfoot, drip, drip, drip…

But Jon Snow saw nothing, heard nothing. He locked his fingers a little tighter around Longclaw’s hilt, running his fingers reassuringly over the cold metal crossguard.

Ghost closed his jaws suddenly, stopped snarling, and came to stand beside him. Jon ruffled the direwolf’s fur. And then he saw why Ghost had done as he had. “We’re fine,” he said quietly. “Dead men don’t carry torches.” He turned back to the other three. Meera knelt beside Bran, with an uneasy grip on Dark Sister uneasily.

“Hodor?” asked Hodor.
Jon nodded. “Those are living men out there, not the dead.”

“Your brothers?” Bran asked.

“Aye, I think so.” By the light of their torches he could make out the faintest speck of black. And even if these men were wildlings, what did it matter? Jon called out to them and walked towards them, half-fearing that the Others might suddenly emerge from the trees around them.

But more men in black emerged instead.

They were around one hundred in all, wildlings and Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch both... and a few men he did not recognise as either. “Lord Snow?” a man asked. Rory, Jon remembered, his name is Rory. “That’s... Lord Commander, is it...”

“Aye,” said Jon. “It is. I am Jon Snow.” What else was he supposed to say? “Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch.”

“King Crow,” said a wildling, stepping out behind Rory. “I know you.” He was wiry, long-limbed and dark-haired. “Men call me Harle the Huntsman. You may know my cousin... he’s a cunt.”

Jon remembered; these were the two who had the blood feud with one another. But I sent Harle the Handsome north, and the Huntsman south...

“Mance will want words with you,” Harle said.

That took Jon aback. “Mance is here?”

“At Hunter’s Hermitage, two days’ ride away. We were sent west, to see if anything could be found this side of Craster’s Keep, but we’re returning now.”

Jon nodded. “We’ve had some trouble that way.” He cleared his throat. “Two days to Mance’s camp, you said?”

“Aye. If we get going soon. Think you can keep up with us, Lord Crow?”

“Aye,” said Jon, “but my brother—”

“The cripple boy,” Harle said distastefully, “we’ve no wagons or anything, but there’ll be room enough to strap him on a horse with his giant friend.” Harle turned away and went down the hill.

“My lord?” Jon heard a voice say. It was a gruff voice, though it belonged to a woman. Its owner was clad in oiled grey ringmail, with a battered leather arming doublet underneath and ample furs over the top. “You knew my uncle. The Old Bear, Jeor Mormont.”

“That I did. But I fear I do not know you, my lady.”

“Alysane Mormont.” She thrust out a hand as big as a bear’s paw, and shook Jon’s hand with enough force to nearly dislocate his shoulder. “Men call me the She-Bear.”

Jon nodded. “The bear is your House’s sigil.”

“They say that I fight like a bear too. And act like one. I wouldn’t be too offended if you said I looked like one, ‘specially with all this fur. But aye, House Mormont’s sigil is a bear.” Then she saw Ghost. “So this is your wolf, Lord Snow? He looks more fearsome than you, I’ll say that.”

That made Jon chuckle. “Of course he is. He’s a wolf. What were you expecting from me?”
“I thought you’d be taller. And less pretty. You could do with someone breaking your nose once or twice, Lord Snow, begging your pardon.”

“You rode up with Mance?” he asked.

“I rode south with Stannis the first time,” she explained, “‘till we took Winterfell – it’s with fat Lord Wyman now, he’s the castellan. Stannis wanted us all to head south, but I went back to Bear Island and fetched my sister Lyanna.”

Jon nodded. “I remember her. She wrote a letter to Castle Black. King Stannis was most displeased by it.”

“Yes,” said Alysane, “he would be. No one told Lya to do that, but she’s a wilful girl, and as much a leal supporter of your brother as anyone on Bear Island.”

“Is she here with you?” Jon asked.

Aly shook her head as she mounted up on her garron. “She’s still a child. Left her at the safety of Castle Black, with Mors Umber and a few of the others.”

This was news to Jon. “How many Northmen are at Castle Black?” The garrison could only support a couple of thousand.

“There were thirty thousand when we got there, but only ‘bout one in five were fighting men. The better part of them are camped along the kingsroad, all the way back to Mole’s Town, and out on the Gift. Forsters, Glenmores, Cerwyns, Hornwoods, Alys Karstark and her brother on his way too, the Flints of the mountains and Widow’s Watch and Flint’s Finger, Lord Manderly’s uncle Ser Marlon and a few of his lot, the Ryswells, even the bloody Greyjoys.” She patted her horse’s flank, urging it into gentle motion. “My mother is on her way up to Castle Black with the Greatjon. She’ll be there soon.” Then she rode off into the thicket of trees, and Jon was left to mount his garron alone.

The Greyjoys are at Castle Black. Theon has survived. Bran had said as much in Bloodraven’s cave, but knowing it to be true made Jon immeasurably angry. When I get back to Castle Black, I will give him justice, he thought. The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword.

The sun was rising as they left the village behind, bathing the ground in soft yellow shadow. The faces of the crags glimmered like shards of obsidian and milkglass, and the winter wind slowed to a breeze. It was hard going at first, but their garrons made short work of the difficult tracks and winding passages that cut between the hills. Sparrowhawks circled overhead, cawing. Jon could not help but wonder if they were warg scouts, like Orell or Varamyr Sixskins.

That night, Ghost and Summer brought down a couple of deer and the wildlings shot some rabbits for the stewpot. Jon played dice with Aly Mormont and talked about the Old Bear some more. “That sword you wear,” she said, “it’s Longclaw, isn’t it?”

Jon felt absurdly guilty. “It is,” he said, “the ancestral sword of your house. You… you should…”

“No longer,” Alysane said, “it belongs to the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch now. Besides, I prefer my mace.”

Aly Mormont reminded Jon of his little sister Arya. That ought to make him feel sad, but instead he felt only an empty pit in his stomach. Arya was too far away even for Bran to see her in his dreams. He wondered if she still remembered the lesson he’d taught her, long ago, when he gifted her with a sword, Needle. Stick ‘em with the pointy end.
They slept around the fire beneath the stars. Jon drew first watch, and sat poking the embers with a stick as the night drew on. One time he heard a rustling in the woods and went to investigate, but it was just an owl fluttering to its perch. Back at the fire, he found Meera admiring Dark Sister. “It’s beautiful,” she said, twirling the sword through a few motions. “The rubies, the metalwork, everything…” Her face fell. “But it wasn’t worth the price.”

“Nothing ever could be,” Jon said solemnly, “I… I’ve lost a brother too, Meera. We were the best of friends, all our life.”

“I only have the one brother. Had. And now he’s gone, and I’m alone.”

Jon looked to Bran, and she followed his gaze. His brother lay across the snow with Summer’s pelt for a pillow, firelight flickering through his messy curls of auburn hair. “No,” he heard himself say.

“No?” she asked.

“No, Meera,” he said, “you are not alone.”

He had never seen her cry before. But now there were tears in her eyes, falling down to shimmer on the hilt of Dark Sister. “I know what you’re planning,” she blurted suddenly, her eyes switching back to him. “I know what you mean to do.”

He was not surprised that she knew. “Then you know why I am doing it.”

“Aye. I do. But…” She chewed her lip. “Jon, I don’t know how he’ll take it. If… if this is the last time you and he… how will he remember it?…”

“I don’t know.” That was what scared him.

The second day dawned bright and clear. One hour was all they needed to rouse themselves and break their fast, and so they were marching early, because Harle the Huntsman wanted to reach Mance’s camp by noon.

They made it with two hours to spare before nightfall. Hunter’s Hermitage was a clearing in the Haunted Forest at the source of the Antler River, surrounded on all sides by tall black sentinel pines that blocked out the sun. Jon had passed this way before, escorting Tormund Giantsbane to Hardhome, only Jon had never made it, and Tormund was now stuck behind the walls of the wildling settlement with Mother Mole and some fifteen thousand refugees, the last he heard. Rescuing them was the entire purpose of Mance’s ranging, to hear Harle the Huntsman tell it. “Mance is calling it the Last Ranging,” he told Jon, “cos he says it’s the last time men will ever go out beyond the Wall.”

Harle had told him about Mance’s army as well, but vague descriptions did not do the real thing justice. From atop the hill Jon Snow beheld the camp with his own two eyes. The wildling tents were in the centre, Mance’s great pavilion surrounded by others, their frames of walrus bone and timber hung with leaves, animal hides and pelts to keep out the cold. The Night’s Watch kept meaner habitations, their tents of dark canvas laid out in methodical rows, with latrine pits and cookfires in between. And then there were a considerable of tents that belonged to neither wildlings nor black brothers, tents in dark red and pale yellow and striped silver-and-blue, colours that Jon had never expected to see beyond the Wall, where everything had a tendency to be either white or grey or black. More curious still were the sigils that topped the tents, flying on banners and flags. Jon did not remember which of his father’s bannermen they belonged to, but Bran was on hand to help.

“That’s Lord Hornwood’s banner,” he said, pointing to a pair of antlers, white against a brown field.
“And that’s the giant of House Umber.” His finger moved across the field, naming each in turn: “The Forresters, the Mormonts, the Glovers, the Norreys, the Flints, the Glenmores, the Tallharts. And the Karstark sunburst.”

“I know Alys Karstark,” Jon said. “She came to the Wall.” Not that Bran was like to know. He had spent the better part of a year north of Castle Black, stranded from civilization. He knows even less of the south than I do… does he even know that Robb is dead? Jon had never asked outright; he had always assumed Bran knew, somehow.

Crows and free folk alike crowded round as Harle the Huntsman and Jon Snow returned to camp, pointing and staring as though they’d seen a ghost. Doubtless they had thought him lost beyond the Wall, dead from cold, and Val’s group would have recounted that story had they managed to get back.

Unlike Mance’s camp on the Milkwater, where entire wildling settlements had come together, men and women and children, this camp held warriors only. Some were women, true – spearwives and a few others whom he supposed were Northern warriors like Aly Mormont – but four out of every five were men, stern-looking and stoutly built, their ages ranging from as young as Bran to greybeards with hooded eyes.

“Lord Crow!” someone called over the heads of those in the front rank. And then another, and then another. Very soon the crowd was alive with calls of “Crow!” from the wildlings and “Snow!” from the Night’s Watch brothers, both groups trying to outshout the other.

The commotion was such that it brought Mance Rayder from his tent. He stood on the threshold, clad in a number of furs, brown and grey and white. Snow dusted his long straggly hair, and a beard covered the lower half of his face, dark brown tinged with strands of grey wire. He wore a moleskin hood that covered his ears. First the king beyond-the-Wall squinted, trying to make out his visitors, and then recognition came all at once.

“Jon Snow,” Mance said, a little frostily. “Is that truly you?”

Ghost slunk up beside Jon’s leg, snarling at the men around them. Summer followed behind. Mance nodded. “We heard that you were dead.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ll bet it is.” Mance pointed to the tent. “Come inside now; we’ve got mulled wine and roast meat. Bring your companions with you.”

Hodor led the way, muttering a nonsense song to himself, “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor…” There were times – only a few – that Jon found himself wishing that he was as simple as Hodor, so that he could flit through life in a state of perennial happiness. Right now he was filled with apprehension instead.

The tent was dim and musty, smelling of charred meat and wet fur. Mance did not lack for company, Jon saw; the Great Walrus was seated by the fire with one massive bear paw tearing at a haunch of mutton, while Devyn Sealskinner and Old Halleck played a game of knucklebones in the corner. Morna o’the White Mask stood up suddenly when Jon came in, but if she was surprised he could not see it beneath the lines of her carved wooden face. “You’re alive, Lord Snow,” said Morna.

Old Halleck looked up. “Can’t say I’m all too happy about it.” He jerked a finger in Jon’s direction. “Mance, how do we know this is even the real King Crow, not just some trick of the Others?”

“If the Others were smart enough to trick us like that, we’d all be dead by now,” Mance replied.
“The boy has his wolf. He’s real, all right.” His eyes narrowed. “And if he is a wight, then I trust you all to deal with him.”

Mance sat on a stool by the hearth and kicked another over for Jon. Meera and Bran settled onto a mound of stacked furs. “And who are these fine folks, Lord Crow?” Mance asked him.

“This is my brother Bran—,” said Jon.

Mance looked wary. “The crippled boy.”

Bran tried not to look too aggravated by that. “Aye.”

The King-beyond-the-Wall smiled. “You need not worry, lad. I often find those that are broken in body to be stronger in mind than their fellows. You seem a good lad.”

Unsettled, Jon continued with the introductions. “—And his friend, Meera, daughter of Lord Howland of Greywater Watch”

“Friend, eh? Or something more?” Mance’s smile was shared among the others in the tent, and Devyn Sealskinner hid a laugh.

“Just a companion,” muttered Meera.

“And who is this mighty fellow?” Mance’s eyes were on Hodor now.

“This is Hodor.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor.

Mance nodded his approval. “I’ll reckon you’ve got giant’s blood in you.”

Devyn Sealskinner said, “And a giant’s wits, from the look of things.”

Hodor beamed. “Hodor.”

“And what were you doing north of the Wall, might I ask?” Mance’s question was directed to Bran.

Without pausing, Bran said, “We were looking for the three-eyed crow.”

The tent seemed to grow colder. Wind rustled the canvas. Morna o’ the White Mask glanced up sharply and even the Great Walrus stopped gnawing at his mutton bone. Ghost’s hackles rose.

“Dark wings, dark words, boy,” said Mance. “Sometimes, there are things that a man should not explore. Like the mysteries of Gendel’s children, and the fireside tales of crows in caves far underground, skinchangers and wargs and old magic.”

Bran opened his mouth to continue, then stopped himself. “Well,” said Mance. “You’re here now.”

“Why are you here?” asked Jon. “Harle told me most of it, but—”

“We’re waiting for that chickeneater Tormund Giantsbane to get back from Hardhome. And for our scouts to return with their reports on the other settlements.”

“Tormund survived, then? For certain?”

“I hope so,” said Mance. “A scout returned with one of Tormund’s outriders, and they made it back
to our camp. When I sent them back out again on the next day to deliver a message, they never returned.”

“The Others?” Jon asked, wary.

Mance shrugged, but his eyes told a different story. “Might be. It’s not safe to venture out so far, especially away from the group. I wanted to send Harle west of Craster’s with just the ten men, but I had to give him a hundred, else we’d have lost them all.”

“You’re headed for Craster’s Keep?” Meera asked. “Deeper into the Haunted Forest? Not back to the Wall?”

“We came from the Wall,” said Morna o’the White Mask. “We marched up through Whitetree. We free folk don’t leave our fellows behind.”

Jon could not help but admire that. The thought led him to wonder about his own brothers-in-arms. “And what of Castle Black?”

“Your friend the Old Pomegranate told us that you were dead, and named himself Lord Commander.”

“Bowen Marsh,” Jon said distastefully.

“Might have been his name. No matter, he won’t be Lord Commander much longer. I’m no fool, Lord Snow. Soon as we left the Wall, he probably started work on sealing the tunnels shut behind us. But there are far more free folk at Castle Black than there are crows, so I arranged a little revolt.”

“Your people took up arms against him?” He was sure that Mance meant well, but nothing good could come from the wildlings attacking Castle Black. That would only fester mistrust between the Night’s Watch and the Free folk, and—

“Aye, but they were not alone. You still have friends at Castle Black, Jon Snow. Chief among them some fellow called Mully and a lad named Satin. Even your cook was in on it. They’ve taken your Castle Black under their own command; Bowen Marsh is probably in an ice cell as we speak.”

“That is… good, I think.” Jon tried to sound surer than he felt, which was not difficult. “And the way south is safe?”

“Our column stretches back to the Wall, with manned outposts every couple of miles. If anything’s happened, we’d know by now.”

“Very well.” And let us hope that you are right, Jon thought. He turned to face his brother. “Bran… I’m sending you back.”

Summer growled. Bran stared at Jon for a long time, as though he had not quite heard. “You… what… No!” he exclaimed, “Jon, I should stay with you, I—”

“It isn’t safe.” There was nothing to be said but the truth. “Bran, we both know what’s out there—”

“I’m a man grown!”

He shook his head. It hurt, but he had no choice. “Bran… Bran, you’re a cripple. I’m sorry, but if they come marching, you can’t fight them. You can’t.”

Jon extended a hand to Bran’s shoulder, but his brother flinched away as though stung. “Hodor can
fight for me,” he said; his voice was pleading and desperate.

“No, he can’t. I won’t risk him either. Or Meera. I won’t lose you again.”

Bran’s voice wavered. “You’re… you’re my brother,” he said, “and you want to send me away.”

“It’s for the best,” Jon said. “You’ll… you’ll leave tonight… no, now, if Mance can spare an escort for you.”

“Might be I can,” said the King-beyond-the-Wall. “They’ll see them back safely, Lord Snow.”

Meera reached for Bran’s hand. “He’s right. You know he’s right, Bran.” She smoothed his hair with her hand. “Come on, we’ll get our things ready.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor. Even with only one word, Jon could hear the sadness in the gentle giant’s voice. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around the massive stableboy. “Thank you, Hodor,” he murmured. Then it was Meera’s turn, and lastly…

“I have to go north now,” Jon told Bran. “I have to go to Craster’s Keep, with Mance, or up to Hardhome. I can’t let those men die… no more than I can you.”

“Jon, I don’t want—,” his brother started, but whatever he’d meant to say was smothered by Jon’s embrace. He hugged him as tightly as he could, and Bran hugged him back. The warm lining of Bran’s coat brushed against his neck, soft as Ghost’s fur, and his brother’s hands were warm despite the chill. For a time, Jon did not know how he could ever let go, and he never wanted to either, but at long last, they did, pulling apart, slow as anything, inch by inch. “I know. But you’re a Stark of Winterfell, a son of Lord Eddard Stark. I have to keep you safe. I’m the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, a bastard named Snow. The world can live without me… but without you… Bloodraven told me that I have to keep you safe. And he was right.”

Tears were threatening in the corner of Bran’s grey-blue eyes. “You’re not a bastard,” he said. “You’re my brother. My brother. Always.”

Farewell, Snow.

Goodbye, brother.

The next time I see you, you’ll be all in black. And Jon was reminded of what it was to part ways once again. Bran was not Robb, he had never been quite as close to Jon as Robb had been, but he loved his brother fervently all the same. “I know, little brother.”

It was as though Bran had read his thoughts. “Promise me,” he said, “when Robb went away, he said… he said he would return, but he never did. You… you’ll come back, won’t you? Promise me, Jon.” They both knew that no such promise could be made, but Jon did not dare to say anything to the contrary.

Perhaps he could allow himself one moment of weakness. A break in Lord Snow’s icy façade, just for a moment. One tear. It would only be one. But if he did, then he knew that he would never be able to let Bran leave him. Promise me, Jon.

“I promise,” he said.
Father’s Footsteps

Chapter Summary

“The dragon and the direwolf must unite beneath one banner to face our greater enemies in the wars to come.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SANSA

Between the road and the dim grey shore of the lake, the woods were cloaked in mist. In the grey-green canopy above, a thousand finches and hedge sparrows trilled the dawn chorus, and the leaves rustled and whispered forgotten secrets as they drifted down into the mud. The trees themselves were tall mist-shrouded shadows in the predawn gloom, crooked limbs reaching out like the gnarled fingers of giants.

For three hours they rode along the lakeshore in near-complete silence. Sansa was too tired to talk, and she had nothing to talk about. The Brotherhood trudged along the road all around her, their faces darkened by shadow. Sandor Clegane’s chains clanked as he rode along. For the past two nights he had been manacled as punishment for his attempted escape. Sansa half-wished that he’d gotten away. All the more, she wished that she had been able to go with him. We were so close. Weeks, or even days, mayhaps. Now Brynden Tully and his men were lost to her, and with him the prospect of Rickon. And now I am to be a Targaryen prisoner. A little bird in a gilded cage, like Clegane always said.

Someone must have told, she knew. It could not not be by chance that Aegon’s men had come upon them in the inn near Rushing Falls; someone had to have told them. Ser Rolly Duckfield had told the men of the Brotherhood to surrender their swords and come quietly, but a few of them had chosen to fight anyway, for the sake of their freedom, if nothing else. We could have beaten them, I know we could have. When the fighting started, Brienne of Tarth and Ser Jaime Lannister had stood around her, Ned Dayne and Gendry too, and even Podrick Payne, shy as always yet looking somehow-brave with longsword clutched between his fingers. They’d been waiting for her signal to do something, to join the fray as the Hound had, but Sansa held them back. When the Targaryen guardsmen had disarmed the rest they advanced towards Sansa’s group. “Surrender your weapons and come with us,” Ser Rolly said, brushing down his cloak.

No, she ought to have said, I’m going home, and you cannot stop me. But instead, she’d stepped out and announced her intention to yield. “I am Sansa Stark,” she said, “the eldest daughter of the late Lord Eddard Stark, of Winterfell.”

“I know,” Ser Rolly replied, offering her his arm.
Now, on the road up to King Aegon’s camp, Sansa truly considered the meaning of those words. *He knew; of course he knew. Someone must have told him. But who?*

Not Brienne, for a start. The lady knight had been as solemn as anyone in the last few days, speaking to no-one save for Podrick and Sansa, and even then only sparingly. And it had not been Podrick Payne either, nor the Hound — why would he have tried to escape if it were so? It could not be Ser Jaime Lannister either; they had arrested him and put him in irons. “Kingslayer,” Ser Rolly had spat as they bound him to his horse, “King Aegon will want words with you.”

Lannister murmured back something inaudible then, and resigned himself to his fate. Sansa did not know what they meant to do with him. *Kill him, most like.* Ser Jaime had slain the Mad King; that was why he had gotten his name, of course… but the Mad King was Aegon Targaryen’s grandfather, Sansa remembered.

*And the Mad King murdered my grandfather.* Her father had never told her the story, but Sansa knew what had happened anyway. *They went to King’s Landing to free someone they loved from a rapist and murderer, and they were killed for it. Unjustly killed.*

*There’s no justice in this world, she remembered Littlefinger telling her, not unless we make it for ourselves. You loved your family… avenge them…*

Soon Harrenhal rose before them, its half-melted towers clustered together like five tall black candles. Behind the murky windows of Harren’s castle, a smattering of torches shone faintly through the predawn gloom. Brienne of Tarth sniffed the air. “I mislike this place,” she said quietly, more to herself than to anyone else.

“Why?” asked Sansa.

“Old memories,” Brienne muttered, “bad memories.” For a moment she paused, and unspoken words lingered in the air.

“Vargo Hoat ruled here, once,” she explained. “A Qohorik who led the Brave Companion; they called him the Goat of Harrenhal. When I was escorting Ser Jaime south on the orders of your lady mother, he led the castle garrison for a time. I would have died in this place were it not for him.”

“Ser Jaime?” asked Podrick Payne. “My lady?” The cut above his left eye was fading fast, Sansa saw. Pod did not seem sure how or when he’d gotten it, but it had fallen to Sansa to sew it up with needle and thread. She had a half a mind to sew up his battered leather aketon too, given how poor a state it was in.

“He saved my life,” Brienne said. “Hoot wanted to feed me to a bear as a way of entertaining for the castle garrison, but Ser Jaime came back for me.” Sometimes the way she spoke about the Lannister knight made him seem like a hero. *That is what a king ought to look like,* Sansa had thought once, in the courtyard of Winterfell, her eyes drifting between Ser Jaime and old fat King Robert as she made the comparison. He’d had both his hands then, and a reputation as the most gifted swordsman in the Seven Kingdoms. Stupid as she was, she’d thought him half a king herself.

Now, he looked old and decrepit, with a golden beard as ragged and mucky as soiled straw, and the eyes of a man in a fever. His skin was sallow and grey and pale, and the recent rain had brought a chill upon him.

“Roose Bolton was here as well,” Sansa said solemnly, glancing up at Harrenhal’s smoking black towers. “Before the Red Wedding.”
Brienne gave her a long, haunted look. “And Tywin Lannister before him.”

“And the Whents before that. My mother’s mother was born a Whent. I never knew her.”

“They’re all dead now.” Podrick shrugged. “Harrenhal is cursed by ghosts, they say. Anyone who holds it dies, same as Harren and his sons.”

Sansa wondered if that fate would befall Littlefinger someday. It was strange to imagine Petyr Baelish being dead; he had always seemed like the sort of person who would live forever. He has been playing the game for so long that he knows every plot there is before it even begins.

A man could not plot against ghosts, though. Sansa doubted that she would weep for Baelish if the curse of Harrenhal proved to be his undoing.

Aegon’s camp had sprang up in Harrenhal’s shadow. The tents were a thousand little peaks among the grey grass, capped by hundreds of different banners. Sansa spied the three-headed red dragon of House Targaryen everywhere, but she also saw the turtle of the Estermonts, and Lord Velaryon’s seahorse. She knew the red crab banner of Claw Isle, and the blue spiral of the Wyldes, on a yellow field. “Those are the arms of Tarth,” Brienne said, pointing to a tall standard, “quartered, with a yellow sun on pink and a white moon on a blue field. My father will not be here, though; he is too old for such campaigns.”

Podrick pointed. “And look, there, the standard of the Golden Company, my lady. King Aegon has sellswords fighting for him, then.”

Sansa was not sure what to make of that. Once, she had overheard her father talking about mercenaries to Robb; “If a man must buy his swords with coin, then it means he cannot inspire the loyalty of the men following him.”

A pair of sentries in red-plumed helms held them up at the gate. “Halt!” one cried, “who goes there?”

“Ser Rolly Duckfield of the Kingsguard,” replied Ser Rolly from his horse. “I have returned with guests for His Grace; Lady Stark and Ser Jaime the Kingslayer among them.”

The sentry nodded and bid them open the gates; then they were through, lost among the valley of tents. The road behind them faded into the fog.

The king’s command tent was marked by two towering standards, each bearing the Targaryen sigil, red on black. Kingsguard knights cloaked in snow guarded the entrance, resting lobstered gauntlets on golden sword hilts. “What do you know about this King Aegon?” Sansa asked Lady Brienne as they drew up outside.

Brienne bit her lip. “Not much. His father was Prince Rhaegar, who kidnapped Lady Lyanna before Robert’s Rebellion, but I am too young to remember anything of that war. You might do better to ask Ser Jaime.”

Podrick helped Sansa down from her mare, blushing redder than a cherry. “My lady,” he mumbled to her shoes, leading the way inside.

Aegon had some appetite for grandeur, it seemed. The tent was large enough for twenty men, carpeted with fresh rushes and Myrish rugs. A canopied bed dominated one corner, stacked with blankets and cushions. Sansa counted three chests of clothes; striped silken tunics trimmed with silver lace, doublets lined with ermine and sable, leather gloves, moleskin socks, lambswool breeches. A winged helmet rested upon the table, dragons duelling on the crest.
King Aegon himself sat behind his desk, looking bored. Broad of shoulder and chest, long of limb, he was handsome in much the same way that Joffrey had been. His eyes were a bright purple rather than green. His hair fell uncut to his collar, silvery-gold in the lantern light. But he lacked Joff’s pouty lips or weak chin, instead possessing a strong jaw and thin, almost feline cheekbones. Sansa could feel herself wanting to blush in his presence, but she hid it well. *His looks mean little and less. And words are wind. It is his actions that matter.*

Aegon had dressed for war. His armour was dark grey scales engraved with niello. A three-headed dragon had been picked out on his chest in blood-red rubies, and a wool scarf was tucked under his gorget. His red half-cape was clasped by a pair of golden rings.

Ser Rolly made the introductions. “You stand before King Aegon of the House Targaryen, the Sixth of His Name, King of the Andals and—”

The king waved a hand, plainly all too familiar with the recitation of all his titles. “Never mind all that, ser.” He approached Sansa first. “My lady,” he said, and bent to kiss her hand. His lips lingered on her skin a moment longer than was necessary. When he looked up again, a blush was fading from his cheeks.

Sansa felt awkward as she curtseyed in return. “Your Grace.”

It was a long moment before Aegon’s eyes moved on to seek Brienne. “You must be Lady Brienne of Tarth,” he said, offering a handshake instead of a kiss. “I’ve heard all about you, my lady, and I cannot help but admire you.”

“Your Grace,” the lady knight said, dipping her head. From the frosty look in her eyes, Brienne must have thought she was being mocked. Sansa did not think that Aegon meant her any harm.

Aegon was still picking out other faces in the crowd when Lem Lemoncloak came forwards and went to his knees with a word of, “Your Grace.” Even the king seemed startled. “And who are you, ser?”

Lem rose ponderously. “Your Grace...” he repeated, his voice unusually thin. “My name is Ser Richard Lonmouth, the Knight of Lonmouth Castle. I was squire to your royal father Prince Rhaegar. If you will have me, I will consent to be your man.”

Anguy the Archer recovered his wits before Aegon did. “Lem?” His eyes widened.

“I was never Lem, Archer,” said the man who was called Ser Richard Lonmouth, shaking his head. “Forgive me.” He bowed his head to Sansa. “And you, my lady. I told you that I fought during a war and lost everything, but I never told you that the war was Robert’s Rebellion, and it was fighting at my prince’s side that I lost my land, my titles, and all that I was. A broken man, as I said.”

There was silence for a second. Then Swampy Meg spat on the rushes and turned her cheek. “And a traitor too, it would seem.”

“Forgive me,” said Lem. He looked down at his feet, then left the tent at the king’s quiet urging. Aegon’s eyes – and Sansa’s – went back to the other men and women of the Brotherhood without Banners. Some looked shocked, others angry, a few bordering upon distraught. *They have a right to feel betrayed, though.* Sansa felt more than a little uncomfortable herself. *My enemies have lied to me enough, but now those who I thought friends will do the same. I knew that someone must have told Ser Rolly... at least now, I know who.*

“You,” said King Aegon, nodding into the crowd, “you have the look of Old Valyria. What is your
Ned Dayne took a step forward, a warning look in his eyes. “I am Edric, Your Grace. Edric Dayne... the Lord of Starfall.”

The king raised an eyebrow. “Ser Arthur Dayne’s... nephew?”

Ned resigned himself to the shadow of his uncle once more. “Aye,” he said, “But I was Lord Beric Dondarrion’s squire for two years, and a man of the Brotherhood thereafter. And here I stand.”

“The Daynes served House Targaryen well during the reign of my grandfather Aerys and during Robert’s Rebellion,” Aegon said expectantly. “An army from Starfall is stationed at Highgarden with Prince Oberyn Martell as we speak.”

Edric’s face went cold. His jaw jutted out like a stone plinth. “I will pledge you my loyalty, Your Grace,” he said through gritted teeth. He gestured to those standing behind him, “but these men and women are my friends, my brothers and sisters. You have to promise that no harm will come to them.”

Aegon’s eyes flashed for a second, and then softened. “I can promise that for all of them,” he said, “all... save for Sandor Clegane and Jaime Lannister.”

Amid the general noises of affirmation, Sansa felt an inexplicable compulsion to speak. “Your Grace,” she said courteously, careful not to break Aegon’s gaze, “whatever evils Sandor Clegane did during his service as Joffrey Baratheon’s dog, he is not the same man now.”

Aegon shook his head. “The crimes he committed in the name of House Lannister - your captors, I seem to recall – and whilst a free man in the Riverlands warrant a trial in the sight of gods and men.”

“Lord Beric gave him a trial,” Ned Dayne interrupted, “he fought against his lordship, we all saw, and defeated him in a holy bout; I swear it upon the honour of my House. The Lord of Light named him a free man, even if the Seven did not.”

Sansa started. “I can vouch-”

Clegane’s husky laugh came from the crowd. “Don’t worry yourself, little bird,” he said, stepping forward. “It’s all right.” He fixed his glare on King Aegon.

“I know of what he has done against your family, Your Grace, but Ser Jaime Lannister is a good man, and noble,” Ned Dayne continued, “I... I implore you to hear out his words and his reasons before you sentence him. The gods have named him innocent as well; he duelled her ladyship’s champion under the hollow hill, and emerged victorious.”

Brienne of Tarth stepped forward. “I will vouch for Ser Jaime too. He has saved my life more than once... and... perhaps you do not know, Your Grace, but he did not slay his king without reason.”

“As will I.”

Sansa looked around to see who had spoken, then realised that it was herself. Why... why did I say that? she wondered.

_Because you know him to be innocent_, a voice in her head replied.

Aegon’s brow creased with poorly-hidden concern. He bit his lip, sighed, and turned to look at the man in question. “And what say you, Ser Jaime?”
Lannister spoke so quietly that Sansa scarce heard him. His voice was thin and reedy. “Either kill me or let me go free, Your Grace, but be quick about it,” he said. “I have no love for politics, nor patience for waiting.” His shoulders slumped. “It may be that I am owed some justice, aye. But since Edric and the ladies seem to favour keeping me alive, I would advise you to listen to their judgement.”

“Fair enough,” Aegon said after a moment, “then you will receive the same judgement as any other man, Ser Jaime. But I must put you in a cell, you understand.”

Lannister already looked half-dead as they led him away, his green eyes staring at nothing.

King Aegon turned back to the Brotherhood without Banners. “You are free to go, as I see it. There are no crimes which I mean to try you for, not now. Lady Sansa, if you and Lady Brienne would stay, though, I would have words with you.”

_Haven’t you already?_ Sansa knew that there was no use in anything other than obedience, though, so she stood by and waited for the others make their departure. All the while, Aegon’s gaze nervously flitted to hers when he thought she could not see him looking. “My lady,” he said at long last.

“Your Grace,” she replied.

Aegon’s cheeks coloured slightly and he glanced at his shoes. “Rolly sent a raven to me on his way up to Harrenhal,” he said. “An inn seems a curious place to find a daughter of Winterfell, I must admit, and the company he found you in is stranger still… oathbreakers, sellswords, broken men. Lady knights, small lordlings and smaller folk.”

“They are good men… most of them, at least.”

“Good men?” Aegon gritted his teeth. “From what I have heard, it is by their responsibility that the Riverlands are in their current state today. On my march from King’s Landing, I saw countless fields burned and sowed with salt, burned villages, plundered farms, sacked septs. I heard tales of women and girls who had been raped half a hundred times, of men who had lost brothers and sons and fathers to the battles of the Trident, but also to the massacres at Maidenpool and Harroway’s Town and Saltpons. _Saltpons_, where the Hound was said to commit the slaughter himself.”

“That wasn’t Clegane,” Sansa told him, “a vile man named Rorge stole his helmet and pretended to be him when the Brave Companions attacked Saltpons. Lady Brienne and Sandor Clegane _slew_ Rorge, at the inn near Rushing Falls. The Brotherhood without Banners want to keep the common folk safe.”

Aegon’s eyes narrowed. “Or so they say.”

Sansa summoned her courage and attempted to change the subject. “Why are you here, Your Grace? Forgive my abruptness, but the last I knew you were in King’s Landing.” Though she had not heard proper news since her time in Highgarden; King’s Landing could have burned to the ground by now and Sansa would be none the wiser.

“Even kings need allies to rely upon in troubled times like these.” His eyes still refused to meet hers, drifting to the tent ceiling this time. “I confess that I did not come searching for you, my lady, but now you are here… well, we could be of great help to one another. I assume that you are trying to get back to Riverrun. To your family.”

“We were on our way… and then your men waylaid us.”
Brienne started. “If it please Your Grace, might we be allowed-?”

“I am afraid not, Lady Brienne. As you well know, Ser Brynden Tully is marching a host down from Riverrun, intent on taking Harrenhal from Petyr Baelish in the name of Stannis Baratheon. The Riverlands has seen more than its fair share of war… and I do not mean for this war to continue any longer. There must be peace between north and south… and I need you to help me with that, Lady Brienne.”

“I serve Lady Sansa,” Brienne said icily.

“I will not have you do anything without her ladyship’s permission,” said the king.

“But he means to keep me as a hostage and send Brienne in my place. ‘Why not send me to my great-uncle myself?’ It was worth a try.

“Because I need your help here, my lady,” said Aegon. “Petyr Baelish and young Lord Arryn have hidden themselves away behind the walls of Harrenhal with eight thousand men for company. I could storm the castle… but that would be worse for all of us, and I do not desire to be a king who wastes the lives of his subjects. Lord Robert is your cousin, and I understand that you are… familiar… with Lord Baelish.”

Familiar? The way he’d said the word made her want to laugh. We are more than familiar, Your Grace. In distant daydreams, her mind would wander to the memory of Littlefinger, to the flash of his grey-green eyes and the quirky smile that was never far from his lips. You do want to go home, don’t you, sweetling? Don’t you?

“And what would I gain in return, Your Grace?” Sansa asked.

Aegon’s smirk was almost enough to unnerve her. “Why, you would have the very thing that you desire, my lady,” he said. “I would let you go home.”

Home. One simple word, and yet it was so much more than that. Home was the towers and turrets of Winterfell; it was the winter wind caressing the leaves of the heart tree in the godswood by day, and torch sconces throwing up the shadows of men against the walls of the Great Hall by night. Home was the damp dusky darkness of the crypts where the stone kings sat on their stone thrones; it was the sensation of water running between her toes in the hot pools. Home was Gage’s lemoncakes and Septa Mordane’s stern rebukes and Ser Rodrik’s shouts from the training square; home was Jeyne Poole’s giggling and Beth Cassel’s gleeful grin. Home was Rickon’s laughter and Bran scaling the walls like a hermit crab and Arya running riot in the courtyard; home was Father’s kisses and Mother’s fingers braiding her hair, the voices of Robb and Jon, the smell and feel of Lady’s warm fur against her cheek…

“Home,” she repeated. The word fell from her cracked lips. “Do you promise?”

For the first time, Aegon’s eyes truly stared into hers. They were a rich dark purple, the colour of amethysts and king’s blood. “I would let you reunite with your brother again and leave you in peace. I swear it upon my honour. By earth and water, by bronze and iron, by fire and blood.”

“My lady,” Brienne of Tarth said, “I swore an oath to your lady mother… to take you somewhere safe… and…” Her words went unspoken as her gloved fingers brushed against the gilded hilt of Oathkeeper, polishing the rubies.

Sansa blinked twice. Her fingers clenched and unclenched. She nodded.

Brienne turned to the king. “Your Grace, if it please you, I would take my squire Podrick with
“Perhaps you would do well to take some of the Brotherhood as an escort,” Sansa suggested. “Anguy, Greenbeard… Gendry…” The king did not know who Gendry’s father had been, but perhaps it was safest to get the young smith away from the Targaryen king rather than have him risk the anger of Aegon or his men.

The king waved a lazy hand. “To be sure, but I mean to keep the Dayne boy here. The lad is noble born, from an old and chivalrous house; he would serve me ably as a squire, no doubt.”

As a hostage to his house’s behaviour, you mean. Ned himself would doubtless have little choice in the matter. “Ser Rolly,” the king called to his guard, “escort Lady Brienne to the stables, and offer her the pick of our freshest horses. You will depart on the morrow, my lady, as the sun rises.”

“Lady Sansa-”

“It’s alright, Brienne,” Sansa found herself saying, “I can protect myself. No one will harm me here.” And she hoped that it was true.

When the lady knight had gone, Aegon offered her his arm. His fingers dug into her elbow, and once again his gaze drifted from hers. “My lady, if you would follow me.”

“As it please Your Grace.” Outside, the sun had hidden behind the clouds again. Sansa could feel Aegon’s eyes on her. “It will rain soon,” she said.

He nodded. “It is chilly this morn.”

Sansa smiled. “Winter is coming.”

“Aye.” Aegon nodded and swallowed nervously. “I want you to understand something before I take you to your tent.” His lip quivered. “We both know that our alliance is tenuous at best.”

Aye, we do. Your father kidnapped my aunt, and he raped her, and the Mad King Aerys killed my uncle and grandfather too. “There is bad blood between the houses of Stark and Targaryen,” Sansa said tersely.

Aegon seemed relieved by her understanding. “Aye. That there is. But we are linked by more than that. A Stark and a Targaryen… and in Harrenhal to boot… we must both admit that we have come to a dangerous place, and we find ourselves in a difficult situation. The shadows of the tourney and the war that followed still looms over the legacy of both our houses, and over both of us. Some would argue that I owe the Starks a measure of vengeance for the deaths of my own family.”

Sansa met his gaze. “And in the North, there may still be those who hunger to see the blood of the dragon wiped out.”

Aegon’s hand gripped her arm a little tighter. “But we must move on from that. I… I know what my father did. I do not know why he did it. Yet I do know this: we must work together to build a better future. The dragon and the direwolf must unite beneath one banner to face our greater enemies in the wars to come.”

He stopped outside a tall silk pavilion and released her hand. His fingers were a little clammy as he let go. “This is your tent, my lady,” he said. “I hope you will find everything to your liking. If it please you, I would sup with you this evening. In my tent, mayhaps?”

Sansa nodded. “Yes, Your Grace. You… you have been very courteous.”
“Courteous… aye…” A red blush flooded the king’s normally pale cheeks. “Well… uh… good day, Lady Sansa.” He bowed his head, and left her there. For a while Sansa watched his retreat, standing half-inside her tent. A Stark and a Targaryen… for the sake of the Seven Kingdoms, I must hope that Aegon is not the man his father was. She remembered a story Old Nan had once told her, of a silver prince and a wolf maid, with blue roses in her hair.

Chapter End Notes

This one took a while. Sorry about the wait. I'm afraid that my 4-times-a-week uploading schedule is over, so I'll be updating more slowly going forwards.

That being said, I'm exceptionally happy with how this chapter turned out. It took a couple of hours for the first draft, but I think this is one of the most well-polished chapters I've written so far. Which is a good thing, because it's basically the chapter that launches the second part of Sansa, Brienne, Jaime and Aegon's arcs.

Good news for Sansa fans: she is very busy during this middle section of The Sunset Kingdoms (she has 10 POV chapters in TSK overall; this is her fifth). A great many characters are converging on Harrenhal, and she's going to be interacting with a fair few of them in the near future.

Next up: probably Bran, which really messes up the timeline of events.
The hours crept past as slowly as years.

Afternoon turned to evening and then to dusk. The sun cast shadows of a hundred different shapes, the moon a hundred more. Ser Arys Oakheart stood and watched, as squires carried water jugs this way and that, as armourers hammered dents from old steel, as camp archers practised by loosing arrows at men stuffed with straw. Come night, the camp followers made their first appearance, ladies shrouded in silk, creeping off to do their duty in the beds of knights and lords.

He was never alone, and yet he had never been more alone. All that kept him awake to the noise was the shudder of Ser Robert Strong’s heavy breathing, and the subdued laughter from inside the king’s tent. Enough, he thought, when his eyes threatened to droop closed. My mind must be awake, as well as my body. He curled enamelled fingers around the hilt of his longsword, reassured by the supple leather on the crossguard. Ser Arys never felt more at home than with a sword in his hand.

Mercy finally came in the form of his Sworn Brothers Jasper Peckledon and Lorent Lydden, who appeared as the moon rose over the hill, as the tents melted into heavy darkness. “We are here to relieve you, Lord Commander,” said Ser Lorent. As though it were not obvious. But Ser Arys Oakheart had picked the man for his sure sword arm, not for his quick wit.

“And not a moment too late.” Ser Jasper sounded quite drunk. But who was he to judge? Speaking out against them would only prove Ser Arys a hypocrite; he too had been a foolish young knight once, under the disapproving gaze of Ser Barristan Selmy. A far better man than any of us, he thought.

“Is His Grace still with the Westerling girl?” Ser Jasper asked.
“Aye.” Ser Arys nodded. “He has been for hours.”

“I heard that they’re going to get married back at Casterly Rock,” Ser Lorent Lydden said. “If you want my opinion on the matter, His Grace should just have her now, before the battle; she’s a pretty maid—”

“And that is why no one wants your opinion,” Ser Arys said “The king is not going to just fuck the Westerling girl. He’s a boy, for the love of the Seven.”

“I was fourteen when I had my first,” Ser Jasper said, as if it were his sole crowning achievement. “Besides, he’s no stranger to it himself. He had Lady Margaery, and—”

Ser Arys knew full well that nothing had happened behind the closed doors on the night of the king’s wedding. There’d been no sound of any pleasure from inside the bedchamber that night, and Ser Arys knew that sort of sin all too well. Much to his dishonour…

“You have the guard,” he told his brothers. “I’m going to make my report. And then I’m off to bed.” Without waiting for a reply, he ducked inside the tent.

King Tommen lay sprawled on his front across the bed, cupping a wine-goblet in his hands. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes seemed to have a mad glitter to them. Lady Eleyna Westerling sat at his bedside, laughing at some jape when he came in.

This had been the fifth night in a week that the king had invited the Westerling girl to sup with him, and each time she stayed later and later. Ser Arys knew that the notion of bringing the pair together had belonged to Princess Myrcella, but the king himself seemed amiable enough towards the notion.

“Your Grace,” he said, bowing. “My lady.”

“Ser.” The Westerling girl was all cool courtesy. “Are you changing the guard?”

“Is it that time already?” King Tommen asked. “You should probably being going, Lady Eleyna. Ser Arys could escort you back to your—”

The girl shook her head. “I might stay a while longer, Your Grace. If it please you.”

The king reddened for a moment, his face turning even redder. “Oh,” he said, shrugging, “of course, my lady. Ser Arys, I will see you on the morrow, before the battle. You… you are dismissed. Tell… tell the Kingsguard they can go too. I’ll get some rest. I’m going to bed soon.”

“My lord.” The Kingsguard knight closed the tent flap behind him. *That girl will be in the bed with him soon enough.* He was unsure what to make of the fact that the young prince who had abhorred violence was now leading an army to war. *Times come and go. The world is passing strange.* Outside the tent, he turned to Ser Jasper and Ser Lorent. “Share the night shift between you. If Ser Robert stays up all night, there will always be two of you on guard, and we do not need three. You will need to be well rested on the morrow.”

*And with good reason,* Ser Arys thought as he left them behind. Stannis would be upon them come the dawn, like as not, and battle was a certainty. When the fighting eventually came, he would command a force on the right flank. Leading armies was a task that had been taken up by many Lord Commanders of the Kingsguard… but then again, Ser Arys Oakheart had never expected to be Lord Commander, not even temporarily. A thirdborn son, he had joined the Sworn Brothers at twenty, the youngest among his fellows. But with the departure of Selmy, the deaths of Blount and Moore and Greenfield, and the flight of Meryn Trant, he was the most senior among them, save for Ser Jaime.
Lannister. And if the Lord Commander was dead, then he would be the youngest knight to ever lead the Kingsguard. Even now, he was not sure whether that was a curse or a blessing.

The camp was quiet at this hour. The woods that surrounded the camp at Sarsfield were full of whispers, but Ser Arys could not make out what they said. A few drunken soldiers were singing the *Rains of Castamere* around a campfire, and the smells of charred meat were in the air. He saw Ser Raynald Plumm fucking a camp follower behind the grainstore, and sounds of pleasure were emanating from half the tents he passed. That was no surprise; many men found comfort in women on the eve of battle. Ser Arys almost felt a pang of jealousy at that, but his Kingsguard vows had never stopped him from having a woman before… for one, he was certain that Princess Arianne Martell had been on the verge of bedding him prior to Myrcella’s return to the capital.

*I should stop pretending to be so virtuous,* he told himself. It was even harder to do so when he got back to his tent and found the girl waiting in his bed.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he told her.

“Send me away, then.” Lady Rylene untangled herself from the bedsheets. Arys did not know where she was the lady of, and did not care. Nothing mattered when he was with her. *Oathbreaker,* a voice screamed in his head. *You oathbreaker!*

She rose, and the soft silk of her grey gown clung to her shapely figure as she did so, baring her legs to the night chill. Beneath his enamelled armour and woollen undergarments he felt something stir. A deep-rooted lust, his most shameful urge, his fatal flaw. “I looked for you earlier today,” she said, as she tickled her fingers over his breastplate. “But I couldn’t find you.”

His breath caught in his throat. “I was with the king.”

“Of course. Will you be taking a command on the morrow, my lord?”

He nodded. “On the right. It’s the Lord Commander’s duty.”

“Will His Grace be there with you?” she asked, in a voice as soft as summer silk.

Ser Arys shook his head. “He won’t be at the front. That’s where Stannis is going to be.”

Her cheek was warm to the touch when he put his hand there. Ser Arys felt his palm shiver as she coaxed him to her left shoulder. He threaded his fingers through the ties of her gown, and broke apart the clasps with a gentle *click.* And the silk slipped away at his slightest touch, baring one of her lovely breasts. She was not particularly well-endowed, but her nipples were pink and perfect and firm and—

“My lady,” Ser Arys said hoarsely, “you know I cannot do this. My duty—”

“Will your duty object to me touching you, ser? Can she fight for your honour? I think not.” Her hands trailed lower down his breastplate, then into his breeches, towards his hardening cock. Arys tried to turn away, to hide his shame, but she grabbed him there and pressed his lips to her cheek. “My sweet silly valiant knight.”

“I-I shouldn’t…”

“No,” she said, “but that will not stop you.” Her fingers tickled his neck, rubbing soft circles there. She unbuckled his cloak and let the white silk flutter to the floor of the tent, a bird without feathers. “My sweet chivalrous brave knight.” She kissed him with lips that tasted of cherry and sandalwood. Unconsciously Arys’s hand cupped her breast and stroked the nipple. *No, he thought, no, I must…*
She sat him down on the bed, and sat behind him, unclasping his armour. “You seem nervous, my sweet knight.” Her hand tousled through his hair. “What ails you?”

Arys stood, tried to turn away from her. But he was weak and feeble, and down below his cock threatened to rip through his breeches entirely as she pulled away vambraces and gauntlets of lobstered mail with one hand, while the other stroked inside his smallclothes. “I am nervous,” he admitted, “I’ve never led men before. Archers and cavalry and all that… five thousand men, all depending on me.”

“I thought you had six thousand.”

Arys shook his head. “Ser Addam sent scouts down into the forest, I—”

“I’m sure you have a plan,” she said. “Don’t you?”

“Aye… it wasn’t much of a plan. Ser Addam… defensive, of course… but he wants us to press forward at the right time, at the signal… I don’t even know if I’ll hear the signal, amid the battle. And if we have to attack ourselves… if they don’t come by afternoon. If we are attacked on our right, we are weak on that side, and if they come from the woods—”

“Hush now.” Her hands removed the heavy plates that covered his shoulders, and shrugged him out of his mail shirt so he was only in his underclothes. “Are you afraid?”

Arys let her lips brush against his another time. “Yes,” he whispered into her ear, “yes, I am.”

“Let me make you brave, then.” He could feel her hand cupping tighter still around his cock. “I shouldn’t,” he tried to tell her, but she placed a finger on his lips and eased him back into the pillows, dragging his breeches down, laying kisses along his front. “You shouldn’t. But you will. I am yours, and you are mine.”

This time he met her lips willingly.

Why, why, why? old Ser Barristan’s was shouting in his ear, but he never heard it. Jasper Peckledon fucked a different woman every night. At least Ser Arys Oakheart was true to his mysterious lover.

He pushed her dark hair aside and kissed her neck, biting at her breasts and her face. Then she turned him over and fell upon his cock, moaning out her pleasure as the feel of her cunt swathed him like a velvet blanket. When his time came, he screamed out her name, but he had the foresight to pull out just in time to spill his seed across her belly. The second and third releases had all but exhausted him, so he let her take her own pleasure and then fell back onto the bed as she finished him off. As the night grew old, the pair remained, entwined as serpents might, until the knight fell asleep in a haze of pleasure…

…and woke to the sound of drums booming like thunder in the valley, to warhorns blaring through the dawn air. Stannis, he thought at once, Stannis is here. He barely had time to spare a thought for the vanished Lady Rylene as he pulled on shirt and breeches and gauntlets and greaves, and pulled his chainmail shirt over his head. His white cloak sat strewn across the floor, stained by his own seed.

The shame that flooded his cheeks was like nothing he had ever known. Oh gods, oh gods, forgive me. He pulled the cloak on, checked the buckles and straps of his armour and forced his way out into the morning. The warhorns did wait for him, their deep, sonorous music ringing out across the world. They are here, it sang. They are here, they are here, they are here.

He took a deep, long breath. The master-of-arms back at Old Oak had taught him that. All your
lessons will amount to nothing if you cannot remember the first. There must be calm before the storm.

The camp did not seem calm, though. The rain lashed down in thick black sheets, the droplets raking his cheeks like knives. You are a Kingsguard, he reminded himself, as Ser Barristan Selmy had once told him, so guard the king. King Tommen’s pavilion was not difficult to find, being at the very centre of the camp, marked by a dozen waving Lannister pennants.

Smoke and music filled the air. Arlys passed a band of marching boys playing the drums. Ser Kennos of Kayce was blowing the Horn of Herrock at the top of his lungs. “Ser Arlys!” Ser Addam Marbrand shouted over the sound of the rain. “Ser Arlys, why are you here? To your men, ser, on the right, quickly now; Lord Tytos is waiting to sound the advance!”

“Advance?” Arlys’s voice came out as a croak. “But the king—”

“—has three other Kingsguard knights to guard him, does he not?” He turned Arlys away roughly, back towards the front lines. “Go on, ser!”

The walk back through the camp left him feeling drunk. His feet did not feel like his own and his vision was hazy. Arlys turned his head and spat in the grass, hoping to clear his head. The spittle dribbled down his chin instead.

Wet ground, he thought, everywhere, so, so... wet...

He staggered on a patch of mud and nearly fell. Crossbowmen ran past him through the predawn gloom, holding torches in one hand and their weapons in the other. The smell of wet leather filled his nostrils, and the rain beat against the top of his helmet, the droplets like a drumbeat on the steel. Arlys’s head rang from the clamour.

Thunder burst through the clouds and a forked bolt of yellow lightning split the sky. Perhaps it was the flash of light, or perhaps the loudness of it, but something spurred Ser Arlys back into motion. He bundled up the hem of his white cloak – though he would’ve been better served by ripping the damn thing off – and began to run.

Torches bobbed ahead of him. A light mist was settling over the field, getting darker and thicker as he ran further. In the end he could not see more than twenty feet in front of him.

Where in seven Hells is our bloody line? he wondered. It hadn’t looked this far away. If that fool Tytos Brax hadn’t decided to advance so early, then mayhaps—

His toe caught in a rut and a stabbing pain went up through his ankle. His sword clattered in its scabbard and landed in the mud. Ser Arlys retrieved it, wincing, and staggered the rest of the way down the hill.

And he found the army at last — part of it, at any rate. The men crouched behind wooden barricades, cowering with their crossbows and spears. Wind whipped their faces and the rain pelted down on their heads. Barely half of them looked alert. The line stretched into the grey mist in both directions.

“Squire!” Ser Arlys shouted, not even knowing if one was about, “a horse, fetch me a horse!” A boy hurried over from nowhere, dragging a chestnut rounsey by the bridle. The squire helped Arlys up onto his mount and passed him the reins.

Up here on the horse’s back he could make out another line of men, and a few vague orange lights through the fog. Torches? Flaming arrows?
He looked towards a man in a captain’s armour and pointed into the mist. “Who commands out there?”

“Lord Brax!” the man shouted back. “He saw them coming up the hill unawares and took half our force out, ser!”

“Stannis’s men? How many?”

“I don’t know, m’lord. But there’s too much o’ this damn fog to get any arrows off, and the rains soaked through all of our bowstrings. And we can’t unstring these crossbows or anything.”

Ser Arys was aghast. “Haven’t we got any longbowmen?”

“No, m’lord. Lord Tytos took all those as well, trying to find better ground, I think. Like I said, he saw Stannis’s men and went down there—”

No, the Kingsguard knight thought, no, no, no. This is all wrong. The king wanted us to defend this ground, not attack across it.

The king is a boy of four-and-ten, his better sense reminded him. He let out a sigh. “No good can come of having our flank split in two. If Brax has gone forwards, then we must follow. Captain, find your fellows and prepare your battalions for a forward march. And you, boy, squire, find whoever is in charge of our cavalry and tell them to rally to me.”

It was a long ten minutes before any of those tasks were done. There was no interruption from Ser Addam or the other command, no word from Tytos Brax, nothing at all. Another squire brought him a Myrish lens. It was of no use, though. The gloom was thickening, drowning the world in grey ashes.

In the end, there were only about a hundred knights and twice that number of freeriders. He gave some commands, but it did not really seem that anyone was listening. We should defend these lands, King Tommen had said. What of it? Ser Arys Oakheart put his heels into the flanks of his horse, drew his sword and led the way.

The cavalry streamed out behind him, their hooves splashing through the morning rain. The mist began to thin as they went deeper and deeper into the valley, and he could make out more of his own men, or perhaps Lord Tytos’s, grey shadows that jumped out of his way as he rode. The field was dark, and without torches to light their way he was blind to any proper sense of direction. So they went forwards, and hoped for the best. Stannis, Ser Arys thought, Stannis, we have to get to—

Then his horse caught in a rut or a spike, and the next he knew he was falling, flailing, and coming down heavy. Worms and blood filled his mouth as he lay there, watching the other horses thunder past. An archer lay dead in the mud beside him, bleeding from a few fresh stab wounds in his side. When Ser Arys turned his corpse over, he saw the Lannister lion on the front of the man’s leathers. Stannis must be here. But where in seven fucking Hells is Tytos Brax?

He turned, feeling dizzy. Clumps of mud clung to his sword. He wiped them off with one gauntlet, took a step forwards. The ground was so waterlogged that when he pressed his foot down on the grassy clump beside him, the mud trickled out like blood from a sponge.

His eyes drifted back to the dead Lannister soldier… and then to the next… and then to the next. The dead were all around him, Lannister and Baratheon both, the remnants of Tytos Brax’s men and those Stannis had sent against them. All the while the rain pelted down on his helm, ringing his head like a bell. He reached up to the strap under his helmet, pulled it loose, and threw the helm down,
letting the rain wash the sweat from his hair. Lightning crackled overhead, and faintly, far-away, Ser Kennos of Kayce was still blowing the Horn of Herrock. The horsemen thundered all around him, their mounts slowing down, tripping and falling as they waded out into the quagmire.

“My lord!” someone was shouting to his rear, “my lord, they’re behind us, they’re here, they’re behind us!”

There must be calm before the storm, Arys thought, oddly peaceful. And then, as though mocking his words, lightning flashed down, turning the world around him white. In that brief flash, the fog died away, and he saw them, Stannis Baratheon’s men running onward through the mist. Coming towards him.

And the dead rose.

They climbed from their graves in the wet black mud with swords clutched between gauntleted fingers, with maces and pikes and spears, with mud clinging to the their tabards and their armour, dirtying their skin and hair. They rose all around them, to the front, to the back, to both sides. Black monsters with blinking white eyes, and stags emblazoned upon their shields.

And so he spoke, and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere.

“Retreat!” someone shouted, “Get away, get back, go, go, go!” And Arys found himself echoing the call, fleeing as the enemy bore down upon him, struggling in his heavy steel. And the rain came down still, as though the Stranger were weeping tears at their expense. Ser Arys could only watch as men collapsed into the mud all around him, as the mist brought more of Stannis’s howling monsters from the gloom. Dogs were barking, horses whinnying, men screaming out the calls for a retreat. His feet were sticking, stuck, gone. He fell.

But now the rains weep o’er his halls, with not a soul to hear.

A man bore down upon him, his spear raised. Ser Arys went for his sword, brought it up and across, and felt blood spray his face through the rain, through leather and flesh. Then someone wrenched his arm up and screamed at him to keep going, back towards the lines, towards the Lannister lines.

Seven hells, where were the lines? Where was anyone? He crashed into another enemy soldier, brought him down, drew his dirk and slashed it across the man’s throat. Arys was bleeding by then, from a joint in his left knee.

The king, he thought, despairing, I have to get back to the king. He will know, Ser Addam will know, the day is lost, but the king is not—

He spotted a torch flickering, and then another, a third. And there came a whole battalion of men, armoured with in mail and leather, and one man at the centre of them all, bearing a sword that seemed to glow. Pennants flapped over their heads, a golden stag prancing inside a flaming heart.

Stannis, he knew, somehow. It was Stannis. If only Ser Arys could get to him, kill him, the war would be won at once, and he would be a saviour… or a martyr.

Once, as a boy at Old Oak, his mother had told him stories of Ser Olyvar the Green Oak, who had fought and died beside Daeron the Young Dragon in the Prince’s Pass. A martyr, aye, but all men of the Reach know his name.

He was an Oakheart too. Our roots go deep, he thought, and charged. His sword felt weightless in his mailed fingers. His white cloak – more green and brown than white now — fluttered behind him. All that mattered was him and Stannis. Two men, one fight. Twenty steps away, ten, five…
“FOR OLD OAK!” he screamed, swinging.

Stannis brought his glowing blade up to parry the wild strike, and turned it away almost lazily. He ducked a second swing, then made his own attack. The burning sword flashed down like lightning, almost blinding Ser Arys. In his light mail and sparse oddments of plate, the king was faster than the knight, and the mud did not slow him nearly so much. Eventually they backed apart. The light made the rubies glow in Stannis’s helm, and firelight flashed along his jaw.

Arys went at him like a man gone mad. The battle fever was upon him. His hair in his eyes, the white cloak whipping around him like a whirlwind, his sword flashing down upon Stannis again and again and again with relentless fury, each blow wild and angry. But every time the Kingsguard knight attacked Stannis was there to block it. Wisps of smoke hissed off the king’s blade. Arys lunged, Stannis ducked, and forced his sword upwards.

Ser Arys Oakheart’s sword dropped into the mud. The rain brightly glimmered off his mail. He felt blood trickling down under his left arm, flooding across his chest. No matter, he thought as he went to his knees, the rain will wash it clean again.

Stannis Baratheon stood over him. His knights waited in a circle around them, ready to intervene at any moment. In the king’s hand, the glowing sword had turned a bright, burning white. “You are Kingsguard to this false bastard,” said Stannis. His voice was ice, but his eyes were fire. “The day is lost to you, and the war. But yield your sword, ser, and you may live yet.”

“Never,” spat Ser Arys Oakheart, without quite knowing why. Mud dripped from his lips. “To the seven hells with you.” My sword—

One of the knights kicked it away.

“So be it,” said King Stannis. His words smoked in the chilly air. The burning sword descended. And darkness fell.

Chapter End Notes

Wait, you say, is that it?

To which I reply: yes, it is. The Battle at Sarsfield is written to be deliberately confusing, muddled and underwhelming, but I think that's what lends it a sense of uniqueness. Though I did consider various POVs both in the Lannister and Baratheon camp, I think Ser Arys Oakheart seemed the most appropriate. He's able to get into the thick of the battle and yet he can still interact with some of the higher-ups in the Lannister command (if only briefly).

Another aspect of Ser Arys's character that is interesting is the way that he is the epitome of one of mankind's flaws - a soiled knight who cannot resist his own urges and lust. 'Lady' Rylene is just a regular camp follower, like Shae - nothing special - but he tries to convince himself that he is somehow more righteous by maintaining his 'loyalty' to her.

In terms of the actual battle, obviously this is a very convincing win for Stannis's side, who manage to rout the Lannister army and break their defense, owing in part to strategic skill and in part to the foggy weather - though Stannis may have been able to predict this in some way, thus it can also be attributed to good strategic planning.
This chapter was very hard to write and even harder to edit, and yet I don't think it's among my better work. Unfortunately, I've lost the writing streak and the inspirations that I maintained over the summer and I know that I can't keep up the pace of uploading new work every 3 days, both due to my real life commitments and this temporary writer's block I've run into.

Therefore, I'm planning to take a hiatus from uploading THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, though I will still be writing it (albeit slowly). Hopefully, this will give me the time to think about my writing more without the pressure of constant uploads, and the space to get back into the spirit of writing. This hiatus will probably last somewhere around 2 weeks, so I'm afraid you'll have to find other fics to occupy yourself with until my next upload.

I will not give up on this fic, though. I'm going to keep writing for as long as you guys are willing to read it.

Thank you all so very much for your continued support.
Black candles burned in the torch sconces, and the air was heavy with the smell of incense. It sounded like she was in a temple, though the songs of worship were faint and far away. The light streamed down from a high window and pooled around her feet, the pale amber colour of honey.

She heard her name spoken by one voice and echoed by ten thousand. “Daenerys Targaryen…”

“Quaithe?”

The woman stood shrouded by a cowl of shadows, her face hidden as always behind a lacquered red mask. Her eyes burned through the dark, shifting red and blue and green. “Remember the Undying, Daenerys,” she whispered. “Three fires must you light, one for life and one for death and one to love; three mounts you must ride, one to bed and one to dread and one to love; three treasons you will know; once for blood and once for gold and once for love.”

“Three treasons,” Dany echoed, “who… who will betray me? Do you know?”

“I cannot see that far,” said Quaithe, “so you must learn to look. Soon you will dance with mummers. They will wrap you in perfumed silks and drag you down, still hiding behind their masks and cowls and painted faces. And you must sing a song for them.”

“I must sing a song? You… that doesn’t make sense. A song for mummers.”

“You are dreaming,” said Quaithe, “when you wake, the words will speak to you differently. You know they will.”

“Yes,” replied Dany, “but if I am sleeping… then how…?”

A crack of thunder split the night wide open, and she fell from the dream as raindrops fell from the sky. They beat down mercilessly outside her window, playing a song on the cobbles below. And I must sing a song too, Quaithe says. She shifted in her bed and pulled herself up onto the pillows. The air tasted of salt and storm. Her brow was slick with sweat, and her nightdress clung to her.
Half-dazed, she stumbled up from her bed. She went to the window, steadying herself against the pane, and gazed out. Below her, King’s Landing sprawled, its streets and buildings black shadows against the blacker sky above. Atop Visenya’s Hill, the sparrows were holding a vigil near Baelor’s Sept, so she saw plenty of lights there, glowing brightly enough for her to make out the seven crystal towers. From the north, on Rhaenys’s Hill, she thought she heard the cry of one of her nesting dragons. Viserion, mayhaps. His screeching sounded odd to her ears.

Was she still dreaming? Wearily, Dany rubbed her eyes.

When she looked out again, she could see beyond the city walls, to where the Dothraki camp sprawled, docile tonight. Were she still a naive girl, Dany might have said that all was well in the city again. Alas, it was not so. The sparrows were attacking brothels and pleasure houses now, declaring them sinful to their gods, and on occasion they had been known to attack markets to smash up casks of wine as well. I will have to see to them soon enough, and it will not be easy. Varys’s little birds reported that her dragons were often the target of the sparrows’ sermons. “They call them unnatural and a danger to the ways of men,” he had said.

“Your Grace.”

Dany jumped from the shock. “You must not do that,” she said.

“Beg pardon, Your Grace,” said Ser Jorah Mormont, “I heard you and I thought you might be in distress.”

“I am fine. You may leave…” But when he turned to go, Dany stopped him. “No, send for Irri instead. I would take an early bath. My handmaidens will not love me for it, though.” Not that anybody else does.

Ser Jorah went, leaving Dany alone with her dreams and her doubts. The Undying promised me three betrayals, but I have been betrayed too many times to count, and certainly more than thrice - once for blood and once for gold and once for love. But if Jorah was one, and Brown Ben another, and they have both come back to me, then am I still owed two betrayals?

She decided not to dwell on it. Soon after her handmaids came up with pails of water for her bath, still scaldingly hot from the kettles. Dany undressed before the window and lowered herself into the steam, letting the water suckle at her legs and her breasts. It was still dark, so Irri lit a lantern and placed it on the side table with her wine cup while Jhiqui scrubbed her back with soap and put lavender oil in her hair.

“I hope I did not wake you too early,” Dany said in Dothraki, “the hour is unseemly, I know.”

Irri was not bothered. “I dreamed a strange dream this night, until Jorah the Andal woke me. A swarm of moths came down from the moon and spoke to me in the long grass. They had glowing wings and shone like stars, but they had the voices of the blood of my blood, of the brothers and sisters who have died since we left Pentos with you, Khaleesi. And even more than that. I saw the mother who gave me life and the father who let me ride on his shoulders when I was but a girl…”

“You are dreaming cursed dreams,” Jhiqui told her. “A swarm of moths is bad. It was the night lands that you saw, girl, and to see the night lands is to be cursed. It is known.”

Irri nodded soberly. “It… it is known.” She looked almost afraid.

“We all have evil dreams from time to time,” Dany told her, “oftentimes they mean little and less.” And I can only pray that is true, with all my heart.
The handmaid seemed comforted by her words. “It is not known,” she said, “but perhaps it is so.” She towelled Dany’s hair and brushed out the tangles.

Later, when dawn was peeking above the horizon and her skin had turned wrinkled and red from her long immersion, Ser Jorah opened the door a crack and said, “Archmaester Marwyn has come seeking an audience, Your Grace.”

“I am breaking my fast with Tyrion Lannister before he leaves,” Dany replied. “But I will receive the archmaester, though I cannot promise him a long meeting.” When Jorah was gone, she climbed out onto the towels and let her handmaids scrub her down. She chose a long ivory dress with dagged purple sleeves, and pale blue sandals for her feet. On the balcony, Irri brought her lime cordial, figs and wedges of blood orange, while Jhiqui ushered in Marwyn the Mage.

The archmaester did not wait for her invitation to take his seat. “There is good news to start, Your Grace. I have it on good authority that a tribe of mountain clansmen have been flushed from the Kingswood and were last seen heading off in the direction of the Vale of Arryn.”

“Where they will likely continue with their present actions of raiding trade caravans and unsuspecting travellers. I thought you had good news?”

“It is a matter of perspective, I suppose.” He folded his arms. “Far be it from my place to impose any suggestion to you, but I have word of a number of visitors who sailed into the harbour this morning.”

“What sort of visitors?”

“Unusual visitors, to say the least. Cloaked all in red like our friend Moqorro.” His lip curled with distaste. “You might do well to-”

“-receive them,” Dany said.

Marwyn shrugged. “I was going to suggest that you ignore every word they say, but I suppose that would be impolite.”

“It would be ungenerous to banish them from the city,” the queen said, “However, it will not do to have them freely preaching the Lord of Light’s religion among the people, especially with our sparrow problem as yet unresolved.”

“Very well. Send Moqorro and a litter to retrieve them, with drapes over the windows so they are not seen… on second thoughts, do not send Moqorro. Aurane Waters should be sufficient company for them. Bring them to the Red Keep and have them see me this evening, when the audiences are done.” Waters was informally the master of ships in Lord Celtigar’s absence, but he was known to overstep his authority. Ser Jorah mistrusted him, Dany knew – though Jorah mistrusted most everyone.

“Wise thoughts, Your Grace. And with Lord Waters leaving by week’s end, any threat of conspiracy will be soon gone.”

Dany gave him a wry smile. “You have a suspicious mind, Archmaester.”

“I have spent most of my life in Oldtown. There a man learns to be suspicious, else he might find poison in his porridge.”

Something I might need to be aware of myself, she thought darkly. Marwyn shifted in his seat, rose, then left her with a bow. I trust him more than Varys or Lady Olenna or Lord Tyrion, but only because he has never served another king. Three betrayals I shall have… but could he be one of
them. She thought not: Marwyn had no hunger for gold, no thirst for blood, and he loved no one, as far as she knew. But he did know Mirri Maz Duur… perhaps they were more than mere acquaintances…

After, Irri draped her shoulders in a half-mantle of ivory wool and coiled the three-headed dragon necklace around her throat, amber and jade and onyx burning in their eyes. That done, Dany descended the stairs from the balcony to her solar, where she found Tyrion Lannister sitting, staring deeply into his wine cup as though trying to discern its secrets.

“I am sorry for my lateness,” Dany told him, “Marwyn held me up.”

The dwarf lord shrugged. “I came at your invitation, Your Grace, so you cannot be late. I am sorry for being early.” Grinning, he spread his hands in apology. Does he mock me? Dany wondered. She could not tell.

Jhiqui brought their breakfast, but Dany pushed hers away. Her hunger had dissipated, though she did not know why.

Lord Tyrion had no such qualms. “Fried bacon and fried bread. I must be blessed. Why, I can think of nothing better to remind me of King’s Landing on my journey east.”

“I expect you’ll be glad to leave the city behind.”

He speared a rasher of bacon on the point of his knife. “Well, it does have its faults – many of them, truth be told…” Here he took a moment’s pause to sip his wine, “And yet I have grown with it, and I have learned alongside it. King’s Landing has been my home for nearly two years now. And while I hate the stench and the treachery… and most of the people… there are things here that I love. Things I will miss.”

Is that what it feels like to be home? Dany wondered. She had never known. The word sounded funny in her thoughts. Home.

“Lord Varys is not one of them, though,” Tyrion said.

“Yes. I suppose it is my turn to contend with the eunuch now.”

“He’s not so bad… once you get past the fact that he has ten thousand spies across all Seven Kingdoms doing his bidding and learn to ignore the fact that Varys knows everything that you ever do.”

“That seems rather difficult to ignore,” she quipped.

“It’s all a part of the game, Your Grace.” With a small sad smile, he said, “I suppose I’ve grown so used to treachery by now that anything else seems too good to be true.”

“Too good to be true.” Strangely, Dany thought of her brother then. There had been a time when Viserys had been her hero, come to think of it. Before…

“My brother,” she said, unsure why she was telling Tyrion Lannister of all people. “Viserys… he was flawed... but perhaps his dream was real... he made out that the Seven Kingdoms were some sort of paradise.”

“I’m sure. With houses made of gingerbread, and rivers flowing with blackberry wine. Well, I have to credit his optimism, if nothing else.”
“He did not know this place. Not truly… and neither do I.”

The dwarf curled his lips into something that resembled a smile. “You will learn, in time. You have the good fortune to possess a certain shrewdness that will doubtless prove useful at some point in the wars to come.”

Dany shook her head. “There are no wars to come.”

“You have enemies, same as anybody else.”

*And many more, I’m certain.* “Yes, I have enemies. But I also have dragons.”

“Fire and blood cannot solve all your problems,” he said. “You have dragons, yes… but dragons die.”

Jorah Mormont had said the same, in Qarth, what felt like an age ago. Dany replied as she had then. “Dragons die. But so do dragonslayers.”

“That they do,” said Tyrion Lannister. “I seem to recall that several thousand smallfolk were killed storming the Dragonpit during the Dance of the Dragons. Of course, the five dragons were slain in the end, and Princess Rhaenyra’s youngest son along with them, but… well, dragons are no man’s playthings.”

*No,* Dany had to remind herself, *no, they are not.* Drogon was near ninety feet from wingtip to wingtip now, Marwyn estimated, and certainly more than big enough for her to ride. “My foes would do to remember that.” *As would my so-called ‘friends’.*

“Oh, indeed,” the dwarf said. “I have a sellsword friend who tells me that your dragons can be heard fighting over scraps in the Dragonpit on Rhaenys’s Hill every night.”

“Yes. But that is only Rhaegal and Viserion. Drogon spends his days hunting.” And that worried her all the more.

“Woe betide any who have the misfortune to cross him,” Lannister said. He bit his lip, looking for a moment like an overgrown, sullen child. “I never thought that I would ever see a dragon. When I was a boy, I asked my uncle Gerion if I could have one for my nameday. ‘It wouldn’t have to be a big dragon,’ I said, ‘only a little one, like me.’

“My father was never a kind man, Your Grace. I suppose he was about as far from kind as a man could possibly be. ‘The dragons are all dead,’ he told me that night, ‘they died out over a hundred years ago. There is no magic in the world.’

“I almost cried at that, as my father no doubt wanted me to. ‘Don’t listen to him,’ Uncle Gery said. ‘There is no magic in the West, aye… but until we have explored the whole world, then we cannot know that there is none at all.’ And he was right. For here I am, still the same ugly dwarf boy… but I *have* seen a dragon.”

“And another sits before you,” the queen said.

Lannister nodded. “Well, then,” he said, raising his cup high, “a toast, to us. The children of terrible fathers. May we be considerably less awful than our forebears.”

Dany supposed she could toast to that. She swallowed down her sour wine even as Tyrion Lannister lowered his cup to the table. “My ship is leaving soon, Your Grace. I had better be on it, if you’ll excuse me.”
“Yes,” said Dany, “I suppose you ought.” She had been about to say something else, but the little man had distracted her, and now she had no clue what she had meant to say. So she could only sit and watch as he bowed and waddled away, his wisdom lost to her. A queer sense of unease washed over her. *We will meet again, Tyrion Lannister,* she thought, half-prophetically, *though not like this.*

She ate half a pomegranate to finish her breakfast, sprinkled with lime juice. Neither fruit grew in Westeros, and Dany knew that their supplies of exotic eastern goods would run out soon, but they tasted too good. Last night she had thought of opening a trade route with the Free Cities of the East… but she needed money to make her trades, and for that she needed Tyrion Lannister. As she did for a dozen other things. The chests of gold they’d ransacked from ancient Astapor and proud Yunkai were running low, as were the gifts of wealth that the Lysene magisters had given her to stop her dragons from burning their cities to ruin. Without money, she could not pay her sellswords, and Dany was not such a fool as to believe that they would stay with her out of some sort of devotion. *Brown Ben has turned his cloak twice already, and Daario… Daario is as fickle as they come.* He’d sent her letters from Bywater and the Ring, where House Roxton had its seat, reporting that the Dothraki were dissatisfied with the plunder there and wanted to return to grazing lands before it started to snow.

His words spoke ill, but Dany had spent an age with his letter all the same, tracing the form of each and every word he’d written. She knew it was foolish, and yet she did it all the same. *So what does that make me?*

Ser Jorah and Lord Varys awaited her in the antechamber, the knight looking none too pleased at the eunuch’s presence. Varys moved towards her in a wash of perfume and sweet-scented violets. “I am ever your servant, Your Grace,” he said, bowing his head. “Your pardon, but I bring ill news. From Storm’s End. Lord Jon Connington’s company was attacked by rebels in the night, and his lordship was sorely wounded by an arrow that took him in his lower leg. He will recover, so says Ser Harry’s letter, but this may delay the Lord Hand’s return to King’s Landing.”

*Not that the Hand has ever made his intentions to return known.* Dany was convinced that Lord Connington was merely wasting time in the Stormlands for some reason she could not quite discern. It worried her, but there was little she could do. *I must trust in Aegon, and in his judgement of Lord Connington. I have no other choice.*

*And I must say the same for Varys, it would seem.* “I pray Lord Connington recovers soon,” she said coolly. “These rebels you speak of… Lannister supporters?”

The eunuch glanced at his feet. “That is the other thing, Your Grace. The Grandisons have sworn oaths to us, as have the Fells and the Bucklers and the Bar Emmons who supported Stannis, but your foes now come from a different quarter. Men are calling them the Kingswood Brotherhood come again, but it is not anarchy they seek to spread, but distrust in you.”

“I faced the Sons of the Harpy in Meereen. I am no stranger to insurgency. And no friend to it either.”

“It is not the nature of this uprising that concerns me, Your Grace, but fear that it might reach King’s Landing, and the ears of the sparrows. Religious fanatics will be only too keen to jump onto the bandwagon of these rebels if they find their aims favourable…”

“And their aims are?”

Varys shifted uncomfortably. “To overthrow the established order of the Seven Kingdoms, to knock down the kings and queens and create equality for all. Or so they say. A similar revolt happened in Lorath a century before Aegon’s landing, and was successful for a time. Maester Kopriss was known
to write that the Lorathi believed all men were equal... but in practise some men are more equal than others. It was not long before tyranny imposed its hold over the city.”

“It will not get that far,” Dany promised. “Lord Connington has this all in hand, I trust?”

“So he says.” Varys’s words did little to reassure her.

She nodded, and turned away from that subject. “How many petitioners are there this morning?”

“One-hundred and eighty-three, Your Grace, at the last count. That will take a few hours, at the very least.”

Dany had chosen to forego the throne room in favour of the Small Hall in the unoccupied Tower of the Hand, where she could sit on a cushioned chair, eat figs and sip wine while the petitioners begged favours of her. Lord Varys had protested that most fervently. “Your Grace, the Iron Throne is more than just a seat; it is a symbol of power, your birthright, the-”

“My dragons are my power. And my birthright.” She was defying tradition, but what of it? She had defied tradition in Slaver’s Bay, and the people of Meereen and Yunkai and Astapor had come away so much better.

“All rise for Her Grace Queen Daenerys,” the herald declared as she came in, “the First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lady of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.” Dany took a seat on the throne amid pale purple cushions. Ser Jorah Mormont stood at her right, his brows furrowed with distaste. Below the dais sat Grand Maester Gormon with his ponderous chain, Lady Olenna Tyrell, dignified in her moonstone-studded wimple; Haldon Halfmaester, Marwyn the Mage, and lastly Lord Varys, who was acting as her steward, much as Reznak mo Reznak had in Meereen. Beware the perfumed seneschal, she thought, as Varys conducted the petitioners inside. The eunuch always smelled of fruit and flowers, but Dany found no cause to be wary around him. I am seeing foes in every shadow, where I ought to see friends. But if they are my foes...

First came a pair of Pentoshi captains who were angered by the tariffs she had placed on their goods being sold in the harbour. Lord Tyrion had imposed them himself before leaving, so Dany left the explanation to Haldon Halfmaester, who seemed to have a better idea of what he was saying. Then a farmer who claimed that Drogon had come down from Blackwater Bay and eaten all of his livestock, but Dany was certain that he was lying, since the man did not seem to know what colour her dragon was, nor where his own farm was situated.

Midday brought the arrival of a pair of begging brothers from Baelor’s sept, in roughspun robes and old sandals on their feet, who stank of the city. They bowed to her and looked up distastefully with pinched, mean faces. “Your Grace,” one of them said, “We have been sent to beg audience with you, at the Great Sept of Baelor.”

“Sent by who?”

“His High Holiness,” said the brown brother.

Lord Varys coughed. “There is no High Septon, goodmen. The Most Devout have not chosen-”

“The Most Devout are old men, their souls black with sin. Let them use that gilded monstrosity of a sept on Visenya’s Hill as a breeding ground for their immorality, Your Grace, Let them continue with their tedious process of choosing their High Septon. Your people have chosen theirs.”

Dany looked to Lord Varys. “Did you know about this?”
It was Marwyn the Mage who answered. “The smallfolk choose a dozen leaders at dawn each day, Your Grace; most have fallen by dusk. Tradesmen, merchant guilds, even thieves, they all have their leaders. So it goes for begging brothers.”

“His High Holiness is different,” the brother said, “he was chosen by septons from all seven corners of the city, raised up from among thousands by the light of the Seven. It would please us greatly if you were to receive him. It would please your people.”

Lady Olenna Tyrell spoke up. “I must admit some concerns about this High Sparrow you seem to speak of with such reverence. I seem to recall that Cersei Lannister raised such a man to prominence, and he stormed her daughter’s wedding and executed the groom. If this man has returned to the city, then Crown Law dictates that his head be mounted on a spike.”

“This High Sparrow was last seen headed for Oldtown with five thousand of his followers,” said Varys, “but that was half a year ago. I think it is safe to say that we would have noticed his return.”

“Would we?” Lady Olenna raised an eyebrow. “For a master of whispers, you do not sound very certain.”

“My lady, if I knew every single person coming into this city and their business here, things would be so much easier, don’t you think?”

Dany sighed and looked at the sparrows. “Tell His High Holiness that I will see him.” I am consorting with liars and braggarts every day, why not zealots too? “Soon.” That was vague, but it was enough to placate them for now, and it was more than she needed to do. Dany thought they ought to be pleased by that, but they were frowning as they retreated from her.

Lord Varys said, “Your Grace would do well to ensure the loyalty of your people, especially in the wake of all this terrible warring.” He pressed his soft hands together. “No doubt our good Lady Olenna would not hesitate to lay on supplies from the Reach for the poor beleaguered folk of King’s Landing.”

The Queen of Thorns snorted. “All paid for with Tyrell gold, of course. But yes, I shall consent to that, out of the kindness of my heart.” She smiled at Dany. “Fear not, Your Grace shall have no doubts about House Tyrell’s loyalty.”

“There are warehouses and stores around Rhaenys’s Hill that could hold the foodstuffs from the wagons,” said Lord Varys.

“Yes, but you shall have no part in their storage, eunuch. I don’t want your grubby hands poking everywhere. I daresay none of us do.”

They took a brief recess, during which Varys and Olenna complained some more and Grey Worm came to make his report. Moqorro came in alongside him, swaddled in his blood-red robes. The red priest was helping her Unsullied commander with his investigation into the murders of her Unsullied. “We have dire news, Your Grace,” he said, with nothing to soften the blow. “Ten of your men were found dead this morning, in a winesink near the Lion Gate.”

“Ten?” asked Lady Olenna. “That many? And you are no closer to knowing who has perpetrated this?”

“This one does not understand,” admitted Grey Worm, “we are thinking that it is the sparrow people, but there is no evidence, my queen. It is like Sons of the Harpy, come again.”

It is worse than that. In Slaver’s Bay, I was a foreign queen in a foreign land. Here I am among my
people, my father's people, and yet still they cast me away. "How did ten men die?" Dany asked. "I ordered them to patrol in pairs." As though that would protect them. The excuse sounded pathetic now.

Grey Worm sounded as ashamed as he could. "This one sent ten to patrol western wall, my queen. Perhaps they were enticed into wine-place and set upon, perhaps killed and then dragged inside."

Marwyn the Mage said, "And still you suspect the sparrows?"

"This one saw the winesink with his own eyes. It is near the Sept."

"I have met with the sparrows only this morning," Dany said, a sour taste in her mouth, "they seemed to want me as their friend… though liars rarely present themselves as such."

"On that we are agreed," said the Queen of Thorns, with a sidelong look at Lord Varys.

After Grey Worm had gone, Varys brought the petitioners back in. One was a messenger boy sent by Brown Ben Plumm from Tumbleton, announcing that Lord Footly had surrendered to her sellswords, and that the Second Sons had barricaded the goldroad near Stoney Sept, so that no wagons or horses could pass through that region to deliver supplies to either Lord Stannis or the Lannisters. "Is there news of Daario Naharis and his Stormcrows?" Dany asked eagerly, but the boy knew nothing, and she got nothing in answer. A captain of her City Watch came to tell her that Tyrion Lannister’s ship had departed, with the dwarf, his squire and his sellsword friend on it. "Good riddance to him," Lady Olenna said with pursed lips.

Lord Rosby brought forth claims of a border dispute with Lord Rykker, blushing and bowing his head over and over again. He is half in love with me, Dany thought, but I have nothing for him. He half-reminded her of Hizdahr zo Loraq, and that made her oddly sick, so she promised to hear his words and had him dismissed as quickly as she could. Fifteen-year old Lord Monford Velaryon came before her to bend his knee and say some words of fealty. But when Dany asked after his cousin Aurane Waters, he shook his head and said that he had not seen his cousin since his departure to the docks this morning on her orders. How long can it take to find a few priests? she wondered.

A balding man claimed that a Dothraki horde had attacked his village on the far side of the Blackwater Rush, carrying off his chickens and a nanny goat, and reportedly groping his wife when she tried to protest. Dany promised the man recompense in the form of silver, but when she admitted that it would be impossible to charge anyone. When he heard that he spat at her feet, and Haldon Halfmaester and Ser Jorah had to haul him out.

"Was there any truth in his words, do you think?" she asked Marwyn the Mage.

"We have no way of knowing, Your Grace," the archmaester said. "And if it is so, the Dothraki are too far away for us to know about." Two-thirds of the male warriors had gone out on the ranging, though a good forty or fifty thousand women and children remained outside the walls of King’s Landing in their ramshackle camp. And there were worrying reports of more raids near the Mud Gate, of shops and businesses being looted. Drogon’s appearance cowed them for a time, but they are a warring people. Perhaps I should send them back to Dragonstone, or over to Essos once more. Let them ride in the Disputed Lands, and come back only if I need them.

Lastly, Grand Maester Gormon presented a score of letters to the court, mostly pledges of allegiance and empty words of praise, but there were some interesting messages from Highgarden too, written in the hand of Willas Tyrell, now Lord of the Reach. “Lord Willas regrets that he cannot come to King’s Landing to bend the knee in person, on account of his bad leg-"
“Don’t expect me to bend the knee either, what with these hips,” added Lady Olenna.

“—so he is sending his uncle Garth in his place, and a party of other Reachmen to attend upon Your Grace’s court. Meanwhile his brother Garlan is raising a host to march to Storm’s End, first to defeat the remainder of Lord Randyll Tarly’s host in the field, and then to aid Lord Connington in this rebellion that plagues him in the east.” He rolled the scroll and picked up a quill. “How should I reply, Your Grace?”

“Gratefully,” said the queen. That meant glad tidings, gentle words, but nothing of substance, nothing that could damage their new alliance. House Tyrell had been battered by the War of the Five Kings that had preceded her landing, yet Highgarden still commanded close to seventy thousand swords, and near as many knights as every other part of the realm put together. She had half a mind to request those swords to bolster King’s Landing’s defences, but she did not want to seem too reliant on the aid of her vassal lords, nor foolish by believing in their assured loyalty. *Three treasons you will know.*

The herald was preparing to call the proceedings to a close when the doors opened and in came Grey Worm and Moqorro… and Aurane Waters as well. Dany stared down at the Bastard of Driftmark. “Did you find those red priests?”

“He most certainly did,” replied the voice of the man who followed. Tattoos covered his head like a thousand tiny patches of motley, red and orange and smoky umber, rippling with every twist of his mouth. “I am Benerro, Your Grace,” he said, bowing deeply before the dais. “The First Servant of the Lord of Light at the Temple of Volantis, the Light of Wisdom, the Flametruth.” Others followed in his wake, about twenty of them in all, dressed alike in red, men and women both.

Aurane Waters smirked. “Save your titles, red man. They pale in the face of hers. For this is Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Queen of Meereen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains—”

“—and Mother of Dragons,” Benerro finished. “I have come a long way to find you, Daenerys Targaryen. And you have not disappointed.”

Dany could not help but smile. “Perhaps you are making a hasty presumption, my lord Benerro. We have barely met.”

“They say a child takes after his mother. I saw your child, my queen, as we were crossing Blackwater Bay. The black one, with fire in his eyes. Drogon.”

*How did you know his name?* she might have asked, but Benerro was not done. “A man is truly blessed to see a dragon in his lifetime, Your Grace, but it was you I came for, not him. For you are the blood of the dragon, fire made flesh. I came to see Azor Ahai reborn.”

Chapter End Notes

Hmm... this one wasn't very fun. Luckily, it was the top of the 'hill' that I've been trying to get over for the last couple of weeks, and the last of the setup chapters from part II. I think I channelled ADWD Dany quite a bit here, which isn't necessarily a good thing. It's rare that I write a chapter where absolutely nothing of substance happens, but this one came close. However, we did get some news from Highgarden and Storm's End,
and a few tidbits about the sparrows, so I guess we did alright overall.

Next up: Davos and Sansa, though not necessarily in that order.
BRIENNE

“Tarth, you say?” Lord Karyl Vance was a tall, stately man of about forty years, with a winestain birthmark on his left cheek. His silver-grey plate was edged in niello, as were his gauntlets. His cloak was black and white chequy, with black dragons on the white squares, and two eyes in a golden ring on the black. The same coat of arms was inked upon the great ironwood shield in his squire’s arms. “The home of Lord Selwyn Tarth?”

“Lord Selwyn is my father,” said Brienne.

Lord Vance affirmed. “A good man, and true.”

But Ser Brynden Tully only shrugged. Hard lines marked his hard grey face. “You could say that for most men. Let us not waste any more time. How might we help you, Lady Brienne?”

Brienne gestured to Podrick, who fumbled in his saddlebags for a while before drawing the parchment forth and offered it to the Blackfish. “The seal is unbroken,” she noted.

“I can see that.” He paced back across the tent. In their seats, the lords Vance and Vypren and Ser Patrek Mallister craned their necks to get a better look at the paper, but they could not have read more than one line before Ser Brynden scrunched it up into a ball and tossed it at Pod. “Dishonest words from a Targaryen pretender. Perhaps you have not noticed, but we fly King Stannis’s banners.”

“To be sure,” said an immensely fat knight who wore White Harbor’s coat-of-arms. “But the wench has a point.”

“My name is Brienne,” she told him, “not wench.”

“And I am Ser Wylis Manderly. My apologies, my lady.” To Ser Brynden he said, “Might the rest of us see the missive, at least?”

“You may not,” the Blackfish said curtly. “We are to take Harrenhal for King Stannis, and then we are to regroup with my nephew Edmure and move on to Maidenpool and the rebel lords of the Vale. As I have told you. We will not concern ourselves with Aegon Targaryen. Not until he concerns himself with us.”
Brienne curled her fingers into fists. “My lords, Lady Sansa is at Harrenhal. Your niece’s daughter, Ser Brynden!”

The Blackfish’s face could have been made out of stone. No, his eyes said, no, and nothing more.

Bronze Yohn Royce spoke next. “Your offer is sweet, my lady, but we serve King Stannis now. We cannot bend our knee, lest we be considered traitors.”

Brienne could scarce believe what she was hearing. “Lady Sansa has travelled leagues and leagues and survived countless hardships to get to Harrenhal. And now you would deny her the chance to see her brother, to see her family again, all because you are too proud?”

“Broken oaths are what tore the Riverlands apart at the Red Wedding,” said Ser Patrek Mallister, “and the keeping of new oaths are what brought us back together.”

“Under Stannis Baratheon as the King in the North, Stark and Tully are united again, and in a state of relative peace,” Lord Redfort explained. “Even the lords Bracken and Blackwood are in agreement. We are a free and independent people, the Freys are destroyed, and there is a living Stark who will rule in Winterfell someday. Tell us, my lady, why should we give all that up to serve your southron king?”

“You say that you keep your oaths?” asked Brienne. Her hand went to her swordbelt, and in an instant her steel was drawn. Brynden Blackfish’s hand leapt to his own scabbard, Lord Forrester cursed loudly and Robett Glover jumped back in his seat, swearing. The guardsmen turned, raising their spears at her. “What are you doing, woman?” Lord Royce asked loudly.

Brienne held her gauntlet high in surrender, showing that she meant no harm (though in hindsight, perhaps drawing Oathkeeper in the first place had been ill-advised). “This sword is Valyrian steel,” she said, “forged by the Lannisters from the metal of Lord Eddard Stark’s greatsword.”

“Ice,” said Rickard Ryswell.

“Ice,” Brienne repeated, “it was given to me by Ser Jaime Lannister.”

That brought renewed mumbling to the table. “The Kingslayer spun me some yarn that you were searching for Catelyn’s daughters during the siege of Riverrun,” the Blackfish said at last.

“And now I have found one of Lady Catelyn’s daughters,” Brienne said, anguished. “When Lady Stark released Ser Jaime from his cell, she made him swear to return her daughters to Riverrun, or Winterfell, or a safe place, by way of exchange. Jaime lost his sword hand during the journey, and shortly after we reached King’s Landing, Lady Sansa fled the castle, so Jaime was powerless to help her.”

“Listen to the wench!” exclaimed Lord Redfort, pointing a fat thumb in her direction. “She even calls him ‘Jaime’, not Kingslayer. Perhaps there is more truth to the rumours than we think.”

Brienne had heard the rumours, of how men called her the “Kingslayer’s whore”, and yet a rumour was just that, and easily ignored. “By the time we reached King’s Landing, news of the Red Wedding had reached us. Nonetheless, Ser Jaime passed his quest on to me, to find Lady Catelyn’s daughters and take them somewhere safe – the Wall, mayhaps; they have a bastard brother there, or to their aunt Lysa Arryn, in the Eyrie. He told me to name my sword Oathkeeper, for the oath I meant to keep to the Stark girls’ mother. To return them to someplace safe. To you, my lords. Yet now you refuse to allow me to complete that quest.”

Bronze Yohn regarded her with flinty suspicion. “That is a Lannister sword. A golden lion on the
pommel, and rubies in the hilt. Red and gold. Lannister colours.”

“The wench is a Lannister,” agreed Lord Rodrik Forrester. “She probably shits gold, just like the rest of them.”

“The wench is not a Lannister,” said Brynden Tully, and for a moment Brienne had hope. Only for a moment, though. “But she is on their side, and she certainly does not fight for the same cause as ours.” He turned his questioning gaze to her. “Do you?”

Brienne was struggling to hold back her rage, towards Stannis, towards Ser Brynden, towards all of them. “I would sooner die for a good cause than fight for that evil man,” she said. “You will not stand with Lady Sansa? Fine. I will not stand with you, nor with a man who would murder his own brother with blood magic.”

“As I seem to recall, you slew Renly Baratheon, my lady,” said Bronze Yohn. “It did not seem proper courtesy to mention that, though.”

“A pair of kingslayers,” crowed Lord Redfort.

Brienne gritted her teeth. “I did NOT kill Renly. I would never… he was… he was… kind, clever, good…”

“You killed him,” repeated Lord Royce, sounding half-saddened, “and my son Robar died for it. True, it was Loras Tyrell who did the deed, but he died for Renly’s legacy, and you killed Renly. Forgive my bluntness, but it seems you flit from camp to camp fast as anything. Renly at Bitterbridge, the Young Wolf at Riverrun, the Lannisters in King’s Landing, and now the Targaryens in Harrenhal.”

“The wench might owe her loyalty to Littlefinger,” Lord Vypren suggested, as though Brienne were not even there. “Liars flock together, they say.”

Ser Wylis Manderly raised a hand. “Lady Brienne, I am afraid the matter is rather simple. We are King Stannis’s men; we knelt before him and said our oaths of fealty, to serve his will from White Harbor to Runestone to Riverrun. That is the oath we swore, regardless of what Lady Catelyn asked of you. We cannot give up our loyalty and surrender His Grace’s trust in us to a Targaryen, of all people, even if it means getting Lady Sansa back.”

“Out of courtesy, I will allow you stay the night, to wait out the storm,” said Ser Brynden Tully, “but after that, you must return to Harrenhal.”

Brienne swallowed a breath, and nodded her head stolidly. And to think, once she had respected the man, and she had been impressed by the tales of the Blackfish’s knightly chivalry. This was no chivalry, though. This was treason, to one’s own kin. “If… if I might make one last request, on behalf of Lady Sansa. She will want to know that her brother is well.”

“We cannot allow Lord Rickon to be near this woman,” someone said.

The Blackfish looked at her for a long time. “No,” he said at last, “we cannot. Good evening, Lady Brienne.” He walked back round the table and passed close to her, showing her and Podrick the way out into the night.

Stormclouds hung black and heavy over the camp. The rain was coming down heavy and loud, and very soon the ground would become just like the road from Harrenhal, a quagmire of silty mud so slippery that they had been forced to dismount in places and walk the horses along.
“My lady!” Podrick hurried along beside her, struggling with the heavy weight of his satchel. “My lady, we should head back to the campfire.”

Brienne stopped, balling her hands into fists. For a moment, she was tempted to make Pod the subject of her anger, but this was no fault of his. She gave an empty little nod and headed out towards the campfire. There was nothing else to be done. *Ser Brynden is stubborn as any Tully, just as Jaime warned me.* She’d been to see him in his cell before her departure. Jaime had looked ragged on that night, his fair skin mottled with muck and mire, his threadbare cloak sprawling out on the ground behind him.

“Good luck with that, my lady,” Jaime said, when Brienne told him what quest Aegon had given her. “The Blackfish is not over fond of compromise, and you’ll be hard-pressed to negotiate with him.” He smiled at some joke only he seemed to understand.

“It is his niece’s freedom I am negotiating for. The Tullys are proud, aye, but their words are *family, duty, honor,* in that order. Brynden Blackfish knows where his loyalties lie.”

“You can hope, my lady. I’ve found that House words mean little and less. *Hear me roar.*” He pointed to his stump, newly swathed in greyish-white bandage. “*Hear me roar,* eh. Look at me, then, Brienne, and tell me if I look like a lion.” His tone was full of mocking, but strangely sombre as well.

“Those aren’t your words, though. Not really. I suppose… it’s like you say. *A Lannister always pays his debts.* You promised to return Lady Catelyn’s daughters to her. And no matter how long it took you, that debt is nearly paid.”

“The Blackfish’s host is half a week’s ride away,” he said, “by the time you return to Harrenhal, I may be gone.” *Gone.* She did not have to ask what he meant by that. They both knew. “So I have to ask, now that we’re talking about it: the words of House Tarth. *Your* words. I confess that I never troubled to learn them. It seemed to me, proud as I was… as I still am, truth be told… that some little house from an island in the Stormlands wasn’t big enough to warrant its own words. But I’ll not go wherever I’m going thinking that your words are ‘thappireth’.”

“What…? oh… you were mocking the Goat.”

“Those are some strange House words, my lady.”

“No, I meant-” She felt a blush rising to her cheeks. *Why?* she asked herself, *you don’t love him; he doesn’t love you, he never will, he loves his sister, a woman fair and full-grown, not some gangly maid with a man’s shape and a woman’s weak heart.* “Judge Us By Our Actions,” she blurted, before she made herself look any more of a fool.

“Judge Us By Our Actions,” Jaime repeated. “They suit you, my lady. Most would look at you and see a great ugly wench… but… I’ve known you, and I see… well, you.”

Brienne was wondering what he’d meant as she and Podrick trudged along the muddy track towards the campfire. The winds had risen, blowing a blustery gale across the hillside; raindrops stung her face and trickled down her cheeks. The tents of Ser Brynden’s camp flapped in the wind, rising and falling like a ship’s great sails. Earlier, a stream on the southern camp border had burst its banks, and the soldiers were lugging sodden tents and waterlogged waggons up the hill as they went down. Raindrops fell from the peaks of their hooded cloaks, scattering themselves in the grass like tears. She stopped abruptly to look at Pod. “A campfire?” she asked. “In this rain?”

Her squire looked at his boots, flushing red. “Sorry, my lady.” He looked as tired as she felt, not that Brienne blamed him. It had been a long day’s riding, and to get here and have the Blackfish refuse
them… well, that had been the ultimate indignity. Brienne was ready to forego finding the Brotherhood, willing to head straight to bed, but then she spotted Anguy out of the corner of the eye, sitting in a cluster of men beneath the pale canopy of a feast tent.

They had the good fortune to find a quiet table, though the tent was hardly busy anyway at this hour. Lamb stew was cooking in kettles on the stove. Podrick hollowed out two trenchers of black bread and filled them until they were brimming, while Brienne fetched two mugs of hot spiced wine. They ate in satisfied silence, listening as the raindrops beat a song above their heads. “It reminds me of when I was with Ser Cedric,” Pod said as they ate. “Only you’re much better than Ser Cedric. My lady. Kinder, I suppose. And better with a sword too.”

Brienne acknowledged the clumsy compliment. “There have been worse squires,” she said. “Far worse squires.”

Hob-nailed boots squelched through the muddy grass, and Brienne looked up into the eyes of Gendry. Renly’s eyes, she thought for the hundredth time. And the memory returned to her of a young lord’s words at a harvest ball, as they did so often. He’d been sixteen when it happened, scarce older than Brienne herself, but still broad and handsome and smiling, as always. In her dreams, Renly was always smiling. My king. She had not forgotten her pledge to Catelyn Stark, but she had certainly not forgotten the promise she’d made to herself. I will avenge Renly Baratheon if it is the last thing I do.

She must have been staring at Gendry for too long, for he looked up with a slightly confused look in his eyes. “My lady?”

Brienne blanched a little. “I am… sorry. You… you remind me of someone I once knew.”

“Was it my father, my lady? He… he-”

King Robert. “No,” she replied, “it wasn’t. It was King Renly. His… the brother. You look alike, both of you.”

There was no malice in Gendry’s gaze, as there had been none in Renly’s. “The common folk liked him,” the young knight said thoughtfully. “When he came riding through the streets to go to the tourney grounds or down to the harbour, the men would chant ‘Baratheon, Baratheon, Baratheon!’ and the maids would throw flowers at his horse. Master Mott made his armour too; lobstered steel with a greenish tint, with enamelled roses on the greaves and gauntlets. And a helm topped with golden antlers.”

I remember. That was the same suit he died in. King Renly’s blood had trickled out over that sheet of fine emerald plate, dressing his throat with glossy redness as the shadow that had slain him slunk away into the night. “Cold,” he said, and then he died.

“He was a good man. He would have made a better king.”

“Perhaps he would have,” Gendry said. “But most folk would never have known the difference. Back in King’s Landing the only change we ever knew was harvest time, ‘cos you could buy food from places other than the pot shops instead of stealing it. And war. That was bad, probably, but I wasn’t in the city when the fighting started.” At Brienne’s urging he continued, “I went north on the Kingsroad, with Yoren and the Night’s Watch.”

“And Lady Arya?”

He stopped, swallowed his words. “She didn’t like to be called a lady.”
“Do you know where she is?”

Gendry’s eyes grew angry. “If I did, don’t you think I’d tell you? She ran away. She was always running away. I think she went with the Hound, but she never told me. That’s just was how she was.” His voice brimmed with bitterness. “I should have gone with her. I wouldn’t have, not back then, I’d have tried to get her to come back… but I should have followed her, tried to find her. Arya… Arya… she was the closest thing to family that I had.” He rose abruptly from the table, his trencher still mostly full, and left her there.

The night passed by slowly after that. Brienne drained her cup of wine and looked to refill it. It was dishonourable to be drunk, but she was tempted to make an exception for tonight. All this running, all this fighting, all this searching the hedgerows and towns of the Seven Kingdoms to fulfil one oath, and being denied at the last hurdle. That was hardly fair, she thought… then again, things seldom were.

“Come on, Podrick,” she said gloomily, rising from the bench and slamming her tankard down. “To bed. We have a long day, come the morrow.”

They trudged back through the campfires to where they had raised their tent. Pod had laid down sheepskin blankets to keep off the chill, but Brienne’s mood did not leave her wanting for comfort. In the grass beneath a tall elm tree she found a mottled grey-and-black stone, jagged at the edges, and set it down beside her in the mud. The raindrops came down through the forked branches and ran down under her gorget and her arming doublet. Runnels splattered her blue plate and plastered her hair to her forehead, limp and damp. Brienne took out Oathkeeper and scraped her makeshift whetstone along its length, over and over and over, as the rain doused the fires and her spirits. You failed, she thought, you great pale cow of a wench. You always dreamed of a knightly quest and chivalrous deeds and great honours, and you came so far, but you failed, you fell, you lost, and you will never be a knight, just an ugly, stupid little girl with ugly, stupid dreams who never learns. The world is not yours; it is theirs, the others, the liars, the braggarts, the thieves, it will never be anyone else’s. There’s no justice in this world, not truly.

She must have fallen asleep beneath the elm. That night she dreamed that she was swimming off the coast of Tarth, as a storm picked up in the north. The wind battered against the sails of her father’s boats, smashing into them like a titan’s fingers. Brienne tried to swim, to move away, but the weight of her plate armour was dragging her down, as though someone were pulling on her ankle, and the next she knew the waters had closed over her head and she was sinking like a stone.

Then gauntletted fingers clawed at the surface and fixed around her arm, and gave a sharp, swift pull.

She came out of the darkness retching, and glanced around to find the face of her saviour, blinking the water from her eyes. He wore green armour polished as brightly as a sun, with the arms of Tarth embossed on his breastplate, and Renly Baratheon’s antlered helm. A cloak of snow streamed from his shoulders, flapping idly in the now-quiet breeze. But when he drew back the visor, it was Jaime Lannister’s face that smiled back at her. “Careful, my lady,” he said, grinning, “you almost drowned there.”

She dreamed another dream then, but come morning Jaime’s words were all she remembered. Birds fluttered above her in the canopy, robins and wrens chirping a dawn chorus to herald her waking. The grass around her was soaked through, and the mud had turned sticky and black and thick beyond that, but someone – Podrick, most like – had covered her with a blanket during the night to keep the rain off.

Brienne walked back to their tent half in a dream. Pod sat cooking liver sausages on a wooden skewer over the fire, his brow creased in concentration. “My lady,” he said, standing up when he
saw her. The sausage dropped from his skewer into the hot coals, where it spat and curled and
blackened. “Oh. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes.” In a manner of speaking. “I seem to have interrupted your breakfast.”

“Well, it’s your breakfast as well. And there’s boiled eggs, not just sausages. If I can work out how
to boil them.”

“Have you tried getting some water?”

“Oh. No. My lady.” He half-stood, then sat back down. “My lady?”

She turned, and her eyes met those of Ser Brynden Tully. He wore a dark blue cloak clasped by an
enamelled black fish, and the same suit of scaled black mail he’d donned for their meeting yesterday.
The craggy knight looked as alert as ever, despite the hour. Brienne suspected that he had been up all
night for whatever reason. She watched him all the while as he drew closer.

“My lady.” He inclined his head respectfully. “Might I have a moment with you?”

Brienne replied with a stiff, wordless nod, out of the fleeting respect she’d once had for Brynden
Tully and nothing else. “Pod,” she said, “go find the horses once you’ve broken your fast. We have a
long hard ride back to Harrenhal to report our failure to Lady Sansa.” She said the words loud
enough for the Blackfish to hear them, wondering if the old knight felt any shame on his part.

“To my tent,” said Ser Brynden once they were alone, “quickly now.”

A low mist was settling over the encampment. The way was long and muddy and quiet; the horns
that served to wake the common soldiers had not yet sounded. They passed only half a dozen others,
men-at-arms and knights alike; the Blackfish greeted them all with a cordial nod. Their eyes lingered
a little longer on Brienne as though to say; what in seven Hells is she?

“You must forgive my earlier brusqueness,” Ser Brynden said as they passed a row of Tully men-at-
arms. “There were far too many ears listening for my taste, Lady Brienne. Far too many.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that we have not been entirely truthful with you. None of us have.”

‘Us’ turned out to include half a dozen of the Northern lords who had sat at Ser Brynden’s war table
the day before. Lord Rodrik Forrester was there, and fat Ser Wylis Manderly, busy demolishing a
plate of fried bacon and fried bread. Next to him was Ser Patrek Mallister, and next to him Robett
Glover, of Deepwood Motte, and lastly the Riverlords Vypren and Vance. Half of them made their
excuses to Brienne’s face, while the others apologised to her feet. When that was done, Ser Brynden
bid her take a seat. “I would sooner stand,” Brienne said brusquely. The company made her uneasy
as it stood; she was not about to bow to their wishes.

“We shall be frank with you, my lady,” said Ser Wylis, “as we were not yesterday. Alas, as Ser
Brynden has surely told you, there were too many listeners in that room for us to share our true intent
with you. We can never quite trust a Ryswell, though I don’t doubt that they’ll stand with us when
the time comes. And the lords Royce and Redfort are fast supporters of Stannis Baratheon.”

Brienne raised an eyebrow. “And you are not, my lords?”

“Well.” Lord Vance looked uncomfortable. “In short, no. We proclaimed Stannis king out of
convenience, but none of us hold any love for him in our hearts.”
“He is not an easy man to love,” Ser Wylis quipped.

Brienne touched Oathkeeper’s hilt with her fingers. “If you do not support Stannis… then…” She took a breath. “…what about Lady Sansa?”

“Lady Sansa is my grandniece, the blood of my beloved Cat, and a daughter of Riverrun,” said Ser Brynden. “Family, duty, honor. I could not turn her away, no matter the circumstances. Not truly.”

A wave of relief came over her, though her tone stayed wary. “So you will hear my terms?”

“Aye. We are riding to Harrenhal whatever the case. I will dismiss the Vale lords to aid my nephew Edmure in his taking of Harroway’s Town and Crackclaw Point. Meanwhile, we shall march on Harrenhal and put up siege lines, while you and I treat with Aegon Targaryen under the guise of a parley. Oh, there will be terms to settle and agreements to sign, but with luck, we will be returning north to Riverrun with Sansa before news of this reaches Stannis Baratheon.”

Brienne could only nod her head dumbly. “And… my lords, why are you doing this?”

Ser Wylis answered, “Long ago, the Manderlys made a solemn promise to the Starks of Winterfell. In return for shelter and safety in the Northern lands and the permission to keep the Seven southron gods, we swore fealty and absolute loyalty to them, and that we would always endeavour to protect and uphold the Stark of Winterfell. A promise was made; those are the Manderly words. Yet that same solemn vow is not unique to us. The vow that we Northerners made to the Kings in the North is more than words on paper, it is blood and water and all things in between. We are their loyal bannermen. Always. The north remembers, Lady Brienne. It remembers the Red Wedding, aye, but it remembers our ancient history as well, and it remembers its promises most of all.”

“Robb Stark gave us a cause to rally behind, and many of us would fight that cause till our dying breath,” said Rodrik Forrester. “As we speak, Lord Umber and Lady Mormont are at Castle Black, to seek out Bran Stark and Jon Snow and present them with King Robb’s will. The wolves have come again. And whether it be Brandon or Rickon or even Lady Sansa that we stand behind, the North stands with them.”

“And the Riverlands,” said Brynden Tully. “Stannis Baratheon has brought nothing to us but more war and hardship. He may take Lannisport someday, but how many lives will be lost in doing so? How many lives wasted, and for a cause we do not even care for? We Rivermen want nothing more than to put away their swords and return to their homes, including the Brackens and the Blackwoods and all those warring in the West even now. ‘Tis a cruel fate for the man we called king, and it may besmirch on our honour… but precious few of us are happy to spread the song of the Red God’s choir, truth be told.”

“Aye,” agreed Galbart Glover, “someone ought to burn that red priestess of his.”

“Lord Rickon,” Brienne said suddenly, remembering, “might I be allowed to see him? Lady Sansa was most anxious for her brother’s wellbeing.”

“Naturally,” said Ser Brynden. He nodded to a guard, “bring him in.”

The men came first, and the boy followed close behind. Young Lord Rickon had his mother’s auburn colouring, and the blue eyes of the Tullys of Riverrun, but there was a haunting look in his gaze. He had seen more than any boy of eleven ought, Brienne knew, and he had suffered for it. The softness of childhood had gone from his face; his cheeks were sharp and defined, his jaw near as hard as iron. This is what war does to people, she thought. And there were more obvious signs, too: over his arming jacket of boiled leather Rickon wore a battered steel breastplate, and pauldrons and
greaves and vambraces made for his size. A bowl-shaped helm was tucked under his arm.

“My lord.” Brienne ducked her head. “I come with word-”

“I’m not a lord,” he interrupted her, “Bran’s lord of Winterfell, not me, I told them all, and now I’m telling you-” He caught the Blackfish’s warning glance and gave her a shy smile. “Is Sansa with you? I heard you talking.”

“No,” Brienne felt more ungainly and awkward than ever around this not-quite-child. “No, she’s not. She’s at Riverrun, with… with people who will keep her safe.”

Rickon frowned, screwing up his face. “They always say that. Theon said we’d be safe, but then he killed everyone and burned Winterfell. King Stannis said we’d be safe, but then he wanted to send us all to war, that’s what they said. Are you going to rescue Sansa?”

Brienne’s lips were dry as dust. “Yes,” she muttered, “yes, I suppose I will. And you’ll help. Once we get there. To Harrenhal.” She felt as tongue-tied as Podrick Payne.

“You’re a knight,” said Rickon, “but you’re a lady too. Like Arya.”

“Your sister…”

The boy spoke insistently. “I saw her.”

The Blackfish frowned. “Our dreams seldom have truth in them.”

“This one did,” the boy insisted, “the wolf dreams never lie. She was in a strange city, and all the faces were looking down on her.”

*The faces?* Brienne did not ask what he meant, lest she sound even stupider than she must look. Her hand went to Oathkeeper in its scabbard, for no particular reason at all… but there was reason to it, she quickly realised. “This was forged from your father’s sword,” she said, unhooking her swordbelt. “It… it belongs to you now, as a Stark of Winterfell.” She laid sword and sheath both down on the table. Candlelight flickered along the rubies set in the hilt.

Rickon squinted down, laying his eyes upon the steel. “There’s a lion on the hilt,” he said disapprovingly, “the Stark sigil is a wolf.”

“A sword can be reforged, and decorated again,” Ser Brynden said. “But this is a blade fit for a knight, I must say.” He looked at the sword with something that might have been longing, then turned his gaze away. “And you are only a boy, nephew. Until such time as you are old enough to wield this sword properly, it should stay with Lady Brienne.”

Whatever she might have said in reply went forgotten when she heard the tent flap parting and a messenger pushed his way through the press, flustered with exertion. “Ser, my lord,” he directed at Ser Brynden Tully.

“What is it?” asked the Blackfish.

“Ser Ryam’s back, my lord,” the messenger replied, “they came upon the Lannister party south o’ Pinkmaiden, ser, they have them. And the princess too.”

Tully let his breath out in a long, low hiss. A long moment passed before Brienne understood what the message meant. *The princess,* she realised; unbidden, her thoughts went to Jaime, along in his cell on the fringes of King Aegon’s camp. *Oh, that princess.*
“Beg pardon, my lady,” Ser Brynden said to her. “It seems I have something to attend to. You might do well to talk with Rickon; the boy is doubtless full of questions.” He went, and the Riverlords followed in turn.

Brienne heard Rickon’s voice beside her. “Father’s sword,” he said quietly, “it was a greatsword, not just a longsword. Twice as big as that one.” He pointed to Oathkeeper. “What happened to the rest of it?”

“There must be two swords,” Brienne replied.

“Yes, but where’s the other?”

She had seen that other sword presented to King Joffrey on the morning of his wedding. “It must be with the Lannisters over in Casterly Rock. King Tommen has it, I’d wager.”

Rickon pouted. “That’s my father’s sword, not his. I used to like him, but not anymore… the Lannisters killed my father, so I should kill them. All of them. Shaggy will tear out their throats, you’ll see. They’ll see.” He looked away from her, pouting.

As Brienne hooked the blade back through her swordbelt, a pang of sadness went through her. She remembered the sad, strong woman who had been so certain that her sons had departed the world before her, had been so certain that she had failed them; then she remembered what Catelyn Tully had become. I hope she has found peace by now, or else the Mother’s mercy. And then, I hope she knew, though, if she’s gone. I hope she knew that all was not lost.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back.

Long story short: My hiatus didn't go quite as well as planned, and I didn't get that much done on the story, but if I hadn't taken it I'd be spewing out incomplete trash.

So how much have I actually done?
I'm sorry to say that this is the only chapter I've completed entirely and re-edited. THE SUNSET KINGDOMS is currently in a middling section where lots of the chapters are merely setup for the second part of the story, and as such many of these chapters are incredibly dull to write (in places). I've got a Jon chapter about 50% done, a Dany chapter (40%), Davos (60%), Cersei (15%), Sansa (25%), a half-planned Mya Stone POV chapter that I'll probably work into a different POV perspective, and more...

However, I have done quite a bit of writing up at the far end of the story, and I now know roughly how this is going to pan out. THE SUNSET KINGDOMS will be 108 chapters (give or take a couple), so we're approaching the halfway mark, and then I'll need another sequel (tentative title: KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE) to wrap everything up - probably a fair bit shorter than TSK.

TSK is a horrible, ungainly beast, that has mutated out of the shape I'd intended to take into something very similar in places and massively different in others. A lot of the time, that's actually a good thing.

I won't be writing at anything near the rate I was during July/August, but I'll try to get 6
or 7 chapters out by the end of October, and then get back up to my normal writing pace in November. With a little luck and a boost over Christmas/New Year, TSK will be complete by February/March 2017, and everything uploaded shortly thereafter.

I would like to talk about this chapter specifically, but really all I want is to click the POST button and get things running again.

Thank you all so very much for reading.
The parchment was wrinkled and dry. *My son is dead.* Davos Seaworth read the words for the thousandth time. *Devan is dead.*

He traced the deep pen-marks of King Stannis’s words. *He died nobly.* Was that supposed to be a comfort? He placed the corner of the yellow paper into the flame. *Died defending his king.* The paper scorched and curled. Ringlets of smoke rose into the air. *Devan is dead.* The words caught fire and melted away, lost forever. *My son is dead.* The paper turned mothy, disintegrating in his hands. Ash fell into a pile on his desk. *I had seven sons, and now I have two.*

Marya had sent the boys to bed early, but Davos knew she herself would not sleep not until he joined her. *We have loved together, lived together, lost together. How many times? How many? My son is dead.* He was suddenly aware of the missing pouch of fingerbones around his neck. *I lost whatever luck I had on the Blackwater,* he thought. Shireen had read him stories of how the Storm God had raised a tempest of wind and howling rain to batter the walls of Storm’s End seven times over, and six times had succeeded in knocking those castles to the ground. *How many of my sons must the Stranger take from me?*

He did not want to know the answer.

Moonlight danced across the window-pane. Raindrops glowed on the glass. Davos looked disdainfully at his wine-cup. The flagon had run dry long ago, but he dared not refill it, fearing he might be lost to drunken sorrow if he did.

He heard the creak of a familiar lock and the sound of familiar footsteps, soft against stone. He had expected Melisandre to visit sooner or later. Curiously he felt no anger at her arrival, only the dark pit of emptiness growing and groaning within him, threatening to swallow him entirely.

“Ser Davos.”

“My lady.”
“I was sorry to hear the news of your son. A noble boy, and loyal to his king.”

*For all the good it did him. Your words will not help him.*

A pause. “You should go to your wife,” Melisandre said.

“That is none of your concern.”

“It is yours, though. And your concern is mine.” Her voice grew louder with every footstep. “I do not hate you, ser Onion Knight, as I have told you. You are but one man trying to do your duty, just like the rest of us in this cold dark world.”

Davos met her gaze, frosty-eyed. “You knew, didn’t you?” She knew what would happen on the Blackwater, and what would happen at the Wall and at Winterfell. How could she not know Devan’s fate? “You knew what would happen to him.”

Melisandre’s did not answer; instead she went to the window. Three tall candles sat upon the sill, unlit as yet. She stepped in front of them, and when she moved away, three flames were burning, whispering and hissing in the secret language of fire. “The Lord of Light permits me only glimpses, Ser Davos,” she said, “I knew men would die at King Stannis’s command, but I did not know who or when or how. I am truly sorry.”

Davos knew she was not lying, but he wished she was. *Then there would be someone to blame for Devan’s death… someone other than me. If I had forbidden him to go…*

*It would have done no good. He was stubborn as I am. And who else will die?”* he said quietly. “How many others will suffer the same losses because of something your god saw in the flames?”

Melisandre pondered that. “I saw the Great Choice that must be made, nothing more.”

*She means Shireen. “I will not speak of that.”*

“You must. Else Stannis will lose for certain, and then how many others will suffer the same losses as you? And all because you were too stubborn to heed my advice.” Her eyes burned red as stars.

Davos ground his teeth. “What do you want?”

“Only one thing, Ser Davos. The triumph of light against darkness. Fire against ice. The new against the old. It is only R’hllor’s testament which I relate to you.” The red woman dragged a chair over to him and sat. “Let me tell you a story, ser. No doubt a seafaring man such as yourself has heard no shortage of those.

“I never knew the mother who brought me into his world, nor the father from whose seed I was born. Nor do I know exactly where I was brought into this world, but it was east of here, a place far enough east that slaves were not uncommon. My earliest memories are of the slave market in Volantis. Buyers haggling for a girl in blue rags. A woman’s voice, and her words. Melony. Lot Seven. Me. In that market there were old crones who wanted me for their spinning wheels, and fat old men who wanted me for their brothels, and many more. A lowborn girl is unlikely to find any sort of respectful trade… unless something is smiling on her.

“I had never believed in a god until that day, after all the hardships I had seen and felt, but a young red priest came running down the steps from the temple in such a hurry that he left his sandals behind in the bazaar. They simply fell from his feet as he ran, clattering off the cobblestones. I remember that better than anything, but not that which came after, for a child’s memory is oft a haze, and it has been many years since I was a child.
“The red priests do not take slaves,” Melisandre continued. “They take servants, and servants are free
to go as they please. They burned away my slave tattoos and my brands, and even then the High
Priest would come to me each year and ask me if I would like to continue my study, or if I would
sooner spend my years elsewhere, in a place where I would live comfortably and without fear of
being enslaved. But I stayed on, out of fear, then out of habit... then out of curiosity, and finally out
of devotion.

“Things started to change. One year, the High Priest sent me to Asshai, and it was there that I
completed my study, learning the arts of the shadowbinders. And for many years I remained there,
teaching those who came after me the words and the ways of the Lord. Until at last the summons
came from Volantis again.

“By then the old priest was long gone, and a man named Benerro had been raised in his place, but
the priest had left a letter for my eyes alone. There was a reason his acolyte had come running down
into the market that day, so long ago. Because they had seen it in the flames.”

When she looked up again, there was a strange, clouded look in her eyes. Davos said, “Surely that is
not so odd for your order?”

“Oh, but it is. Most of the red priests can spot potential in a young student, but such a thing is not
done at the Lord’s express command. And yet there I was. The red priests surmised I had a particular
task to accomplish. They predicted I would find Azor Ahai someday, and that I would bring Light to
the West. And so they sent me forth...”

“...to Dragonstone, and to Stannis,” Davos finished.

“No,” she replied. “And yes. The star I followed led me north and west, till Dragonstone rose before
me. I saw the glow of sunrise flickering through those stone formations of dragons, tall against the
red sun. I could not have chanced upon a surer sign. And then I found a man who had lost his faith
in every god in this world. With my help, he was able to find truth in the only one that matters.” She
twisted her robe around herself and rose, scraping the chair back. “If you will permit me—”

“This means nothing to me, my lady,” Davos said.

Melisandre turned back to him, her old half-smile returning. “Oh, it does. It means something to us
all. I have seen what waits for us if Stannis does not win his battle, Ser Davos. The old cold gods are
rising, and dark wings bring dark words from the North. Can you feel Them coming?”

He frowned. “Who?”

“The Great Other. He Who Brings The Cold. A monster with a thousand eyes and one, swimming
through an icy sea. An ancient evil whose name must never be spoken, an evil who will rise again
with cold blue hands and cold blue eyes. An evil last faced by forgotten kings, who whisper
forgotten secrets in their forgotten tombs beneath the earth. The Seven Kingdoms will not stop him,
not as they are. They must stand united, and only Stannis Baratheon can unite them. Only he can
bring these men together. I have seen it in the flames.”

*I have seen it in the flames.* That same old line again. All of Davos’s curiosity vanished in an instant.
*No madman truly believes he is mad.*

“But you must help him along the way, ser,” Melisandre said. Her eyes told him what her words did
not.

“I am sworn to protect the princess,” he said.
“And the girl is with her mother as we speak. Do you think Selyse will hesitate to serve the Lord when the time comes?”

*She would never do such a thing,* Davos Seaworth thought at first, but then he remembered that it was Queen Selyse who had brought up the matter of the sacrifice in the first place. “If she tries, I will stop her,” he said.

“Will you?” Melisandre raised an eyebrow. “You and what army? The queen has two hundred knights and thrice as many common armsmen standing behind her. Them, and the Lord of Light. What is the life of one greyscaled girl against a kingdom?”

“You will not hurt her,” Davos warned.

Melisandre swept past him. “I must do what needs to be done. As I always have.” Her eyes burned into his, brilliant red into muddy brown, fire and mud. “For if the Great Other should march south, all in the way will fall. You, your wife, your remaining sons, your king, everyone around him—”

“How do you think Stannis would react if he heard that you burned his daughter?”

“A king must do his duty. As I must do mine. He will understand.”

*No. I will not believe that.* “He will burn you.”

Melisandre went to the door. “Perhaps he will. But what must be done will have been done. Stannis will take Casterly Rock, and from there he will take the rest of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“And if he fails?”

Her gaze darkened. “Then we fall.”

“You will not hurt her. I will not have innocent blood on my hands.”

“You will,” Melisandre promised. “Oh, you will.” The door closed behind her. On the sill, the candles flickered, and died. Davos stared at their extinguished wicks long after the red woman’s footsteps had faded away.

Tiredness bore down on him quickly after that. Whatever tasks Davos had consigned himself to earlier faded to the back of his mind.

Of the three main keeps of Riverrun, the Tumblestone Keep was the tallest, a stout tower of washed red stone with ramparts on its north side that looked out across the river to the Whispering Wood on the far bank. By day it bustled with grooms and guards and servants, yet at this time of the night Davos only came across a couple of Tully men with blue plumes in their fish-helms. The vast majority of the Tully force had gone south to Harrenhal with Ser Brynden, or across the Trident at Harroway with Lord Edmure. The Blackfish’s most recent letter to Riverrun mentioned how he had sent Bronze Yohn Royce onwards to join his nephew, while conserving the better part of the army to besiege Harren’s castle. And there was word that Aegon Targaryen had marched ten thousand men along the shores of the Gods’ Eye, heading for the same destination. *And if it should come to battle…*

*... Then may the gods grant us all strength.*

Davos and Marya’s rooms were on the second-highest level of the tower, the boys’ a turn of the stair below that. From behind the door came the faint rustling noise of his sons pretending to be asleep. A pool of moonlight spilled towards the open doorway as he advanced inside.
The boys had pushed their beds together. Stannis sprawled across the middle, one arm splayed across Steffon’s chest as his younger brother nestled in the crook of his shoulder, gently snoring. His brown eyes blinked open a little; Davos the red circles under them. His face was very pale. “Father,” he rasped quietly, little more than a whisper. “I know I should be asleep.”

Davos settled down on his son’s bed and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You should. But I don’t expect it of you.”

“Father.” The boy’s voice cracked with pain. “Is... is Devan with Matthos and Maric now? And Dale and Allard? In the seven Heavens?”

“Yes. He is.”

“Lady Melisandre said there are no seven Heavens-”

Well, I’ll gladly curse her to seven Hells, I know that.

“Lady Melisandre is wrong. Your brothers are up there.” He brought his fingers to his temples. “Gods forbid, I will not live to see you join them.”

Stannis shivered against Davos’s hand. “How long will it be before the fighting is done?”

“Soon. I pray.” There was nothing else to be said.

“I prayed too,” Stannis told him. “Mother told me to pray to the Father to judge Devan justly. And to the Mother for mercy. She didn’t say why.”

Davos did not reply. He pressed his lips to Stannis’s brow and lingered there. “Good night,” he murmured eventually. For a moment tears threatened in his own eyes.

Upstairs, he found Marya sitting alone beside the window. The Red Fork ran black and slow beneath the castle wall.

“My lady,” he whispered.

“Marya,” she replied, “my name is Marya, Davos. We’re… it was never meant to be like this.” Her shoulders hunched and shivered, from cold or grief.

He went to the bed, brought back a grey quilt, and draped it over her stiff shoulders. “I am so sorry.”

She turned to him. “How many times?” Her voice was between grief and anger. “We were never meant to be the Onion Knight and his lady, sworn to Stannis Baratheon. Only Davos and Marya, of Flea Bottom. You…” She swallowed. “You always said that our boys would be better off, that they’d learn to read and write and to be knights someday, but they’re all in their graves now.” She held up a finger. “Dale.” Another finger. “Allard.” And three more. “Matthos. Maric. Devan.”

“I know.” He could say nothing else.

“No, you don’t. All this time… all this time you’ve spent, fighting for Stannis, for that man… what about our sons, Davos? What about us?” Marya was a strong woman, she always had been, but she could not bear this. So he sat there and held her as she wept into his arms, as his doubts echoed around his head, lonely and unconquerable. Is this the price I must pay for the things I’ve done? Is this the price the Red God and the Stranger have taken from me in my servitude? Is this the price the flames warned Stannis of, the vision in the fire which I ignored? My penitence for going against the Lord of Light?

My reward for choosing darkness. What is the life of one greyscaled girl against a kingdom?
Morning brought new colours to the castle. Snowflakes fluttered down like pale-winged moths across the Red Fork. Sentries stood silent on the walls in shiny blue-grey plate. In the eastern courtyard the red woman’s choir gathered around a tall pile of smoke-stained kindling. Davos could make out Queen Selyse among them, wrapped in a fox fur. Above, King Stannis’s flaming stag pennants twisted and curled up against the high stone walls, hiding themselves. Beads of ice slid down the walls like pale goblets of sap.

Davos dressed himself by lantern-light, a plain leather jerkin, brown breeches, a cloak of thick dark wool. I look more a smuggler than a lord, he thought, watching Marya sleep. Davos of Flea Bottom, Davos Shorthand, not Davos Seaworth.

On the way down he passed Ser Malegorn of Redpool and Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain, both watching Melisandre’s sermon in the yard below. “Watch your step, onion lord,” warned Ser Patrek, “some fool boy damned near broke his neck last night running this way.”

The night was dark, Davos thought, and full of terrors. He had not slept well last night. His dreams were full of the battle of Blackwater Bay, of the whooshing sound as the Imp’s wildfire went up and green flames burst across his vision, licking at the night sky, of Matthos’s panicked gasp as he was thrown overboard, of Black Betha blown apart in an eruption of bright green fog. And lastly he dreamed of golden stags burning, with crowns melting into their antlers. If I told the red woman, what might she say? The music of her voice drifted up to him from below, the song of Volantis or Qarth or distant Asshai. She is as far from her homeland as I am from mine. Yet she has her gods, whereas I have... what do I have?

In the main yard, Lord Tully’s new guardsmen practised with blunted swords, under the eye of Ser Desmond Grell, master-at-arms. Ser Desmond was outnumbered in the castle now, with Selyse matching seven hundred swords to his five hundred, something which he was most displeased by, yet powerless to negotiate with. So long as Stannis is his king, he must play by those terms.

So long as Stannis is his king...

Utherydes Wayn called out as he was passing through. “Ser Davos! Ser Davos!” The old man’s face was oddly solemn as he approached. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Davos bowed his head. “Thank you.”

“I lost a son myself once,” the old man said. “Willem. He was nineteen when he rode out to the Greyjoy Rebellion, with a young wife waiting for him back home and a babe on the way. But when his wife learned of the news, she lost the child in her grief, and that was that.” He clapped Davos’s shoulder. “Be thankful for what you still have, ser, not only for what you’ve had. If you need my counsel-”

“No.” Davos did not want to continue this conversation. “How fares Lady Roslin?”

“Well, I think. It was a long birth, but your wife’s help was invaluable, ser, or so my lady says. Both she and young Hoster are healthy. Lord Edmure will be most pleased when he hears, I am certain. A pity that he will not be here for the naming feast.”

It must be that night, Davos thought, it must be. All the lords of the Riverlands in attendance, and Selyse and Melisandre will be occupied. He bid Utherydes Wayn farewell and continued on his way.

He found Shireen in the godswood, nestling beneath the heart tree with a book. When Davos came crunching over the bracken and wet leaves, she glanced up, eyes wide like a deer’s. “Ser Davos,” she said, “I thought you might be Mother. She says it is unnerving to be so close to the false gods.”
“Your mother is often wrong, child.”

Shireen nodded. “It’s quiet here. No one ever comes this way. I liked it when Rickon wanted to play here, but… I prefer the silence, I think. It’s just me. Patches is with Mother.”

Davos listened to the slow trickling of raindrops, down from the bough of leaves above, to the sounds of grass and green winds rustling back and forth. The world was quite still. Restive. At peace.

“I’m sorry about Devan,” Shireen said.

Her words meant more to him than the condolences of everyone else combined. “It wasn’t your fault, child.” He swallowed a breath. “Your father says he fought honourably.”

She picked at the sleeve of her gown. “I’d rather he fought dishonourably. Perhaps then he might still be alive. If there was no fighting at all, then he’d definitely still be alive.”

_You may be wiser than half the lords of Westeros. And kinder. And better._ “I know, child. But this is a war your father must fight.” For good or ill. “A war he must win.”

“Father… he always tells me… he always says that he must fight, that he must do his duty, but war that is not his only duty.” She chewed her lip. “What about his duties to me?”

“I wish I knew. Your father loves you, child, even if he does not always show it. He would do anything for you, as any father would do for his child.”

_As I could not for Devan._

Beneath the heart tree Shireen hugged him and he held her there, as he wanted to hold his sons and his wife. _I am grown old, he knew, not old before my time, but old in the face of the Stranger. He took five strong sons, but he left me._

Perhaps there was a reason behind that. Perhaps he did have a destiny, after all, as Melisandre might have said. But the only thing he knew how to do was the right thing.

In the small rectangular solar in the undercroft of Riverrun’s Great Hall, Ty Frey brought him butter biscuits and fried bacon, a flagon of frothy brown ale, and a letter from the king. Stannis’s letter about Devan’s death had been just like this, an unassuming scrap of paper that gave no suggestion of the horrors within. _What if this is word of Stannis’s defeat, or speaks of the deaths of thousands?_ Melisandre’s words haunted him: _He must make a choice, one that will win the throne or doom the realm._ And then her words drifted to Shireen. _Would Stannis give up his daughter to save the realm? Great or small, we must do our duty,_” he said. _What is the life of one greyscaled girl against a kingdom?_

Davos cracked the seal and read. The script was a maester’s diction, the words Stannis’s own.

_Ser Davos,_

_There is trouble on the road to Casterly Rock. The Lannisters have burned their own fields and farms in their retreat; that will win them no love with their smallfolk, but they had little enough to lose. Rain and storm shadows our every move, and the dark clouds are not going away, the maesters say._

_Kevan Lannister has brought up an army to save those in rout, but it will not save him. I have sent word requesting a parley, in the hope that it might be enough to sway some the Westermen to my_
side, as I have with the Sarsfields and the Yarwycks and the Leffords. Soon I will be sending Lady Lefford back to Riverrun, by way of the Golden Tooth, to swear her fealty.

Underneath the king himself had signed thusly:

*Done in the Light of the Lord,*

*Stannis, of the House Baratheon, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.*

Tywin Frey moved to pour him more ale. “Another, my lord?” The boy had a pleasing manner, in spite of his reviled name.

“Another?” Davos asked.

“From Lord Mallister at Seagard and Lady Blackwood in Raventree Hall.” The latter might concern Jeyne Westerling herself, more than he was willing to deal with before breakfast had properly ended. *Too troubling,* Davos thought. “I will have the Seagard letter, please.”

Seagard’s lord had written this letter himself; the words matched the signature. But where Stannis’s maester’s script was clean and easy on the eyes, Lord Mallister had written in a spikier, tighter scrawl:

*To Ser Davos Seaworth, or whomever it may concern,*

*Five-and-twenty ships readied to sail, nine of them being large galleys. No word from our scouts towards the Iron Islands; the shores of Pyke are grey and dead, they say, as though only ghosts lurk there. The Lannisters are building warships in their harbour at Lannisport, though, sixteen of them, or thereabouts, and many more smaller galleons, chebecks, frigates and cogs. There is renewed trade through Oldtown in the wake of repairs on the main port, and from Volantis and Slaver’s Bay in the east, though the blockade around Lannisport has tempered that which we receive.*

*We have received more news from the North, by way of Wyman Manderly at Winterfell and Maege Mormont on the Wall. Reportedly, Brandon Stark means to make his way south to take up his father’s seat, with Greatjon Umber to accompany him as far south as Last Hearth and some others beyond that. Meanwhile, Barbrey Dustin is back in Barrowton, with Jeyne Poole, who was wed to the Bastard of Bolton. The girl has given birth to a boy named Rickard, after the father of Lady Dustin or the father of Eddard Stark, depending on whom you ask. This does not bode well for those who hate the Boltons, but Manderly insists the child shall not be harmed, lest those in Winterfell risk provoking the ire of the Dustins and Ryswells.*

*Lord Jason Mallister, Lord of Seagard, Warden of the Northern Marches*

The contents were of only minor concern to him. The part about the Stark boy’s intent to travel south was interesting, but what Mallister said about the Lannister fleet only confirmed what Davos already knew: Stannis would not be able to challenge the Westermen at sea. The greater part of the king’s sellsails were still moored at White Harbor, and (albeit in lesser numbers) at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. *And it is not the matter of Ramsay Bolton’s heir that concerns me, but that of Robb Stark’s.* True, it would have been preferable if a girl had been born to the Bolton legacy, but Mance Rayder was lord of the Dreadfort anyhow, and Stannis would surely have plans to dispose of this threat to the North. *Marry him off, foster him, send him into battle, whatever he pleases. The Boltons are no threat to his reign, not anymore.*

*But the Northmen still are,* said a tiny niggling voice within him.
“Ty,” he said to his squire, “another cup, please. And Lady Blackwood’s letter, too.” He snatched it from the boy’s hand quickly. It was not spies he feared, though, but Melisandre and the things she knew from looking into the hearth-fires and speaking to flames.

Davos cracked the seal open, and laid the parchment flat on the table to read. The missive was little more than assent to his plan, a promise that Jeyne Westerling and her babe, the King in the North’s heir, would stay secret for as long as possible. And in return…

...a place for them at Raventree Hall... the princess under the guise of a servant girl... your family as well, if you so wish... move her on the night of young Hoster’s naming feast, as we agreed...

Davos took another long sip of his wine. “Give me a candle,” he told Ty Frey. He raised the lit candle to Lady Blackwood’s letter, watching as smoke curled up from the edges and the parchment slowly turned to ash. “Then saddle a swift horse, and ride to Raventree Hall at once, bearing my reply and the king’s banner.” He could not entrust this message to a raven. “Bring me my paper, pen and ink.” When the boy laid the parchment before him, he took a deep breath, and said a secret prayer to the Seven. May Red R’hllor and Melisandre prove blind in this. If King Stannis learns of my treason, I may well lose my head.

Chapter End Notes

I'm away for a while, so this will be the last update until at least next Friday (21st). This is my favourite Davos chapter, though, and one of my favourites across the whole story.

I don't normally like to praise my own work, but I think the opening conversation between Davos and Melisandre is one of my favourite dialogues from across the entire series. Both Davos and Mel are easily in my top 10 favourite characters.

For clarification unless you didn't understand Davos's plan: He has a pact with the Blackwoods, who are harbouring Jeyne Westerling at Raventree Hall.
In the rain-speckled silence of the early morning, she bathed alone by candlelight. The flame flickered along the sides of the tub, so that in those few moments the metal glowed coppery red. The bubbles caressed her breasts and her hair like soft pale hands, scented with lavender and thyme. Sansa would have gladly fallen asleep in there, but the summons would soon come, and there were still things to be done. Wearily, she climbed from the tub and scrubbed herself down, spreading soapy suds over the rushes. She unfolded the gown that had been laid out on her bed; moonstone-grey silk, with a direwolf’s shadow worked upon the velvet in pale blue thread. The rain had not stopped for four days and would not be stopping any time soon, so she chose high leather boots and a hooded mantle to keep off the cold, both lined with ermine. Around her neck she wore the silver wolf’s head necklace that Olenna Tyrell had sent her on her wedding day, amethysts glinting in the eyes. That would remind Littlefinger that she knew what he had done to Joff, that she was not his little bird anymore.

Little bird. The words made her think of Sandor Clegane, again. Last night, under a pregnant white moon, she had gone to the iron cage he occupied at the edge of the camp. Clegane sat shadowed under a covering of tarps and wet brown leaves, looking lost in thought, but he’d turned his head as she approached. “Come to sing me a song, little bird?”

“Oh of a sort.” She passed a wineskin through the narrow metal bars, “here.” And then a hunk of bread, and a block of hard cheese wrapped in parchment.

“You going round feeding all of the prisoners, girl?”

“No.”

“Then why are you feeding me?”

I don’t know. “Out of the goodness of my heart,” she lied sourly.
Clegane let out a rough, rasping laugh. “I’m not as stupid as you, girl. That silver-haired boy tell you to come and see me? To get a confession?”

“A confession? For what?”

“He wants me dead.” He licked his cracked lips and took a swig from the skin. “Says that I murdered half the folk of Saltpans, and that the only justice for me is the headsman’s axe. At least that’s what the cunt in the yellow cloak told me.” His laugh returned, more of a growl this time. “That boy is half in love with you, little bird, you saw it as well as I did.” He laughed again, and shook his head. “He’s well within his rights to kill a Clegane, I s’pose, given what Gregor did to his mother and sister, but seems to me that he thinks getting rid of a vile outlaw like me will please you.” His eyes flashed. “And will it?”

“I don’t want to kill you,” Sansa said softly.

“Aye,” said the Hound, “but I doubt you’re praying for me to live either.” The wine trickled down over his lips and down his chin, the pinkish-red drops striking hard against the cold black earth.

She did pray, but not for Sandor Clegane. He was right on that account. There was a sept a few miles west of here, where Sansa prayed for Rickon and Bran and Arya, for Jon at the Wall, and once, foolishly, for peace in the world. Better to pray for the Mother’s mercy, and take anything else as it comes.

The world was still grey and dark when the king’s summons finally came. Outside the tent the ground was an unfriendly quagmire. The canvas sheeting was wet through, sagging beneath the weight of all the rain, dripping constantly into the mud. Lem Lemoncloak—Ser Richard Lonmouth, rather—stood outside, his face cowled beneath a brown hood. He has even abandoned his own colours. “My lady,” he said. “The king has sent me to escort you.”

“I do not need you.” Sansa felt nothing for the knight but cold disapproval. “Leave me, ser. I believe I know the way.”

He seemed wounded by that, but Sansa did not care. He betrayed his companions, he betrayed my trust. She swept past him and out into the rain, pulling her hood up as she went.

Today, Aegon had donned a doublet of quilted red wool slashed with black, his collar lined with ermine and studded with pieces of black jade. Underneath he wore red leather breeches, bound by a thick belt of white leather. His cloak was pinned by a dragon with moonstone eyes. “Take a seat, my lady,” he said, hurrying to hold her chair out. “Will you take wine?”

Sansa gave the amber liquid in the flagon a concerned look. “I do not know this vintage.”

“Few do. I am glad you recognised its foreignness, my lady. This is an amber made from the grapes that grow in the vineyards along the river Rhoyne. The rains swell the grapes so that they are almost overripe, so the fruit has a certain sweetness to it. A wine of choice in Volantis, Pentos, Norvos and a dozen other Free Cities that I visited during my childhood.”

“You grew up outside Westeros, Your Grace?” Truth be told, she knew precious little of this Aegon Targaryen… though she supposed that if she had known of him, then he had not been very well hidden.

He looked uneasy. “I did, my lady. Westeros… well, it was where I was born, but I left King’s Landing before my second nameday. First I stayed with a Magister of Pentos, and Jon raised me after that. Lord Connington, that is. We lived on a poleboat for a time, the Shy Maid, and travelled all
along the Rhoyne and the Qhoyne, seeking out the wonders of the world. But we could never come to Westeros, for fear that the Usurper would find out about me.”

It was strange, Sansa thought, that both the ruling king and queen in King’s Landing had lived most of their lives in faraway foreign lands, having never set eyes upon the kingdom they now intended to rule. “I should like to see Essos someday,” she said.

Aegon nodded and poured her a cup of the Rhoynish amber. It was not really that different to Arbor gold, Sansa thought as she sipped it. Ned Dayne entered to bring the breakfast; fried saltfish and bread baked with olives, a Dornish dish of eggs and fiery peppers that Sansa had last tasted at Joffrey’s wedding in King’s Landing, porridge with butter and a little honey, and a pot of mint tea. They ate in silence, though every now and again Sansa would notice Aegon staring at her over his wine-cup. But when she looked up and met his gaze his cheeks would colour and he would glance down at his food, ashamed. *There will come a day when men will be unable to help themselves from staring at you,* her mother had once said, and now Sansa understood. *I am a woman grown… a woman wed, too.* For the first time in what felt like an age, her thoughts turned to Willas, in Highgarden. *I should have left him a note,* she considered, *to know that it was not him who drove him away.* Willas was crippled, and likely suitors for him were few and far between. Her desertion could not be easy on him.

“Your Grace, my lady.” Ned Dayne returned to the tent, smoothing down his tunic. “Lord Mooton reports that a party from the castle has been sighted, waving a flag for parley. Should I have your horses readied?”

Aegon glanced out of the tent. The rain was still coming down; Sansa could hear it on the walls, and the air smelled of wet wool and leather. Ned’s blond hair was plastered down by the rain, rivulets trickling down his brow onto his cheeks. Aegon must have shared her thoughts, for he said, “We will have no joy of a parley in the rain. Send Lord Mooton and Ser Rolly out and offer to receive Lord Baelish and his retinue in here. And you should have some bread and salt on hand when they arrive, as a gesture of our goodwill.”

*Littlefinger will not agree to those terms,* Sansa thought, *Aegon’s tent is a battlefield that he cannot make his own. And Littlefinger never fights a battle he cannot win-*

“Are you worried, my lady?” Aegon asked suddenly.

“Your Grace?”

“I – I just thought…” His cheeks flushed again, out of embarrassment this time. “It doesn’t matter.” There came a long pause. “Since we have this time, we might as well talk. Are… are you fond of music, my lady?”

“I played the harp at Winterfell.” That was true, but she had not touched an instrument since the Lannisters had held her prisoner in King’s Landing.

“My father played the harp too,” he said. “They used to say that his playing was enough to make every woman in the room weep. Or so Jon told me. I-I tried to teach myself, once.” He stopped and did not say any more, and they were both grateful for that.

Sansa was waiting for Ned Dayne to come back with word of Lord Baelish’s refusal, so she was surprised when Ser Rolly returned ten minutes later, flanked by Arryn guards with moon-and-falcon crests on their tabards. Then came Ser Lothor Brune, with a little more grey in his hair than when Sansa had last seen him, then some young lordling, and then-
“Alayne!”

She barely had a moment of recognition before he slammed into her, forcing into a sudden hug. Robert’s skinny arms squeezed her with surprising strength and his fingers dug into her back, causing her a tingle of pain. When he drew away, she saw firstly how he had grown. Robert stood half a head taller than she had last seen him, his cheeks and shoulders had filled out a little, and someone had finally cut his hair, though the auburn-brown locks hung down as tangled as ever. He was wearing one of his doublets from the Eyrie, though it scarcely fit him now, and the trim had been re-stitched with dark blue thread.

Sansa remembered her courtesies then. “Your Grace,” she addressed Aegon, “may I have the honour of presenting Lord Robert Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale, Warden of the East.”

“My lord.” Aegon dipped his head in a respectful fashion. “An honour to meet you.”

Robert had learned courtesy as well. “Your Grace,” he said with a passable bow. “I am thankful for your audience. May I also present Lord Petyr Baelish, Lord Protector of the Vale and Lord Paramount of the Trident, Lord of Harrenhal and Warden of the North.”

And there he was. He was garbed as was his wont, in dark blue doublet and black breeches, his narrow shoulders draped by a thick black cloak clasped, as always, by a silver pin in the shape of a mockingbird. “Your Grace.” Lord Baelish swept into an elaborate bow, but his eyes never left hers. “And Lady Sansa. It has been too long.”

“Lord Baelish.” She tried to say it calmly, but there were butterflies of excitement in her stomach that Robert had awakened with his sudden embrace. Sansa would happily wager that Littlefinger had told him to do that. “It is good to see you.”

“I hope we will find time to talk pleasantries later,” said Lord Baelish, “but first we must deal with all these courtesies and matters of state, no? Lady Sansa, I believe you and Lady Waynwood are old acquaintances, and you are familiar with Ser Harrold, of course.” His grey-green eyes twinkled with wickedness. Harry the Heir grinned at her, the dimples in his cheeks especially noticeable now, while old Lady Waynwood flashed a worried smile.

“May I present Lord Hunter, of Longbow Hall,” Littlefinger continued, indicating a mustached lord of about fifty years, “Ser Symond Templeton, the Knight of Ninestars, and Ser Lyn Corbray, heir to Heart’s Home, wielder of the Valyrian sword Lady Forlorn.” Corbray looked disappointed at Littlefinger’s introduction, having no doubt wanted something more grandiose, while the Knight of Ninestars bowed his head lightly and adjusted his yellow cloak over one shoulder.

“Well,” said Aegon, once the proper courtesies were returned, “let us get right to it, then.” He conducted Littlefinger and the others towards the back of the tent, where a number of chairs were arranged in a horseshoe shape. Sansa took the seat to Aegon’s right, at the end of the arrangement; Lord Baelish was not near her, but she was directly facing him across the room.

Edric Dayne came around with a flagon and filled everyone’s cups, even Sweetrobin’s, though Sansa knew that her cousin was not fond of the taste. This was no Rhoynish wine; it was a full-bodied Dornish red, mature and heavy, and it left a bitter aftertaste on Sansa’s tongue. Or perhaps that was just the present company. “Allow me to do the courtesy of laying down my – our – requests, plain and simple,” Lord Petyr said when all were seated, “first, Lord Robert is to be confirmed in his titles, that is, all the ones that were conferred upon his father Lord Jon Arryn at the start of Robert Baratheon’s reign. Not including the position of Hand of the King, mind.” He smiled at his own jape. “Robert is not quite ready for that.”
“Would my lord care to go through the titles he is referring to?” Aegon asked.

Lord Petyr left that task to Robert himself. “I wish to be confirmed as Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale, and as Warden of the East, as my father was before me.”

Aegon scowled. “Jon Connington is Warden of the East,” he muttered.

“And Hand of the King, as it happens,” said Lord Petyr, “let Lord Connington keep the Handship; it will be more than enough for him, and confer the title of the Wardenship upon young Lord Robert. The title is mostly ceremonial, yes, but the Arryns of the Eyrie have held it since King Ronnel’s surrender to Queen Visenya.”

“It will do no harm, Your Grace,” Sansa found herself saying, “The Stormlands were bled dry by Stannis and Renly’s wars, and the bulk of the Baratheon strength was broken upon the Blackwater. Dragonstone and Storm’s End are all you need to hold the lords of Shipbreaker Bay and the Narrow Sea to their vows. Whereas the Vale will require more effort. By giving Robert his titles… you have extended a hand of friendship.”

When she had finished, Sansa found herself wondering exactly why she had said that. I am supposed to be with Aegon, helping him to create a peace, not throwing away his titles. She looked across the tent, and found Littlefinger’s grey-green eyes fixed intently upon her own. “Yes,” she heard Aegon say, “well, that should do nicely, I suppose. With luck, Lord Connington will not feel… slighted.”

“It is all for the common good,” said Lord Petyr, “if your Hand is truly a man of the realm, then he should be happy to give up his own personal pride to further Your Grace’s aims for peace.”

Aegon bit his lip and frowned. “Indeed. Yes. What else do you require?”

“Lord Robert is of a tender age. In light of this, the lords and ladies of the Vale—” Here he indicated Lady Waynwood and Lord Hunter, “—have decided that a Regency Council consisting of seven parties would suit, a reformation of the Lords Declarant, if you will. I would head this council as Lord Protector, supported by these gracious lords and ladies that you see here.” These gracious lords and ladies whose loyalty you have bought, you mean. Lady Waynwood was stubborn, but the presence of Harrold Hardyng suggested that she had been swayed by something regarding her ward. Lord Hunter was an ambitious man who’d killed his own father; he and Littlefinger were like peas in a pod. The Knight of Ninestars was wearing unusually rich fabrics for a landed knight from a poor house, which implied that Littlefinger had bought his allegiance with coin. And Ser Lyn Corbray was Lord Petyr’s hidden man; he’d admitted as much when they were in the Eyrie. Gold and boys and promises, all things which Petyr Baelish could surely provide in abundance.

Aegon did not know that, though. Sansa glanced at the king, then back across the room and caught Littlefinger’s eye. Now, now, sweetling, said the twinkle in his gaze, what Aegon doesn’t know won’t hurt him. “Once the Vale has been returned into the Seven Kingdoms, its lords are fit to organise its leadership as they see fit,” the king said, “so long as a state of tyranny is avoided.” He narrowed his eyes a little.

“Aegon doesn’t know won’t hurt him. “Once the Vale has been returned into the Seven Kingdoms, its lords are fit to organise its leadership as they see fit,” the king said, “so long as a state of tyranny is avoided.” He narrowed his eyes a little.

“Lord Arryn will sit on these councils too, whenever he can,” said Petyr Baelish. “And come his eighteenth nameday, we will dissolve ourselves peaceably and without revolt. There is, however, one thing that Your Grace should be aware of. This council’s first act in a position of power will be to attain and strip titles from the rogue lords who have betrayed Lord Arryn’s trust; Royce, Belmore, Redfort, and so forth. We do not believe that they are fit to play any part in the rulership of the Vale in the years to come.””
“They will not like that,” said King Aegon.

“To be sure. But they will know the price of their betrayal, and the loss of their honour.”

Littlefinger’s lips curled. “And honour is something that is so very important to men like Bronze Yohn Royce. The legacy of his house will be marred for generations… but the only way to conserve his reputation will be to follow the bidding of his liege lord with exact caution.”

_or to follow the Lord Protector of the Vale._ Sansa doubted that Littlefinger would be contented to share power with anyone for long. She remembered what he had said about Lady Waynwood, back up at the Eyrie before the winter snows had come, and the sycophants he’d mentioned, Lyn Corbray and others. _In a year, all of the new Lords Declarant will be in Lord Petyr’s pocket… or dead, by his hand or otherwise._ “A good idea, my lord,” she found herself saying to Baelish, “but given that the Warden of the East is in royal interests, mightn’t it be a good idea if the king were to have his own representative.”

Baelish twisted his smile into an uneasy frown. “A virtuous idea, I will say that, but if the king means to exercise such direct control over us we might as well be part of the Crownlands, and all of the other seven kingdoms with us. The purpose of the Lords Paramount is to _reduce_ the burden faced by those ruling, not to increase it. Wouldn’t you say so, Your Grace?”

Aegon looked lost. “Y-yes,” he managed eventually, taking a long sip of wine, “yes, I suppose it is. As you say, Lord Baelish. Is there aught else?”

“Despite my priorities being the security of Lord Robert’s rule, I must admit that I have a few selfish concerns.”

Sansa snorted inwardly. _He lies well, no one can deny that._ She caught Lady Waynwood’s eye, and thought she saw a glimmer of disapproval in the old woman’s gaze. Perhaps I am not entirely friendless… and perhaps Baelish is not entirely secure.

“The Lannisters named me Lord Paramount of the Trident for my good service,” he was saying, “I would appreciate it if you would confirm this arrangement. After that, my sword is yours, my wits are yours, my men are yours to command.”

For the first time Aegon looked ready to muster some sort of defense. _If an alliance with uncle Edmure is what he wants, he will need to promise that the Tullys can keep Riverrun and the Riverlands. But if he wants Littlefinger on his side, he will need to make the same promise. Two lords cannot share one kingdom, just as two kings cannot share one throne._

“You must understand that this presents a dilemma,” said Aegon. “Lord Edmure Tully will not surrender to me if I do not grant him his father’s lands.”

“Edmure and I have a good rapport, Your Grace; we have known each other since we were boys. We can resolve this petty dispute between us another time, with mature courtesy and no need for violence.”

“Lord Edmure’s bannermen may not be so accommodating,” Sansa reminded them. _Just as Aegon cannot balance my uncle and Lord Baelish, Littlefinger will have trouble balancing the needs of the Riverlands and the Vale._ “Do you think you can win them to your side, Lord Baelish?”

“I have no doubts that I can rise to the challenge, my lady. A few feasts, a tourney, the generous allocation of the trading goods I am bringing in from Braavos and the other Free Cities. I seem to recall that you are fond of lemoncakes, Lady Sansa; well, we have a whole larder full of lemons and limes and oranges in Harrenhal, another for salted and pickled fish, oysters, clams, cockles and the like. Cinammon and cloves, clary sage and wild garlic. Wines as well, purple strongwine from the lands of Slaver’s Bay, reds from Dorne and the Arbor both sweet and sour, the pale gold vintages of
Norvos and Volantis, sweet ambers grown along the shores of the river Rhoyne…”

“It seems you have good taste in wine,” Aegon said, “Lady Sansa and I were just savouring a Rhoynish amber ourselves.”

“Oh, good, good.” Lord Petyr beamed wholeheartedly. “I have a friend in Selhorys who owns an acre of vineyards along the eastern bank of the river. I suspect he is loath to sell his finest stock to me of all people, but I pay him handsomely, though he is yet to sell me the vineyard itself…”

What game is he playing here? Perhaps Littlefinger was just making small talk, but Sansa doubted it, everything he did had a purpose, or so she thought. *Always keep your foes confused,* he had told her. She wondered if he saw Aegon as his foe, or just as another piece to be played in his game. The young king was not naïve as far as she could tell, but neither was he particularly well-versed in politics, which might well explain his absence from King’s Landing. *And even if he does know his way around a royal court, he does not know his way around Petyr Baelish.* Tyrion had told her that he had been responsible for bankrupting the entire realm, but she could not fathom why, or how he’d done it. All she was certain of was that Littlefinger was no longer a man to be trusted, if he ever had been. *He took me away from King’s Landing, then sold me back to the Lannisters. Was that all to confuse someone?* It certainly confused her.

The king sat staring blankly into space. “For all your pleasing words, Lord Baelish, I must admit that I am not moved.”

“Yet,” said Littlefinger. “I assure you, I can be very persuasive indeed.” He said those words with a glance at Sansa, and for a moment it was as though his gaze had turned to ice. Cold fingers trickled down her spine. “But not to worry. I know that Lord Edmure must be paid his due. House Tully has ruled Riverrun and the Riverlands for three hundred years and offering anything less than that will be an insult to them.”

Aegon glanced up. His eyes were bright and purple, sparkling with curiosity, but they had a certain guilelessness too. “And?”

“I suppose I shall get to the heart of the matter,” Littlefinger said coolly. “Lord Edmure and I are opposed in our claims, but Your Grace intends to placate us both. A compromise must be brokered, it seems. Grant me the Wardenship of the Eastern Riverlands, to command the loyalty of those lords I have swayed and those who stood with House Lannister even after Stannis’s march. That is, the Vances of Wayfarer’s Rest, the Pipers of Pinkmaiden, and the Mootons of Maidenpool, among others. Lord Tully can have the rest. Bracken and Blackwood, Paeg and Ryger and Mallister. All of his father’s bannermen, save for those I mentioned and those who would sooner stand behind me.”

*Few and far between though they will be.* Half of the Seven Kingdoms thought Littlefinger no better than some upjumped sellsword, Sansa knew. *And as for the other half…*

Aegon had no such qualms. “We shall see what can be arranged, my lord. We will need a maester to draw out the lines on a map, ink and quills, parchment…”

“All of which Harrenhal has in good supply, Your Grace. It seems only fitting to extend you my hospitality. I do not have nearly enough men to fill even two of Harren’s five towers.”

“I would not impose on you, my lord…”

“Oh, nonsense. Pitch your tents in my yard if that is your wish, but Harrenhal will give your men a warm roof over their head if they so desire, and through much work we have made the suites in the Kingspyre Tower suitable for Your Grace’s habitation. The Hall of Hundred Hearths is large enough
for half your army to break their fast or sup together, and I daresay we have all grown a little lonely
coopered up behind the castle’s walls. It will be good to see some new faces.”

And if the Blackfish arrives, he will see Aegon’s banner flying side by side with Littlefinger’s, and
know that the Vale and the Iron Throne have made a pact. For good or ill. “And I daresay our
negotiations will continue more easily within the castle than it would shuttling envoys in and out,”
Lord Petyr said.

By then Aegon had little choice in the matter, with half the lords of the Vale looking on. It was no
easy thing to refuse a lord’s hospitality, and especially not when matters were as delicate as they
were. Robb, Sansa thought, Lord Frey welcomed him into his arms, and he never left them. Very
soon they were departing the tent, Aegon leading the way. Robert went at the king’s side, chattering
excitedly about his new bow-and-arrow. But asSansa turned to follow, Littlefinger caught her by the
arm. His fingers pressed into her wrist. “I owe you a sincere apology, my lady.”

“My lord?”

“For our mishaps in King’s Landing. Truly, our parting was not what I wanted, but it was necessary
to let you go, for the good of Lord Robert and the realm.”

“Robert.” Her throat felt funny, her words clumsy. You truly are a stupid girl. “He seems better.
Robert, that is. Now.” There was nothing else to say.

He nodded. “Oh, yes. Our friend Ser Harrold has been training him in the yard most every morning,
with sword and longbow both. It was a struggle to coax the boy to participate at first, I will grant him
that, but now he seems eager to show his new skills to anyone who will listen. No doubt he will
want to show you, too. The boy has changed, and for the better. I wanted to attain Bronze Yohn and
Lord Redfort, but Robert has counseled mercy for his bannermen. Perhaps that noble judgement will
serve him well. Yes, when the time comes, Lord Robert will make a mature and able lord of the
Vale, for the benefit of all... and you, Lady Sansa, are his beloved cousin, his trusted confidant, his
truest ally…”

And you his closest friend and advisor, the snake whispering his ear all the while, the mockingbird
who sings so many songs. “I hope I can be of help, Lord Baelish,” she said curtly.

His fingers caressed the sleeve of her gown, lingering a moment on the soft spiralling patterns. “You
will. Oh, I know you will.”
The night was cold and black and wet, like the last night and the night before. A small gap in the tent wall betrayed them to the storm outside, where gods howled their fury from clouds as black as the queen’s mood.

Is it too much to hope that Stannis hates this storm even more than we do? Cersei wondered. Not bloody likely. Even the mere sound of thunder reminded her of Robert Baratheon, as though the weather was mocking her openly. No man will hear you roar here, it said, our storm is louder than yours.

Tonight the queen wore a gown of soft red wool, her felted collar encrusted with black pearls. She would sooner have donned a suit of armour ready for war, but in this gentle garb Tommen was more likely to stay becalmed. Her son was dressed as somberly as the sky; black breeches, black undershirt, black boots, black tunic with lions engraved in red thread. Cersei watched as he stabbed at the food with his knife, nibbled off a tiny corner and set it down again.

Not that she could blame him. The camp cooks had set a good table: beef-and-bacon soup, a ham hock pie rich with cream and bacon and leeks, dishes of buttered pease and neeps… but she had no appetite for any of it. She had no appetite for any of this waiting either. For twelve days now they had lingered below the walls of Lannisport, as Stannis Baratheon’s army slowly advanced across the West. The last news had come from Oxcross, two days ago. “Tytos Blackwood came to the holdfast gate with four hundred men and asked that we lower our banners,” said Ser Lymond Vikary, who had been the last to reach the city. “Ser Kyle refused them, but when the king’s men threatened to burn out the houses and ransack the farms, the smallfolk forced a surrender upon him, and that was that.”

“Stannis is no king,” Ser Kevan Lannister had replied sourly. “So long as Tommen lives, I will support his claim, ser… as will you.”

So long as Tommen lives… Cersei would not admit it, but she was fearful for her son’s life. Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds. It was not Stannis’s threats that she feared most, but Tommen’s own, the things he muttered to himself when he thought she was not listening, the midnight walks he took with a hollow, gaunt look in his eyes, the way he was reputed to sob himself
to sleep at night, if Ser Lorent Lydden could be believed. She remembered how he had looked on the
night of their return from the doomed battle at Sarsfield, the cold look in his eyes as Ser Addam
Marbrand repeated the names of the fallen for all to hear. Half a corpse, and pale as death.

The king stabbed a parsnip and glanced at it disdainfully. “You need to eat,” Cersei told him.

“I don’t have to.”

“You do. All men need to eat. Even kings.”

“Even kings,” Tommen said bitterly. “Tell that to King Stannis.”

“Lord Stannis, dear. The pretender Stannis.”

“If he is a pretender, what does that make me? His men must laugh themselves silly; a Lannister
weakling—”

We have had this argument before. “Stannis is a traitor. You are the trueborn son of King Robert
Baratheon, the heir of Storm’s End and Casterly Rock and—”

“That’s not what he says.”

Cersei fell silent. He looks like Jaime in this light, she thought, as much as Joff ever did, at least. She
wondered how her eldest son would have reacted to the same provocation. Most like he would not
have turned back from the battle at Sarsfield, she thought, most like he would have made some
heroic, foolish charge… and died for it, and I would be left a mother mourning her lost son.

She clasped her hand over Tommen’s. “You are the King of the Andals and the First Men. You are
strong. We are strong. Defeat will not break us so easily.”

He shrugged out of her grip. “How can you say that? It already has.”

The queen curled her lip. I will not convince him tonight. She drained her cup and stood up. “Pray
pardon me, Your Grace. I must needs attend to the war.”

“My war,” Tommen said gloomily. She went.

Ser Jasper Peckledon stood guard outside, along with Ser Robert Strong. The silent giant was with
the king day and night, while the other three knights of the Kingsguard – Ser Jasper, Ser Lorent
Lydden and Ser Robin Payne – stood duty on rotation. The latter three were all her uncle Kevan’s
men, Ser Robert hers alone. Only one against three, even then. I will have to do something about
that, but not until the war is won. Cersei knew that they could not afford hasty moves that might
offend their lords bannermen, especially since some of the Westermen had already gone over to
Stannis. When Jaime returns, he and I must see to that, and quickly.

It was time for her to deal with Kevan Lannister and his cronies. The war council was entirely her
uncle’s men, none of whom seemed keen to have her with them. I must tread lightly, the queen
thought. Aye, for now. The day of change could not come soon enough.

Tonight they were six. Ser Addam Marbrand in his bronze-plated armour, a golden cloak streaming
from his shoulders. Ser Harys Swyft, the knight of the blue chicken, looking equal parts confused
and cowardly. Lord Farman, who commanded the royal fleet, with more salt than pepper in his
beard. Stout Ser Damion Lannister, who was her cousin but Ser Kevan’s man entirely. Ser Lyle
Crakehall, the Strongboar, a man who was the very essence of ‘deeds, not words.’ That one would
not be easy to sway if I tried; all he needs is a good fight, and a cause to die for. Cersei had known
men like that all her life, and found herself hating them. Ser Lyle even smelled like Robert, ale and leather.

That made five of them. The last was Ser Kevan himself, who headed the table. Gold lions fastened his cloak, a square of heavy crimson cloth with the Lannister lion worked in golden thread on the back. While the others argued, her uncle stood scrutinising a parchment map, candle shadows flickering across his face. *If you only saw his shadow, he could be mistaken for Father,* the queen thought for a moment. But Ser Kevan was broader, shorter and less commanding than Lord Tywin had been, a poor copy all in all. *Yet they follow him all the same. A poor copy is better than nothing, I suppose… but Lord Tywin’s true heir stands before you, my lords.*

Ser Harys Swyft was the first to notice her. “My… my lady. We did not see your arrival.”

“*You were not looking for me,*” Cersei said.

“We did not know if you were coming, Your Grace,” said Ser Lyle Crakehall. “*Well… you are only a woman,* so we thought it best to sort out the broader points—”

The smile she gave him would have curdled milk. “*Quite right,* Ser Lyle. I am *only a woman,* but I am also the mother of the king, and I have his ear.”

“We did not discount you on account of your sex,” Ser Kevan snapped. “*But the details are already decided, niece.*”

She hated it when he called her ‘niece’ like that, and Ser Kevan knew. *Belittle me all you like, nuncle. Soon your japes will lose their hilarity.* “*Might I be allowed to know these details?*”

“You may. *Come.*” He beckoned her. Even that was mocking, as though she were some dog to come running.

Her uncle had weighted down the parchment with his heavy cup to stop it from curling around the edges. On the left-hand side of the map was Lannisport, or rather, an ink-drawing of it that outlined the major thoroughfares and gates. In the east, beyond the city walls, the hills and the rivers and the roads were inked in green and grey, blue and red. Counters the size of a copper penny represented the armies, marked with either a lion or a stag. “*How many is that?*” she asked, pointing to Stannis’s side.

Ser Addam Marbrand answered. “*He has twenty-five thousand, or thereabouts, though our scouts may not have reported everything.*”

“And us? *Yesterday it was sixteen thousand,* I know that.”

Ser Lyle stirred. “*My lord father raised another two hundred, on their way from Crakehall.*”

*Nobody cares about your lord father.* “*That will not serve,*” said Cersei.

“We are outnumbered,” said Ser Harys Swyft. *As though that were not obvious. My son’s council is full of fools.* She had already known that, of course, but this only proved the point. “*And, my lords?*”

Ser Harys frowned. “*And what?*”

“And what do you intend to do about it?”

“What *can* we do?” Swyft looked ready to bawl. “*We must seek Stannis’s mercy, my lords!*”
Ser Addam groaned, as did Ser Lyle. “We have already talked about this,” muttered Ser Damion Lannister. “Surrender, and all of us will be worse for it.”

“Surely not, my lords. Stannis did not harm Lady Lefford, he will not harm us—”

“Stannis did not harm the Lefford bitch because she got down on his knees and probably offered to suck his cock, for all I know.” Crakehall’s words were blunt and to the point. Not that it mattered; Ser Harys seemed to be on his own, cutting an even more pathetic figure than usual. “My lords, Your Grace, listen—”

As the knights argued, Cersei watched Ser Kevan. His eyes were still on the map, looking over each and every counter in turn, searching, searching, searching… When at last he rose, the table fell silent. “Surrender is not an option,” he said, blunt and bitter. “It never was. If you would flee, Ser Harys, state your intention now. I cannot promise you safe conduct, but your cell will be warm and we will treat you more kindly than we would if you faced us in the field.”

Ser Harys Swyft swallowed, and did not speak. Every inch the chicken on his cloak, Cersei thought. “Those are treasonous words, ser,” she added coolly, “if the king were to learn of this, he would be well within his rights to throw you in a cell.” The same for each and every one of you.

“That will not be necessary,” her uncle said, “I am sure Ser Harys knows where he stands. The facts are simple. Stannis will be upon us in two days. By then, we must have retreated all our men to inside the city walls, and have our defenses ready.”

“As I was going to inform Your Grace, before Ser Harys’s outburst.” It was Addam Marbrand who had spoken. Cersei gave the knight a long, appraising look. He was Jaime’s best friend in their youth; might I be able to make him mine? Surely it would be worth a try, and she could offer him more incentives than Ser Kevan could, especially if her brother returned to her side. They will all choose Jaime over Kevan, and Jaime will bring them to me.

Marbrand continued, “The South Gate is bolstered by mounted mangonels, as is the main gate. We have ballistae suited to launch flaming arrows from the walls; the trees have been cut back and burned surrounding the city so that Stannis’s men will find less cover there. The Guild of Engineers has set to supplying ten thousand pots of boiling oil and stones that can be thrown down by our men if they should get that close. Our ditch trap in the east is nearly completed, filled with spikes and caltrops. The armories at every gate are stocked fully with swords and shields, chainmail and leather armour, pikes and maces, crossbow quarrels and arrowheads.”

“Our greatest advantages come from the city itself,” said Ser Kevan. “When I last saw Maester Creylen, he gave me his thoughts on this damnable rain.” As he spoke, thunder boomed in the sky outside, and the cups shivered on the table. “As it happens, it may not be so damnable after all. Since Ser Addam’s men have burned the crops between Sarsfield and the city, Stannis will find himself marooned, we hope, with no crops to uproot, no wood to chop down for his fires, no livestock to tend. And as the rains come down, Stannis’s men will freeze and starve, while ours find the company of hot soup and warm fires.”

That made Cersei uneasy. “That is your strategy? Stannis has won battles against worse odds.” He had defeated Roose Bolton and his bastard at Winterfell, she recalled, despite the lord of the Dreadfort’s assurances that attrition would do for the pretender.

“Aye. But his men have not. The better part of the force that marched on the Blackwater is gone now. Half of Stannis’s men are the levies of the Riverlands, the North and the Vale, men whose loyalty to him is doubtful at best. The North Remembers… it remembers the wars that Robb Stark started, and his movement, but it also remembers their cost. If the snow should come, half of them
will turn their cloaks and run home, rather than die in a fight that means nothing to them. And if they hear that Myrcella has signed a pact with the Tullys and the Starks at Riverrun, promising Northern independence in return for their support of us, they may just take our side.” Ser Kevan smiled.

A horn blast cut the night, as sudden and brazen as a sword-cut. Then a second. And a third. Ser Harys Swyft glanced around the tent worriedly, his chins quivering. “The enemy?” he asked, in barely a whisper.

Ser Kevan frowned. “Addam, are those our trumpets?”

“No, my lord.”

Raindrops beat against the tent roof.

“Stannis, then?” the queen asked.

Lyle Crakehall laughed. “Stannis? Sweet queen, it is the middle of the night. Such an attack is unchivalrous—”

You are a bullheaded fool. “The Blackwater was fought at night, must I remind you?”

Aaaarrroooo0000000000, the horn blared again, aaaaarrroooo0000000000.

“Stannis’s army could not have come so far in two days,” muttered Ser Kevan. He said something under his breath that Cersei did not hear. “…if it is so… yes… niece, would you fetch the king, please? We may have need of him.”

Something about his words enraged her. He means to send me away, to treat me like some child who is not allowed to know secrets.

“He means to send me away, to treat me like some child who is not allowed to know secrets. “I am the queen, not your errand boy, uncle.”

“You have the king’s ear, you said. Go and make use of that power.” He turned away from her.

Sometimes it was easier to lose some battles than to try and win them all. Let Ser Kevan be the child here, Cersei thought. I will do my duty, but not for you, ser. Graciously, she stepped back from the table and swept from the tent.

Outside the horn was sounding louder and the raindrops were coming down faster. The moon had hidden its face behind a bank of cloud, peeking through from time to time as a child mocks his foe when playing hide-and-seek. Moonbeams flickered across canvas, and Lannister lions strained against their banners, as though fighting to be let free. On her way back the queen passed Captain Vylarr, going the other way. Mud caked his boots and the leg of his breeches. “Is that Stannis?” she asked him.

“I’ve sent scouts up to have a look,” the captain replied, “but there’s been no attack, nor any sign of one approaching. Might be he wants a parley, not a battle.”

That would explain why Ser Kevan was sending her after Tommen. If her son was not present, it might seem as though he were hiding behind his mother’s skirts. Though that may be better than the truth…

“Your Grace,” Ser Jasper Peckledon greeted her, outside the royal tent. “The king is within. Should I call for him?”

“I will go myself.” The queen pushed the flap aside and went through.
Tommen was seated on a camp chair, beside his half-eaten supper. He did not seem to have moved since she’d left him, half an hour ago or more. But when Cersei came inside his head snapped around and he stared straight at her. “Mother?” The skin around his eyes seemed red and puffy, but it was hard to tell in the dim light. “Are you all right?” she asked softly.

“Yes. I… I was thinking. Remembering.” His voice was thick and strangled.

For a moment the queen hesitated. “About the battle?” she probed at last.

“Yes.” Tommen looked up suddenly. “Is that a horn? Is it… another…”

“Ser Kevan thinks that it is a parley. You will need your armour, and your crown.”

His eyes met hers. Less like Joff, and more like Jaime.

“I don’t want—”

“You will.” She had to harden her tone; there was no other way. If I am strong, he will be too. My sweet son is not Jaime. He would just laugh all of this off, and ask to meet Stannis in single combat, being the gallant, stupid fool that he is.

“Armour?” Tommen said the word very slowly. “I – my squire was lost in the battle, he—” A shiver went through him. “I killed a squire,” he murmured. “He tried to charge me when I was going to my horse. He had an onion on his shield, white on black. What kind of house puts an onion on their shield? Who did I kill, what was his name?… When… when my sword went through his mouth and he started coughing. So… so I stabbed him again.” A chill wind twisted the tent flap, and raindrops scattered themselves across the rushes like specks of black blood.

“And again… all the blood…”

The mother’s madness threatened to take hold within her. For a moment all she wanted to do was seize her little boy and pull him close to her chest, to tell him that everything was all right, to muss up his hair and kiss his forehead…

No.

“You are almost a man grown,” she told him instead. “You need to be strong.”

Tommen chewed his lip, swallowed, and tried to look brave. He is afraid, she knew at once, but am I?

“Armour,” her son repeated. “Yes, I need… armour. Like you said. Send… send my knights in to help me.”

She did. If the knights of the Kingsguard had objections to becoming glorified squires, they did not make them known. Ser Jasper opened the chest of armour and Ser Lorent brought Tommen’s studded gambeson. They were passing him his gauntlets when Cersei went back out into the night. Thunder crashed overhead. Moments later a bolt of lightning forked through the eastern sky.

Are you watching me, Robert, from your cold hell beneath the earth? Are you watching me, cursing me with every chilly breath you take? I hope you found your Lady Lyanna down there. I hope you found her, I hope you lusted for her, and I hope you never had her. In the early days of their marriage, Cersei had cursed Lyanna Stark day and night, for stealing her husband away. You said you dreamt of killing Rhaegar every night, Your Grace. Well, I dreamt of killing the woman you loved.

The horns had gone quiet now, but the thunder would have drowned them out anyway. Bring on your storm, my lord, the queen thought. I will weather it gladly.

It was some time before her son emerged from the tent, flanked by his knights in white cloaks. Cersei remembered the armour Jaime had worn when he was fifteen, not too dissimilar from Tommen’s own, with gold lions on his shoulders, on his vambraces, roaring on his breastplate. But while Jaime
had looked a proper knight in his, tall and broad and proud, her son still seemed a boy, and the worry was writ plain on his face. His lip was trembling, and he seemed afraid to speak.

Outside Ser Kevan’s tent they mounted their horses. Ser Lyle Crakehall would go ahead with the king’s banner, with an escort of eighty mounted knights and twice as many trailing afoot. Their hooves churned up the mud as they cantered along, down the winding road that cut between the tents of the Lannister army, past the guard towers at the camp perimeter and out onto the goldroad proper. The banner swirled in the wind like a ragdoll with its strings cut as they climbed, a lion spattered with rain.

Cersei remembered Joff on his fine black stallion, riding out to the battle of Blackwater Bay. “They say Stannis never smiles,” he’d said, before departing, “I’ll give him a red smile.” A boy’s jest, perhaps, but for a moment she’d almost believed it. He was a fighter, no matter what they say. And Tommen is not.

When they crested the hill, the moon peeked out from behind its cloud, so that Stannis Baratheon’s banner glowed brighter than ever, and for a moment the stag seemed truly afire. “I do not see his glowing sword,” said Ser Lorent Lydden. “The one that slew a hundred men at Oxcross, or so they said.”

Whatever sword the pretender did wield was sheathed in his swordbelt, but Stannis’s crown still sparkled with fire opals and onyxs that caught the light of the torches his men carried. His armour was finely polished but plain, steel breastplate over ringmail and a jerkin of boiled brown leather, with breeches to match. “Lannister.” Stannis frowned with a face that was made for frowning. “And a legion of traitors to match.” His eyes lingered on Cersei for a long moment.

“It is not too late for you to turn away from treachery,” the false king proclaimed, “it is not too late for you to kneel before the Lord of Light and I, and to swear yourself to one land, one god, one king. Some of your fellows have already made the wiser choice.” He gestured behind him. Cersei saw fat Lord Tytos Brax in his cream-and-purple velvet, bearing their foe’s standard, his ruddy face aglow. On his right sat Lord Sarsfield, who had been captured during the battle at his castle, and that bitch Alysanne Lefford, Lady of the Golden Tooth, watching them with cold courtesy. Stannis is fond of burning, they say, the queen thought, if I get my hands on you, I may become fond of it too.

“Fine friends, I’m sure,” said Ser Kevan Lannister. “But we have better men on our side. Men who do not flit from one king to another as easily as the wind changes.”

“The wind might change, aye, but the truth of my claim will not.” Stannis Baratheon’s face was one of ice. “The Iron Throne is mine by rights.”

“Yes, yes.” Ser Kevan waved a tired hand. “Is there a reason why you have called us to parley, my lord, or is it merely to trade insults?”

Stannis ground his teeth. “Every moment my men spend on the lands you have sown with salt and burned in your retreat is a hardship for them. I have my good reason for our meeting, aye.”

Ser Kevan gave a thin-lipped smirk. “Do enlighten us.”

“A king must be just,” said Stannis, “but he must also be merciful, if he means to rule peacefully. I am here to offer you a chance at mercy, despite my better judgement.” His eyes fell upon Cersei once more, and for a moment it seemed that he was smiling. “Cersei Lannister and her spawn of sin will be executed, though they will be spared the indignity of burning. The remaining members of House Lannister will be imprisoned and trialled, with the option of joining the Night’s Watch if they admit
their guilt. That includes you, Ser Kevan. And your son Martyn, whom I hold captive, and alive… for now. Those noble houses siding with House Lannister will be stripped of all their lands and titles, unless they come to me by midnight seven days from now and swear their loyalty. That is all.”

No one said anything. They are looking to my son, the queen knew, they are looking to King Tommen to lead them to victory. She turned her head slightly and found the king on his horse. It was too dark to tell much, but she could see how tightly his lips were clench. Is he holding back anger, or fear? She did not want to find out. “Is this your offer, Lord Stannis?” she asked loudly. “A noose instead of a pyre for me to die by, and empty promises? We have the strong walls of Lannisport and brave men to defend us. Your side is traitors and broken men, and the winter will have its toll on them. You will not breach the walls of Lannisport.”

Stannis considered that a moment. “Perhaps I will not have to, woman. My brother Renly opposed me similarly, and Ser Cortnay Penrose. As they met their ends, so will your son.” His eyes flashed. “Speaking of which, I wished to look upon this child and to see whether I would have any regrets from killing him. Disappointment is the word that comes to mind. Have they taken your tongue along with your wits, boy?”

He had directed the question to Tommen, but her son seemed to have frozen in place. Around her, Cersei saw lords and knights shifting uneasily on their horses, and quiet sniggers from Stannis’s men. “No,” Tommen said at last, “no, they haven’t.”

“Your bannermen must look upon you and see a frightened boy, same as I do.” Stannis was not really talking to him, despite his words. “I have to wonder what it is that is ensuring their loyalty. Unless Cersei Lannister has taken them all to bed as well.”

Cersei seethed. “That is a vile lie, my lord,” she said. “My lord husband—”

“It is shameful,” Stannis said, “when a boy cannot even raise his voice to defend his own mother. Once Robert broke a lad’s jaw for saying that our mother looked rounder than usual when she was with child.” He raised his voice. “If proof was ever needed that the boy is not Robert’s son beyond his colouring, then that is it. Look to yourselves for answers, my lords.”

This cannot stand, the queen knew. “Tell me, Lord Stannis: was Robert’s body yet cold when you plotted to steal his throne? It must have been hard for you, being the child less loved, less admired, less able than your brothers. You have fought your fight, Lord Stannis… you have led countless men to their deaths and to defeat, time and time again. Blackwater Bay, Dragonstone, Storm’s End…” She spoke to the lords on the horses behind him now, to Sarsfield and Blackwood and Bracken, Farring and Yarwyck and Mallister. “Come to us, and you shall have victory. No more dead sons, no more broken families, no more pointless battles in the snow. Turn away from Stannis’s pagan god and Stannis’s doomed way, away from death and darkness—”

Firelight sparkled in Stannis’s eyes. “I have the Lord of Light behind me, woman.”

Then he drew his sword.

For a moment Cersei was blinded. She heard horses whickering and rearing on both sides of the clearing, and one man was thrown from his mount. When she opened her eyes again the sword was on fire. Red and orange and gold, the flames shimmered down the length of the blade, from hilt to point, glowing with some unearthly power, swimming in a haze of pale golden light.

And King Stannis Baratheon in the midst of it all.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the wait, everyone.

This chapter puts Cersei in the role of Catelyn Stark from ACOK and ASOS, playing her part in her son's wars. Also, it had Kevan and Stannis, so what's not to love (unless you hate both Kevan and Stannis, of course).

Originally meant to be a Tommen POV chapter, but I did some switching around and re-jigged the thingymabobs. GRRM talked about having a Meereenese knot in ADWD, but TSK is pretty bad when it comes to all this structural nonsense too. 108 chapters have become between 116 and 123, depending on where I make the cuts.
Chapter Summary

“I always thought that war would be easier than this. That corpses are just numbers, but now I’ve seen what war does to us.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

QUENTYN

He dreamed of his mother, but when he woke he only remembered green fire. Where?...

Something was pressing down over his eyes, wet and heavy. Quentyn reached up awkwardly, his fingers slipping all over the thick wad of cotton. “How?...”

“Careful now,” said a familiar voice.

“Nym,” he croaked, “how am I here? Am I...” His fingers clawed at the bandage over his eyes. “Am I blind?”

“Only in one eye,” she said. “You were luckier than so many others.”

“Cletus,” he remembered. *I could have saved him.*

“Cletus is dead, and Will Wells, and Obara, and countless others. And not just them. Mace Tyrell was melted inside his armour, and—”

“My eye. Let me... let me see.”

He felt a hand on his brow, and the wad of cotton was lifted. Quentyn blinked, squinted, refocused on Nym’s face. At least, that was what he saw on his right side. On his left, the world turned fuzzy and slowly faded away to darkness. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“About what?” A bandage covered her left arm.

“Obara, Cletus, everyone.” He almost felt like sobbing.

“It wasn’t your fault, coz.”

*It was. It was. I should have seen it, I would have seen it, if I was looking properly.* He remembered the green flash, and splinters flying everywhere, the sharp stab of pain, like the twisting of a knife,
and his friends dragging him away to safety. “Arch?” he croaked, “Drink?”

“I can send for them, if you’d like,” she said.

“No.” That would only bring back the pain of remembering those who had fallen. Quentyn breathed a hoarse, ragged breath. “Uncle Oberyn? Where… where is he?”

“Talking with Willas Tyrell and his brothers. Lord Willas now, I suppose.”

“We… won, then? We took the castle?” He supposed that they must have done. It was a stone ceiling above him, rather than a tent of rippling green silk. *Highgarden.* Quentyn coughed and forced himself into a sitting position. His head rang like a bell. “I have to get up.” *Serve. Protect. Obey. “I have to.”*

Nym laid a hand on his arm. “*Careful,* I said. You don’t want to hurt yourself any more than you have already.”

“It’s… it’s only my eye. My arms and legs are fine.” He pushed away from her, struggled to his feet, and almost lost his footing. His legs felt funny. “I’m fine,” he repeated, waving her off, as he staggered towards the door.

“Wait,” she said. “One moment.” She fished through the drawers at his bedside and drew forth a patch of dark brown leather, bound with a leather strap. “For your eye.”

Once Quentyn had put the patch on, they went down a long hallway and then down a stone staircase. “You were lucky, though,” Nym said. “Lucky that the splinters missed all the important stuff in your head.”

“Must be because I have such a thick skull,” Quentyn mumbled. “Y-you don’t have to come with me. I know you think I’m…”

“Weak?” She laughed. “I have apologies to make too, Quentyn. What you did was not cowardly, even if it was stupid. You are still more like your father than mine, but seeing all this… that is not necessarily a bad thing, is it?”

They emerged onto the castle ramparts. Quentyn felt fresh clean air flooding his face for the first time in so many days. He climbed the steps to stand beside the merlon, feeling dizzy. Nym held his hand as he went up. “We’re camped on the banks of the river,” she said, pointing to the pavillions that stretched as far as he could see into the mist. Their banners were Tyrell and Martell, Redwyne and Yronwood, Rowan and Allyrion. *The Reach and Dorne, together.* Then his gaze moved downriver. The grass were scorched and charred, the leaves of the forest bare. *Wildfire.* He had expected a grisly sight, carrion crows pecking at corpses and the like, but it was almost as though nothing had ever happened. *Almost.* Quentyn would never forget.

“What happened to Lord Tarly?” he asked, leaning against the rampart.

“He got away, though his son didn’t. Lord Willas says that he’ll give him back the bones when Ser Garlan rides to Manderford to sue for peace. There are no bones, though. Only ash.” Nym looked conflicted. “I… I always thought that war would be easier than this. That corpses are just numbers, but now… I’ve seen what war does to us.” She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “Come.”

It was midday, and the Great Hall of the Tyrells was full to bursting. Benches were crammed in from wall to wall, like peas in a pod. The air was full of shouts and cheers and whooping, though most of the soldiers were so engrossed in their own lives that Quentyn and Nym walked all the way to the
dais before they were noticed. It was Ser Loras Tyrell who saw them first, gazing down at them over
the lip of his trencher. He nudged his sister’s elbow, and they both looked up. For a brief moment
Quentyn met the lady’s eyes, then looked away, embarrassed.

“Nephew!” Prince Oberyn moved gracefully down the steps, now garbed in red silken robes rather
than his battle leathers. “I see that you have healed. Well, most of you. The eyepatch makes you look
fearsome.”

“All the same, I would rather have my eye back,” said Quentyn. “But some things are impossible, I
suppose.”

Prince Oberyn nodded. “I am sorry,” he said quietly. “I never thought that they would be so foolish
to leave the wildfire out in the middle of the camp like that. Rest assured, the fault lies with me
alone.” There was a new look in his uncle’s eye; gone was the wicked gleam, replaced by a
soberness. He sees me as a man now, rather than a boy, Quentyn knew. Despite everything, that
made him feel a little better.

A man who must be Lord Willas Tyrell was descending the dais, followed by his two brothers Loras
and Garlan and their sister. “Prince Quentyn,” he said, offering a handshake. “It’s good to finally
meet you.” He exchanged greetings with his brothers in turn, and bestowed a timid kiss upon Lady
Margaery. Nym was pressing her lips together tightly to keep herself from laughing.

“Well,” said Oberyn, clapping his hands loudly. “The men are here, they seem merry, and my
nephew has recovered from his injuries. I see no reason why we cannot hold the wedding
straightaway.”

“Now?” Lord Willas looked aghast. “Here?”

“Well, I thought that the sept might be a better place, but this should serve for the feast. Give the
bride and groom a few hours to get changed, and have your cooks conjure something up from
whatever you have in the kitchens. Us Dornishmen are not fussy, so long as there is some spice in
there, and good wine as well, none of your swill from the Arbor.”

“Today?” This time it was Lady Margaery who was looking at Oberyn as though he’d gone mad. “I-
I can’t get married today… I don’t have the time to get ready…”

“My sweet lady, you look beautiful as you are,” Oberyn said, kissing her cheek. “If you must, find
yourself a nice gown and tie a ribbon in your hair; it will not hurt you. As for the bridegroom…”

Quentyn coughed. “Who are you marrying, my lady?”

The four Tyrells looked at him, horrified. “Ser—,” began Loras, but then Nym burst out into a fit of
laughter, and pointed to him. “You,” she spluttered, barely able to get her words out, “she’s marrying
you.”

“Uh… what?”

“It was in our peace terms,” Oberyn explained, “and you should count yourself lucky, nephew.
There are few women in the realm fairer than Lady Margaery here.”

The lady in question had gone quite pink, but Quentyn was certain that he had turned as red as a
pomegranate. “W-what?” he spluttered again. It seemed that Willas Tyrell and his brothers were
equally surprised. “You want to hold the wedding today?” Ser Garlan repeated, shaking his head.
“You are mad, Prince Oberyn.”
Quentyn’s uncle only shrugged. “Perhaps I am. Either way, I’m sure you’ll come round to the idea very quickly. I will see you all… at sunset, I think. They will remember such a beautiful ceremony for the rest of their lives, I’m sure.” He steered Quentyn away from them and down from the dais, humming ‘The Dornishman’s Wife’ under his breath.

“I imagine this must have come as something of a shock to you,” Oberyn said, when they were out of the earshot of those in the hall.

“You could say that,” Quentyn muttered.

“A pleasant surprise, surely. As I said, Margaery Tyrell is a lovely girl, in every sense of the word. You do like girls, don’t you?”

Quentyn turned red. “Yes,” he managed to say.

“Good. I am sure you will like her more than most. And if you do not, well, you are to be prince of Dorne. I daresay none will think poorly of you if you take a paramour.”

“I imagine Lady Margaery would.”

Prince Oberyn laughed. “You should try to be funny more often. Even if your jokes only work one time out of ten, they give you a certain, hmm, endearing quality. Ah, I believe this is your new bedchamber.”

It was not the room that Quentyn had woken up in, but all the things that he had brought with him on campaign were in here. Prince Oberyn took three quick strides and jumped onto the bed, bouncing a little. “Very springy,” he observed, “that should make the bedding more exciting, if only a little. I’m sure you know what you’re doing, nephew.” He shrugged. “I brought you one of my better tunics if you don’t have anything to dress in. Oh, and you’ll need the cloak.”

“You brought a cloak?” He always intended for this to happen.

“Your father requested it.”

“Father knew about—?”

“Of course he did,” said Oberyn. “You think he’d just wed you to the Tyrell girl without considering the marriage for at least five years beforehand? He and that old harridan have been plotting together for years, and Willas and I have corresponded in the past. That relationship will continue when we head to King’s Landing.”

“Why are we going to King’s Landing?”

“I am going to King’s Landing. You are not. As for why, both Dorne and the Reach have a vested interest in the Crown’s affairs, so Lord Willas and I will be taking up seats on the small council, as will Nym, most like. But first, we need to see Jon Connington, and join Arianne’s escort at Storm’s End.”

That made sense, Quentyn supposed. Arianne will need friends in the capital when she marries Aegon. “So… so where am I going?”

“You and your lovely new wife will be heading to Casterly Rock, to convince the Lannisters to lay down their arms.” Prince Oberyn smirked. “Best you get acquainted with her soon.” That said, he sauntered out of the room.
Seven hells, Quentyn thought. For a moment he felt like throwing up. He had never expected this… any of this. The eyepatch clung to his face like a second skin, and something roiled in his belly. On the wall in front of him, a misty mirror hung, swaying this way and that, taunting him, daring him to look. Coward, it said, coward, craven.

Something steeled inside him then. I will not be beaten by a mirror. His fingers were trembling as he reached up to the patch, but when he tore it away, the fear faded away in an instant, replaced by the overwhelming feelings of horror, shock and revulsion. Where his eye had once been was now a small, dark hollow. Quentyn could not really tell. He made himself look closer, squint with the one eye remaining to him, and see. I will not be afraid of my own reflection. Summoning a deep breath, he took one finger and placed it just below the dark eyeless places, and ran his fingers over the skin. Like windows into the soul. That was a strange thought; it sounded like something a septon might say.

Well. At least I’ll always have an interesting story to tell. He pictured himself sitting around a fire, telling the tale to his grandchildren. But to have grandchildren, he’d have to have children first, and to have children…

I must do this. For Dorne, and for myself. Serve. Protect. Obey. I must act like a prince.

Three hours passed like three minutes. The maids and manservants came and went, bringing him water for his bath and oils for his hair and a cloak of soft red-and-orange velvet. Oberyn must have had this the whole time, the prince thought. The sun sank lower in the sky, and the stars rose slowly over the Mander river. Come sunset, Quentyn was sat in the solar before his desk, writing a letter to his father Prince Doran informing him of what had happened. But then again, Father, you already knew.

When the knock came at last it was not his uncle he found standing outside, but Ser Barristan Selmy. The Queensguard knight was dressed in his finest raiment, tunic, tabard and breeches of thick white wool, with a white cloak streaming from his shoulders. “Prince Quentyn,” he said, and dipped his head. “They are ready for you.”

But am I ready? Quentyn wondered. And he knew that if he did not answer now, he never would. “Yes,” he said, “let us go.”

“It is good to see you walking about again,” the old knight said as they walked down the corridor. “It was a close thing, ser. I could have died very easily. And with this eyepatch, I am not like to forget.”

“Every man makes mistakes,” said Ser Barristan, “but what distinguishes men from one another is how they learn from those mistakes.”

“What mistakes have you made, ser?” asked Quentyn. He was truly curious. “Forgive me, but men only speak of your successes.”

“My great deeds.” The old knight sounded strangely bitter. “I brought Aerys Targaryen out of Duskendale, my prince. I was only doing my duty as a Kingsguard knight… but I wonder, how many lives might have been saved if Tywin Lannister had stormed the town and murdered everyone in it?”

“You saved the king. You fulfilled your oath.”

“Aye. That is what I tell myself when I cannot sleep at night. But I failed Rhaegar too, and Princess
Rhaella, and sweet little Rhaenys.”

“You did not fail Daenerys.”

The old knight did not reply for a long time. “No, not yet. But for every moment I spend away from her, a new enemy presents itself, and I am powerless to keep her safe.”

*He feels like he is failing,* Quentyn thought. *He feels like he is letting duty slip away, that he is doing the wrong thing. Serve, protect, obey, that is all he knows, and he cannot do any of them here.* He felt a sudden stab of pity for the old knight. “The war in the south is won. You should be allowed to go back to King’s Landing. I will speak with my uncle.”

Ser Barristan nodded his head. “Thank you, my prince. Shall we go through to the sept now?”

Without hesitating any further, Quentyn pushed open the doors.

They were all inside, all save for the bride herself. On his way up he saw Arch leaning on Cletus’s shoulder, nursing a broken arm. The big man raised a hand in greeting as he passed. He saw Ser Deziel Dalt, the Knight of Lemonwood, in yellow from head to toe, beside one of the Fowler twins. He saw Lady Myria Jordayne standing between the Reachlords Rowan and Shermer. He saw Oberyn with Nym at his side, grinning like he’d just told the world’s funniest joke. Beside him were Ser Loras Tyrell and his brother Garlan, both looking at him as warily as any brother would his sister’s future husband. The wizened old woman in the wimple could only be Lady Olenna Tyrell, the Queen of Thorns, who had as much a hand in this as Prince Oberyn did. And then he was climbing the steps, and only the septon remained before him, fingering the crystal hung around his neck.

Quentyn had to turn to face them. That was the hardest part. All eyes were on him, he knew, and if he looked even slightly foppish they would laugh at him till the end of his days. *You need to look like a prince, not a boy,* he told himself. He straightened his back and stood a little taller on the dais, holding his head high. *Look at the carvings and the statues, not at them.* Highgarden’s sept was far more opulent than Sunspear’s; the statues of the Seven were marble giants, with gemstones glinting here and there. The Crone’s lamp was forged of leaded glass with a huge chunk of green-and-gold rock at its heart, and the Mother wore amber and jade stones in the hem of her gown. *Tyrell colours. They have even made the Seven their own,* Quentyn thought. *Let us hope that the gods watch over me today as they watch over them.*

The bride was so long in arriving that Quentyn feared she had fled rather than marry him. But at long last the great doors began to creak open again, and two figures emerged from the end of the hall, arm in arm.

Ser Willas led his sister across the hall. In a doublet of turquoise with a thick green mantle thrown over his shoulders, his hair freshly combed and curled, he looked fit to upstage the groom. But that did not matter, since the bride upstaged them all. *Margaery Tyrell is not just some pretty maiden,* Quentyn thought, as she climbed the steps, *she is a beauty, and one I certainly do not deserve.* The bride wore pale gold lace patterned with silver flowers, and a cloak of Tyrell green. Her necklace was seed pearls, with a single amber stone set at its centre. Nothing gaudy or provocative, just her simple beauty. *I have to marry her, but I may just do this gladly.* Quentyn could feel himself flushing hot and red as she ascended the stairs, and prayed that she would not notice.

“My lady,” he murmured, as she came to stand beside him. His palms were getting sticky, so he rubbed them against his doublet, then took her hand in his. Her skin was pale, but warm to the touch.

Quentyn scarce heard the septon’s words. He kept stealing glances at his bride-to-be, looking away
quickly whenever their eyes chanced to meet. His hands shivered when the time came for him to replace her Tyrell maiden’s cloak with his own, a sheet of sheer orange silk with the sun and spear of House Martell worked in golden thread. He was sure that Oberyn was chuckling down below the dais. *Let him chuckle. Can you drown in a woman’s beauty?* Her eyes were liquid gold, with a hint of brown in them.

“Father, Smith, Warrior,” he found himself mumbling, barely alert, “Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger. I am hers, and she is mine, from this day until the end of my days.”

A shiver went through him. When they kissed, he could have died content.

Their wedding feast was no mean thing, but the cooks had had barely an afternoon to prepare it, so it was less grand than it might have been. “Not to worry,” Garth the Gross told Quentyn, “they will more than make up for it come breakfast on the morrow. Such a feast as you’ve never had, my lord.”

Gerris Drinkwater jested about a feast Quentyn had never had, too. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to start with a less beautiful woman? I’ve heard it’s harder to make beautiful women like you.”

“How do you know? Margaery Tyrell is not just some ordinary woman.

He barely spoke to the bride herself, partly because he worried what colour he would turn when his eyes met hers, and partly because he worried about what would come after. There was dancing, and drinking, and two singers, but everything swept by in a blur. Ser Loras Tyrell cornered Quentyn after they brought out the peach pie, laying a firm hand on the prince’s shoulder. “Be kind to her,” he said with a grim smile. “You seem a good man, my lord, but I do not know you. If you hurt my sister, it’s me you’ll face.”

“How do you know? Margaery Tyrell is not just some ordinary woman.

Perhaps one day I will be the one to make her laugh, Quentyn thought.

He turned and saw his uncle Oberyn coming down the steps, arm in arm with Olenna Tyrell, the Queen of Thorns. “Come a little closer, boy,” the old woman said.

“I’m not a boy.” Quentyn did not know why he’d said that. Perhaps it was the wine. He hadn’t had much, but he was already half-drunk on something else. *Someone* else.

“You are to me,” said Lady Olenna, “I remember when your uncle was a boy. He came to Highgarden to ogle my daughters, I seem to think, and ended up bedding a serving girl inside.”

Prince Oberyn grinned. “The wench was wily,” he said.

“So wily that my husband the Lord Oaf had the girl whipped for destroying the alliance he’d been
trying to broke with Princess Meria. I told him that it would not work. ‘Reachmen and Dornishmen have warred for centuries, Luthor, I said. What makes you think that you can bring an end to that?’ He replied, ‘You misunderstand me, Olenna. I am a very careful man, cautious in everything I do.’ A week later he rode his horse off a cliff.”

“Well,” said Quentyn, “perhaps your husband was more right than you thought. He has his Dornish alliance now.”

“Ah, yes, but he’s thirty years dead.” The old woman snorted. “I trust you know what you’re doing in the bedchamber?”

For a moment he was certain that he had misheard. “Y-yes,” Quentyn spluttered.

“My nephew is new to this sort of thing,” said Prince Oberyn with a wicked little grin. “Sometimes I am never quite sure how we are related.”

“Well,” said the Queen of Thorns, “I hope he has his uncle’s way with women rather than his father’s. Only one way of finding out, I suppose, and no point in wasting time.” She gestured to one of her guardsmen. “That should do nicely. It should give you, hmm, half a minute to prepare yourself.”

“Prepare myself for what?” Quentyn asked. Lady Olenna did not answer, and Prince Oberyn only smirked at him. *Half a minute to prepare for what?*

He did not even have that. Someone started to beat on a drum, over and over and over. In the middle of the hall, Galyeon of Cuy put down his harp and picked up his lute, and began to play ‘The King Took Off His Sandal, The Queen Took Off Her Crown.’ Quentyn was no king, but he knew what this meant. *It is time.* He filled his wine-cup once more and drained half of it in a single gulp. As he did so, Lady Margaery met his eyes across the hall, and he felt himself blushing red.

Prince Oberyn climbed up onto one of the benches. “No wedding is complete without a bedding!” he proclaimed, “so let us do our duty, and get them ready!”

It all happened faster than Quentyn thought possible. One moment he was standing on the dais with wine-cup in hand, the next two dozen women were crowding around him, dragging him down towards the floor, pulling at his buttons and laces. Before he knew it his boots were gone and his belt too. Nymeria Sand stood a few feet from him, smiling and waving, smug as ever. The women pulled him away from the hall and along a corridor, chasing him up a flight of stairs. By the time he reached the open door of his bedchamber, they had taken everything but his undershirt and his smallclothes. Quentyn ducked inside, and slammed the door fast behind him.

The bed was big enough for six. A ewer of wine sat on the bedside table. Quentyn poured one cup, and then another, for when Lady Margaery arrived.

That did not take long.

He heard Ser Loras Tyrell’s voice first, warding the men away. Then the ring of the door turned, and the Knight of the Flowers escorted his sister inside. Her gown was gone, and the silken nightdress she wore underneath was torn around the hem, and her face was flushed and red, her hair untangled, but she seemed to have fared much better than Quentyn had.

From the doorway, Ser Loras gave him the longest, sternest look he could muster, then disappeared into the night.

Quentyn wiped his sweaty palms on the blankets. Lady Margaery stood halfway between the door.
and the bed, uncertain of where to go. “You’re holding two cups of wine,” she said at last. “May I…”

“Oh.” His face flushed all over again. “Yes. Sorry, my lady.” When she took the cup her fingers brushed against his just for a moment, and that made him even redder. Don’t look into her eyes, don’t, don’t, you’ll look like an idiot all over again. But he could not help himself. “I…” he stammered, staring. “I…”

She reached up and entwined her hands with his. He could feel the blood pumping in his heart, faster and faster. “My uncle told me—,” he began.

“Your uncle doesn’t matter. There’s only two of us here, my lord.”

“Quentyn,” he told her, “my name is Quentyn. You… you should call me that. Because it’s my name.” His palms were sweating again. “My lady, I… I’ve never done this before.”

For half a moment she looked surprised. “Neither have I,” she admitted at last. “We can share our first time together, then.”

Oddly, he thought of Arianne, half a world away. By now, she was likely at Storm’s End, awaiting the arrival of her future husband, as they had planned. I wonder what she’d think of me now, Quentyn thought, as he lifted his head slightly and met Margaery’s lips with his own.

“There,” she said, once the colour had flooded back into his face. “Now, are you ready? Would you like me to take off my clothes, my lord?”

Quentyn, my name is Quentyn. “Yes,” he whispered, “here, I’ll do it for you.” Was that some strange fit of gallantry, or his desires getting the better of him? I do not deserve her, he thought, as he fumbled with her laces and straps. I do not deserve a woman like this. I am a cowardly prince, half a boy, and she is the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on. Like a princess from one of my mother’s tales… which means I am the frog.

But if this what being a frog is like, then I will gladly become one. I will gladly be hers.

He did not know what was happening until it had already happened. When the kisses went from his lips to his cock, the prince sighed and put his head back, inhaling the night air slowly through his lips. The sensation was a tickling, a tingling, a pulsation, running up and down his length and sending shivers through his whole body. “Yes,” he heard himself mutter, “yes…” When he feared that he could take it no more, the throbbing left him at once, and there came the suddenness of release, as though a great weight had been lifted.

The next time he went between her legs.

That was even sweeter, Quentyn thought afterwards, as they lay together in the cold air. Her lips tasted of wine whenever he kissed them, and his fingers were still sweating, though not with worry.

“Did you like that, my prince?” Margaery asked. “I… I think I did.” She sounded strangely sad. “Four weddings, and yet that was the first time…”

“I know now why my father married my mother,” he said. He could feel his heart thumping, faster and faster. “He did it for love.” And I love you, my lady, even if I have known you for scarcely a day. Whatever challenges our future may present, be it here, at Casterly Rock on our quest or in Dorne, we will face them together. Perhaps he was merely drunk on love, and the morning would make him see everything differently, but Quentyn hoped that it would not.
I am hers, and she is mine. Perhaps they were just words, but Quentyn meant to keep them. I have sworn a vow to her now, and I must keep it. Unbowed, unbent, unbroken. And that was all he knew.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that escalated quickly.

There was a LOT to cover in this chapter: Quentyn's waking up, his meeting with Oberyn, conversation with Ser Barristan, the wedding, and then the bedding.

Quentyn is definitely 'drunk on love', as he suspects, but I think that Margaery and Quentyn will get along nicely. I hope you didn't think the bedding scene was gratuitous, but it is a very important scene for the development of both characters. Quentyn has become a man (in that sense of the word) and Margaery is 'Maid Margaery' no longer, and she is finally bound to something.

Margaery and Quentyn will be heading up to the Rock, but we'll see them first in Willas's next chapter (coming very soon), where we'll get a few more details on this, as well as the general situation in the Reach.

We're coming up to a point in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS where the POVs undergo a large shift. Very soon several of our major characters will cease to be major POVs entirely and will be (mostly) subsumed by 'traditional' POV characters in their respective locations, while other new POVs will start to pop up in their place, the first of which will appear in chapter 60.

Thanks for reading.
The Road to Harrenhal

Chapter Summary

We are lions of the Rock, and lions do not kneel.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MYRCELLA

They gave her a horse and a fur-lined cloak, and thirty men to guard her on the road. To stop me from escaping, more like. That was ridiculous. Where would I go? Back to Casterly Rock, now that Stannis holds the Golden Tooth and Deep Den? To Riverrun, where the Riverlords will treat me just as Ser Brynden has, or worse? To King’s Landing, where Daenerys Targaryen wants my head on a spike?

Ser Brynden’s summons had come in the black of the night. Myrcella’s captors had roused her from her sleep in the back of the covered wayn, accompanied by Brienne of Tarth, who’d cut through the rope that bound her hands. “Shouldn’t we blindfold her?” one of her captors had asked.

“There is no need,” Lady Brienne replied. “It is too dark to see anything, anyway.” That was true. On the way, Myrcella had soaked the hem of her dress trailing through a puddle. All she could make out were the faint outlines of a few tents, lit by dwindling torchlight. The Tully command tent was no different to any of the other shadows, though it did have men in fish-helms standing guard outside.

Ser Brynden Tully had been sitting at a big oaken map table covered by a flap of cowhide, presumably so that she could not see their plans. What would I do with them, anyway? “My lady,” he said, “I trust you have not been treated unkindly?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it was particularly kind, either,” replied Myrcella, but Tully did not care about that. So long as I do not die in my cell, that will serve. Stannis will want to give me to his fire god alive and screaming. But when she looked around the tent, it was not Stannis’s Stormlander allies she saw, but Rivermen alone; their arms were the red stallion of Stone Hedge and the weirwood of Raventree Hall, the entwined snakes of House Paege and the eagle of the Mallisters, silver on a field of purple. “If you meant to give me to your king, you would have done so before now.” Oh, this is interesting. “Are you having second thoughts about your loyalty, Ser Brynden?”

“Even if I was, I would not consider accepting the offer of a Lannister.” He frowned. “As you will. Lord Vance, bring the boy inside.”

The lord of Wayfarer’s Rest went into the back of the tent for a few moments, then returned with ‘the boy’ following in his wake. His eyes flashed when they chanced upon her. He recognises me. “You’ve grown, Rickon,” she said.
“I’m Lord Stark to you,” he replied haughtily. His auburn curls were tight and knotted, his brow furrowed with anger. Is he playing a game with me? Myrcella did not remember this Rickon; she recalled a boy who’d been too short to clamber up into the trees and chase after his brother, but had always tried anyway, a boy who’d gotten mud all over her fine dresses and tried to apologise with sweet words he’d gotten from his sister.

She did remember Shaggydog, though she and Tommen had left Winterfell a matter of days after the direwolves were found. The wolf came from the shadows, so Myrcella did not realise how big he was until he was only a matter of a few feet away from him. Those yellow teeth bared in a ferocious, hungry snarl. Ser Brynden Tully stepped between her and the beast, and Brienne of Tarth said, “Have a care, my lady.”

“He’s grown,” Myrcella said, though half her words caught in her throat. “Oh, he’s definitely grown.”

“Yes,” said Ser Brynden, “and you would do well to be on your guard, my lady. The wolf can smell out a lie, and he will not like it.”

That was a lie in itself. Some dogs could smell out fear, but she was not really afraid. If Shaggydog decided to rip her throat out, there would not be time to be afraid. “What do you want from me?” she asked Ser Brynden.

He told her.

And that was how, as the hour of wolf gave way to the hour of the nightingale, Myrcella found herself venturing out onto the muddy track that led away from the Tully camp, towards the eastern road. Half of her escort were Tully men, the remainder part of the ramshackle band of outlaws that called themselves the Brotherhood without Banners. Ser Brynden had allowed her two men of her own: Ser Balon Swann of the Kingsguard, naturally, and a man-at-arms called Willit who was the second-best fighter they had, or so Ser Balon reckoned. She would sooner have taken Tyg, but he was still recovering from the arrow wound he’d taken in the mountains, and the nighttime ride would do him no good.

The first few hours of their journey passed in near-complete silence. Near every man was exhausted and in dire need of sleep, and so it came as a much-appreciated mercy when Ser Harys Haigh called a halt as the light of dawn was creeping over the hills.

Near every man was exhausted, aye, but that did not include the princess. She climbed to the top of the hill and settled herself down in the shade of a tall oak tree. The young knight they’d consigned to be her closest guard had no choice but to follow her. “Do you have to do this, m’lady?” he asked, exasperated. “Can’t we all just get some sleep?”

“You can if you wish. Dawn is coming. I mean to watch the sunrise.” She raised her hands apologetically. “I promise I won’t try to escape.”

“I’m not stupid, m’lady,” he replied.

Black hair, Myrcella thought, and blue eyes. He has the look, and even the voice. Oh, yes, things have suddenly gotten very interesting. “Well,” she said. “Since neither of us will be going to sleep, we might as well strike up some sort of conversation. What’s your name?”

A pause. He kicked a stone across the hillside. “Gendry. I mean, Ser Gendry. Of the hollow hill.”

“A new-made knight, then?”
He squinted. “How can you tell that?”

“You forgot your ‘ser’. Clearly you’re lowborn.”

“Not all of us can be born into wealth and power, my lady.” He sounded sullen.

*Well, as it happens, your father was a king, and mine isn’t.* She shrugged. “King’s Landing born, by the looks of you.”

“How can you tell that?”

*Do you say anything else?* “I lived there for most of my life,” she explained. *That, and Robert was too lazy to visit anywhere else to find a brothel.* “You look like a fighter. In a certain light.”

“I was a blacksmith, once.” The way he said it made it sound like a warning. *What are you going to do, ser? Hammer me to death?*

“House Lannister always has need of skilled tradesmen.”

That angered him. “I won’t work for House Lannister. You’re all murderers and killers.”

“Speaking for the Lannisters, I respectfully disagree.”

He shook his head. “I had a… a friend once. Lommy, his name was. One of your Lannister men stabbed him through the throat and left him to choke on his own blood.”

“Every side in the war has its mad dogs.” *We just have more than most.* “I’m sorry about your friend.”

He gave a bitter little chuckle. “No, you aren’t, m’lady. Why would you care?”

“The privilege of power is also a responsibility, and we have a responsibility to protect our people and make their lives better as well as our own. My brother would tell you that.”

“Your brother’s insane.”

*Well, his kindness is a sort of insanity, I suppose.* “Yes, he was.”

Ser Gendry frowned. “They say he ordered the murder of babies in the street.”

“He probably did.” *And yet you somehow managed to escape the culling of King Robert’s bastards. Oh, that is interesting.* Myrcella wondered how her mother would react to the news that one of the late king’s spawn still lived. *And there are others, I’ll bet.* “You’re with this Brotherhood without Banners, aren’t you?”

For a long time he did not answer. “I am.”

“I seem to recall my uncle mentioning them. The Forgotten Fellowship, he called them. Outlaws and raiders and broken men.”

Ser Gendry shook his head. “We aren’t like that. Most of us are knights.”

“Like you?” She raised her eyebrows. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard of the hollow hill. Does this hollow hill have a lord, perchance?”

“It did.”
“But not anymore?”

Again he paused before answering. “No. M’lady.”

Myrcella sighed. “Who knighted you, Ser Gendry of the hollow hill? Did he have a name, or did you just make it up when you ran away from the war?”

The anger burned suddenly in his eyes. He jumped to his feet. “I did not run away.”

“What knighted you?”

“You…”

“Who?”

“Was it Brynden Tully? You seem like his lackey.”

His face darkened. “I am not a lackey.” Now there’s the Baratheon anger coming out.

“Yes, you are. Everyone serves someone.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “And what about you, m’lady?”

“I serve my brother, the king.”

“And who does he serve?”

“The gods. Or so they say.” She was becoming less and less convinced that any gods existed, save for the bloody Stranger. If the gods were real, the holiest men would rule the world. King Robert ruled Seven Kingdoms, but he probably couldn’t name seven gods. “I am going to sleep now,” Myrcella announced to Ser Gendry. “Still, you’d best keep up your watch, in case I try and escape in my sleep.” She turned over and nestled in the crook of the oak tree, wrapping her cloak tight around herself.

She did not sleep, though. Closing her eyes rarely brought anything but an onslaught of nightmares. Most nights she dreamed of Joffrey. “I’ll hurt you in a new way,” he said, and I stood back and did nothing. She had turned away and briskly walked back to bed, as though that would somehow make her forget what she’d seen. Is it worse knowing what I saw, or knowing that I did nothing to stop it?

That wasn’t entirely true, though. She’d found Ser Arys Oakheart and loudly told him that she couldn’t sleep, knowing that it would likely prompt the knight to check on her brothers as well. You did all you could, she lied to herself.

An hour passed, and then another, and then two more. When she heard Ser Balon’s voice rousing the camp, Myrcella went and woke Gendry from where he was slumped under the tree. “Well,” she said, as he sat up and rubbed his eyes, “count yourself lucky that I didn’t decide to escape.”

Very soon they were back in the saddle.

Around mid-afternoon, they stopped where the road crossed through a ford, to feed and water the horses. Myrcella ate some bread and hard cheese with Ser Balon Swann, watching as a flock of birds crossed through the sky above, headed south. You are all fools, she thought, the south is drowning in war. The bloody Tyrells are in the south, and the Martells and the Targaryens. The place to go is north. Theon Greyjoy had burned Winterfell to cinders, and half the Starks were dead, but while the Riverlands had been ravaged by lions and wolves alike during the War of Five Kings, the North had
escaped it relatively unscathed, as it had with this new war.

Myrcella wondered whether they were really fighting the War of the Five Kings anymore. Joffrey was dead, as were Robb Stark, Balon Greyjoy and her uncle Renly. Stannis Baratheon remained, yes, but his support was wearing thin, and the Northmen seemed ready to turn on him, if what she’d seen at the Blackfish’s camp was any indication. The Boltons had fallen too, along with the Freys, and House Lannister’s strength in the Crownlands had dwindled to nothing. That singer at Casterly Rock was calling this ‘The Sunset War.’ The nights are getting longer and the sun is setting earlier and earlier with every moon’s turn.

There are dragons in Westeros now. She had no clue how they were supposed to kill a dragon, but they would have to find a way if they were going to take back the Iron Throne. If we can get Uncle Tyrion back from captivity, he might know.

But first, they needed the Vale. Once Stannis is defeated, we can march on the capital. Perhaps it would have been wiser to negotiate with the Tyrells as Tommen had suggested, but there was no time for doubts, not anymore.

Come evenfall, it had started to rain again. Ser Balon said that they would reach Harrenhal by midnight if they kept going at their current pace, but Ser Harys Haigh decided to set up camp instead on an abandoned farm for the night, so that they might approach the castle with fresh eyes on the morrow.

That turned out to be a mistake. It thundered and rained all night, and while Myrcella was out of the storm inside the barn, the road outside had turned into a muddy quagmire. The day had not bothered to dawn, so the sky was still dark when they ventured out and their torches kept guttering out. “I can hear wolves too,” said Ser Balon Swann, “that’s not a good omen.”

“The wolves won’t hurt us,” said a man called Alan of Oldstream, pointing to the banners of House Stark of Winterfell that flew above the barn.

Myrcella snorted. “The wolves will hurt whoever they please.” They’ll certainly hurt men as stupid as you.

It was nearly full dark again by the time Harrenhal came into sight. The sky was black, and so were the castle’s towers, so it was hard to make them out at first. They said that Harrenhal was the biggest castle in the Seven Kingdoms, but it did not look as big as Casterly Rock. There must be more that I cannot see, she thought.

A hundred horsemen met them about a league from the castle walls, half flying the moon-and-falcon banners of House Arryn and half the three-headed dragon of the Targaryens. So they did not lie when they said Aegon was here, the princess thought, as Ser Harys rode ahead to talk with the king’s banner-bearers. No matter. That would complicate her task somewhat, but not enough to truly inconvenience her. And it might be good to get to learn the truth about Aegon Targaryen, to know what kind of foe he might be.

She was unsurprised when Ser Harys came riding back to her with four of Aegon’s knights to his flanks. “My lady,” one of the knights said, “I am Ser Rickard Fell, a knight in service to His Grace King Aegon. If it please you, we would like you to come with us.”

“I beg your pardon, but Ser Brynden Tully has entrusted me with a diplomatic mission that requires me to seek immediate audience with Lord Petry Baelish.”

“And you shall have that, my lady. Once you see the king.”
It was the answer she had been expected, and the answer she had wanted, in truth. *If Aegon thinks that he has inconvenienced me by seeking audience with him, he may be more tractable than usual. If he is tractable to begin with.* This king could be a squalling man-child like Joffrey, or a cool and calculated plotter like her lord grandfather, Tywin Lannister. *Well, let us pray that his years in exile have left him blind to the game of thrones.*

They left the main column behind; the princess, Ser Balon Swann, and four Targaryen knights. The rain fell hard and heavy among the grasses, and the moon hid itself behind the tall towers of Harrenhal. “Has the king taken up rooms in the castle?” Myrcella asked Ser Rickard Fell.

“That he has, my lady,” the knight replied. “Lord Baelish was most grateful to extend the offer of his hospitality.” They passed beneath a gatehouse near as large as the Red Keep. Guardsmen stared down at her through the murder holes with uncertain eyes.

Harrenhal’s yard was the biggest Myrcella had ever seen, and there were more tents there than she could count in a day. They’d sprung up everywhere, a great city of silk and canvas, adorned with a thousand different banners. Some were the queer eastern sigils of Littlefinger’s Essosi sellswords, others the arms of Riverlords, Valemen, Stormlanders, Crownlanders, even a few Dornishmen here and there. The moon-and-falcon of Arryn, Corbray’s winged heart, the broken wheel of Waynwood, Pryor, Shett, Redding, Sutherland and Sutcliffe; Templeton’s nine stars and the three arrows of the Hunters, Maidenpool’s red salmon and Celtigar’s red axe. The lamb of Cafferen and the sleeping lion of the Grandisons; Buckler, Sunglass and Bar Emmon, Velaryon, Rykker and Rosby. To her left stood the biggest tower Myrcella had ever seen, with a gaping gatehouse arch near the size of the Lion’s Mouth. Above that arch was hung an enormous banner with the three-headed dragon of Targaryen woven on it, red against black.

“This is a fair host,” said Ser Balon Swann.

The knights conducted her over towards the tower with the dragon banner. “This is Widow’s Tower,” Ser Rickard informed her, “King Aegon has taken it for his seat.” He pointed vaguely behind him. “And that is the Kingspyre Tower, where Lord Baelish and young Lord Arryn have their chambers.”

*And Lady Sansa?* Myrcella wondered. *Does she shelter with the dragon she does not know, or the mockingbird who bought and sold her like livestock?*

The Widow’s Tower had a stable large enough to house dragons, Ser Rickard boasted. When they had stabled their horses, he led her up the main staircase. Despite the bustle of the yard, the tower seemed to be deserted. Or perhaps that was because it was so large.

After what seemed like an age they finally reached a landing, where a knight called Ser Rolly Duckfield ushered her along a corridor towards the king’s chambers. “His Grace was surprised to learn of your arrival, my lady,” said the knight, who wore the white cloak and enamelled armour of a Kingsguard. “And especially at such a late hour. I am afraid the proceedings might not be as formal as you’d like them to be.”

No doubt he thought her a pampered southron princess, concerned with such frivolities. Informality would suit her just fine. *I have had more than enough courtesies for one lifetime.*

Ser Rolly led her into a solar that was bigger than many a hall. The flagstones were cracked and speckled with ash, the windows huge and drafty. A fire burned in a hearth shaped like a raven’s mouth. *The raven is for House Hoare,* Myrcella remembered. *Harren the Black’s sigil showed the distant lands conquered by the ironmen: the longship of the Iron Isles, the black raven of Oldtown, the grape cluster of the Arbor and the pine trees of Bear Island.*
But the dragons beat them down, and for two hundred and eighty-three years they ruled from Bear Island to Arbor in their place… until the Mad King came along, and Robert Baratheon slew Rhaegar on the Trident. Until the man whom they call my father slew King Aegon’s own sire. She had not considered that until now.

“Your Grace,” announced Ser Rolly, “I present the Lady Myrcella, of House Lannister.”

A score of candles flickered in a tall iron sconce, casting the shadow of the figure who sat beside the fire. King Aegon was not dressed like a king, but that could be excused, given the late hour. He wore breeches, shirt and a blue leather doublet to greet her. “An honour, my lady.”

“And you, my lord.”

“Your Grace,” corrected Ser Rolly.

“My lord,” returned Myrcella. “We can stand here arguing about courtesies, but I would sooner not.”

“She is right, ser,” Aegon said. “Wake Edric, if you would, and have him bring us a kettle of mulled wine. With cloves and cinnamon.” Ser Rolly went, frowning all the while. “Will you have a seat, my lady?” the would-be king asked.

“If it please you.” She sat. “No doubt you want to know my business here?”

“Oh, I do. But humour me first, my lady. If I were to bend the knee to your brother here and now, and swear my fealty to Casterly Rock, what would he offer me?”

She had not expected him to ask that. “Your father was Prince of Dragonstone,” she told him, “likely the king would allow you to keep that title.”

“Prince? That is not ungenerous, I suppose. Anything else?”

“Storm’s End, mayhaps. Someone has to hold it.” He’d probably offer me as well, a wife to keep any treason in check. “But we are not in that position.”

“House Lannister and House Targaryen are at war,” Aegon agreed. “But they do not have to be.”

“I have not come here to negotiate a peace with you, my lord.”

“But would you consider it?”

“Would you bend the knee to my brother?” she asked.

He only smirked at her. “No. But I would offer him the chance to bend the knee to me. How does Lord Tommen Lannister, Warden of the West sound to you?”

He’d likely accept the terms with barely a moment’s thought, Myrcella knew. “Would it not be easier,” he said, “kinder even, if I were to lay down my arms once Stannis is defeated, ride to King’s Landing with an escort, and swear our fealty to the Targaryens?”

“That would sound impossible,” she replied. “My brother is King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, not you.”

“Well, then it seems I must take you hostage. You understand, of course?”

“I would do no differently myself. Is my uncle Tyrion still in King’s Landing?”
“He was.” A smile threatened at the corners of his mouth. “I cannot help but wonder… why would you choose to venture away from safety and travel halfway across Westeros? Is it simply because you wanted to explore the world beyond the Westerlands… or is it because House Lannister is not strong enough to stand up to Stannis Baratheon on its own?”

She sighed. “Do you play *cyvasse*, my lord?”

“The game? Aye. A little. I played with your uncle in King’s Landing, come to mention it.”

“We must have a game sometime, but I digress. I’m sure you’ve realised by now that I haven’t come here for you, my lord.”

“Of course not. Ser Brynden Tully sent me, actually.”

His eyes widened a little. “The Blackfish?”

“The very same. He wanted me to see that his niece actually is at Harrenhal, and to send him a letter when I arrived. Forgive me for saying so, but the relationship between the pair of you seems strained.” That was a good thing, she supposed. If the prospective alliance between the Targaryens and the Tullys was weak, then she might find her task a whole lot easier.

“Why did he send you?”

“I was his prisoner. If you were lying about having Sansa here, what does he lose?”

“Nothing. But Stannis Baratheon loses a lot.” The king considered that for a moment. “Very well. I will permit you to send this letter to the Blackfish, but you will send another to your brother Tommen in Casterly Rock, presenting my terms to him. Maester Colemon will supervise you.”

She smiled. “And here I was thinking we had an agreement built on mutual trust.”

Aegon’s squire entered the room, bearing a platter with a jug of mulled wine. “Thank you, Edric,” the king said, “and… oh. Lord Baelish, I was not expecting to see you.”

Myrcella turned in her chair. “I was not expecting to be here,” the lord of Harrenhal said. All the while his eyes never left hers. “But when I heard that the sweet lady was newly arrived, I hastened over here. I hope you will forgive me if I have to go running off, though. I was supping with Lady Sansa and Sweetrobin when the news came of your arrival, my lady.”

“We won’t keep you if you’d sooner go back to them,” said Aegon.

“And treat a noble guest with such little respect? Why, that would be most unchivalrous of me.” By now he had drawn up a chair and was busy pouring the wine.

“Thank you for your… hospitality, Lord Baelish,” Myrcella said. “I must admit that I find myself a little famished after the day’s riding.”

Littlefinger smiled. “Join us for supper, then, by all means. There is more than enough to spare. I mislike boasting, but Kem cooks better fare than anything you’ve had in Casterly Rock, I don’t doubt. My own trusted man.”

*Oh, I don’t doubt. And I’m sure he’s not averse to cooking with poison, when the need arises.* “You are too kind,” she said, sipping her wine.

“Lord Baelish’s hospitality is most generous,” Aegon said, “but I fear I must keep you from a little
“Surely they can wait until the morrow?” Littlefinger asked. “The hour of ghosts is upon us, Your Grace, and I find myself tiring. Allow me to show Princess Myrcella to her chambers in the Kingspyre Tower.” He drained his wine-cup, and offered her his arm. “My lady?”

Myrcella did not give Aegon time to stop her. She took Petyr Baelish’s arm and let him lead her from the solar, out into the corridor and down the first flight of stairs. “I do hope you haven’t suffered long, my lady. Would that I could have been there sooner.”

“You haven’t suffered?”

“Aegon can be tedious, and prickly too. He seems to forget that he is my guest… which is a little vexing, given how freely I offered up my hospitality.”

“I see.” They crossed through an empty hall, their shadows standing tall against the cracked black stone of the walls. Myrcella could hear the wind shrieking through the gaps. “Do you have Lady Sansa?” she asked.

“I do, thankfully. King Aegon offered to quarter her in his own tower, but Sansa was anxious to be close to her cousin Robert. I am sure you will grow fond of him too, in time.” He smiled at her.

Myrcella bit her lip. Careful now, you will only have one chance to put this before him. “And… and suppose that this fondness were to blossom into something more?”

“Oh, I doubt that you’ll have a love story for the songs, but most marriages aren’t, especially those involving princesses. There’s always some lowborn suitor contending for her hand, the hero in all the stories.” Myrcella thought of Tyg, blushing whenever she kissed him, taking an arrow intended for her, smiling and nodding his head, quick to follow her every whim and wish. “Those stories usually end badly for all parties involved,” Littlefinger said. “I should know. I was the lowborn suitor.”

“What was her name?”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “It was a long time ago, my princess.”

“So you will consent to the match?” That had been unnervingly easy.

“It’s not me you need to please. Robert is a fussy boy, fond of stories and hawking and increasingly of archery.” I remember. Tommen said that I should have brought him a hawk. “Of course, I might have certain qualms as well. King Aegon has offered me the Lord Protectorate of the Vale and the Eastern Riverlands. A most generous offer. But I am a practical man, and if King Tommen were to field a better offer… nonetheless, I am not like to make any rash decisions now. When the Tullys reach the castle, King Aegon will hold a council to negotiate terms of peace. It may be that I am able to sway him into agreeing the match. To his eyes, you will seem not only Lord Robert’s wife but his hostage, and one less problem for him to deal with. Aegon is no fool, but he is lazy.”

They were passing through the stables now, and descending still. Littlefinger picked up a torch from the sconce bracket as they went down. “I thought we were going to my chambers,” Myrcella said.

“We are. But first, there is something I would like to show you. Tell me, princess: have you ever willingly visited the castle dungeons?”

“No. I… why, they’re always so…” The word would not come to her lips. “…cold.”

Littlefinger chuckled. “Right you are. And I would not blame you for choosing not to venture down
here, but you would look something of a fool if King Aegon chose to bring your uncle up as some sort of emotional blackmail. Not that you’d be susceptible to it, of course.”

“But he said that Tyrion was in King’s Landing—”

“The wrong uncle, my lady.”

*I have no other uncles*, she almost said. But when Littlefinger told the guard to open the door of the next cell, she understood.

“…Myrcella?”

Ser Jaime Lannister, ragged and tired-looking, slumped on a bed of straw, his cell cavernous and dim. *He looks fifty years older when I last saw him, back in King’s Landing… but that could have been fifty years ago, with all that has passed since.* When Littlefinger lifted the torch, the firelight flickered through Ser Jaime’s cloudy green eyes. *Perhaps the gods are good after all,* the princess thought. *He is not dead, just beaten. For now.* A smile crossed her lips. *If Aegon thinks he can break us down and make us bow, he is sorely mistaken.*

*For we are lions of the Rock, and lions do not kneel.*

Chapter End Notes

I feel a little bad ending the chapter like *that*, but this chapter is about Myrcella, Gendry, Aegon and Littlefinger, not Jaime, Sansa and Robert Arryn. That’s all coming in Myrcella V, because we do spend a lot of time at Harrenhal over the next few chapters. The cast list converging on the castle is massive, varied and presents some very interesting reunions. Likewise, Myrcella will hopefully have some more interesting talks with Rickon, the Blackfish and we’ll see Tyg again. And she and Aegon might play that game of cyvasse.

Time for some thematic analysis. Who *doesn’t* love themes? A COAT OF GOLD was about identity and who these characters are deep down, with self-revelations for Theon, Tyrion, Sansa and Jaime being among the most notable. THE SUNSET KINGDOMS is about resilience, and staying true to yourself and what you are, about holding on to your principles and values and rights... or, “that you work hard for what you want in life. That your word is your bond. And you do what you say and keep your promise.” We've seen Quentyn maintaining his vows to Dorne and to his new wife, in spite of his injury. We've seen Jon standing firm with the Night's Watch north of the Wall, doing what he vowed to do. We've seen Myrcella maintaing her integrity (in a roundabout way) and keeping her honour.

Or something like that.

Coming up: two POV characters (old and new alike) take us behind the scenes of the Dornish alliance, the Davos/Melisandre/Shireen problem comes to the end, and Stannis attacks the walls of Lannisport. No Jon, Dany or Tyrion (sorry) but it's going to be fun. And you might get a nice surprise or two.
Ghost paused, hackles rising, and snarled in the direction of the forest. Jon stopped what he was doing and knelt in the snow. He had learned to rely upon his direwolf’s sharper senses… but he did not need them to feel the unmistakeable sensation of being watched. They call it the haunted forest for a reason. He curled his fingers tightly around Longclaw.

They had travelled four days from Hunter’s Hermitage, starting out the morning after Bran, Meera and Hodor had headed south. Their final goodbye took place at a ford of a frozen river, as the stars were coming out over the forest. The two brothers had said few words as they embraced for a last time, but Meera brought him Dark Sister and its ruby-decorated scabbard and thrust it into Jon’s hand. “I can’t have it,” she said, “I won’t have it. It reminds me too much of what happened to Jojen.”

Back at the camp, Jon entrusted Dark Sister to Mance Rayder, who received his prize with an odd, almost concerned look, yet no protestation. “One man cannot fight with two swords,” Jon told him, “nor should we waste our Valyrian steel.”

Longclaw had been the ancestral sword of House Mormont once, so he could have passed it on to the She-Bear and taken Dark Sister for his own, but the Targaryen sword was to be wielded with one hand instead of two, as he preferred, and besides, Longclaw had not failed him yet. A bastard sword for a bastard boy. It was almost poetry.

Mance and his chiefs sent patrols to circle the camp borders, and his Sworn Brothers took up guard duties too, but Jon liked to venture out on his own occasionally, to simply walk and think in solitude.

The trees were beech and pine and fir, differing in height and breadth and form, yet all in the light of the setting sun they all had a certain chilly similarity. Icicles hung from the branches, glowing pale-blue, each as long and thin as a ghoul’s finger.

Ghost shifted suddenly, turning back towards the camp. The flames from the roaring cookfires reflected in his bright red eyes, but their stare was fixed upon something – or rather, someone – else.

It was not until Jon saw the shimmer of Aly Mormont’s black ringmail that he realised it was her and not a real bear amid those furs and skins. “Lord Snow!” came the She-Bear’s muffled call as she trudged up the ridge. “Jon Snow!”

When she reached the top her cheeks were red with cold. “My lady,” said Jon, ducking his head.
“Spare me your silly courtesies, Lord Snow. You’re a Stark of Winterfell, not some perfumed ponce from the south.”

“I’m a Snow, my lady. I’ve learned to speak carefully.”

“I’ve got bastards as well, Lord Snow. But I’ll be damned if they have to kneel and lick the boots of highborn folk just for being born on the wrong side of the bed.”

“How many—?”

“Just the two for now, Lord Snow. Bedded down with a bear, or so that’s what I tell them.”

Jon smiled weakly. “I know someone who’d love to meet you, my lady.” He thought of Tormund Giantsbane, and his tall tales of adventure that went far beyond ridicule. And he remember the way Ygritte had laughed at them. *You never fucked no bear, Tormund... you know nothing, Jon Snow...*

“I suppose I’m something of a hypocrite, calling you ‘Lord Snow’ and all that. Just a habit. Everyone calls you Lord Snow, I wonder if they actually know your name.”

*Under the hill, I was just Jon, he thought. The boy. But Lord Snow killed the boy long ago. He gritted his teeth against the chill. See what you have made of me in your mockery, Ser Alliser? “I am a Snow, for certain. As for a lord, well, that’s a different matter. My lady.”*

“You’ve grown old before your time.” She sounded almost sorry for him.

“I had no choice. My brothers named me Lord Commander. I did not want it.”

“And yet you took it. The post my uncle was grooming you to hold. You could have refused it and gone back to stewarding for the new Lord Commander. They chose you for a reason.”

*Would that I knew what it was.*

“This is growing deadly dull,” the She-Bear said pointedly. “I’ve only been here half a minute and already my fingers are starting to freeze. How do you make sure they don’t fall off while you’re not looking?”

“Gloves,” Jon answered.

Alysane chuckled. “Quite right. I’m afraid we Mormonts are not known for our patience. If I had it my way, I’d make for Hardhome as fast as I could, without none of this stopping and pitching tents and patrolling and things. Then again, we’d likely end up dead.”

“Or worse,” Jon muttered darkly.

The She-Bear heard him. “Call me a blind fool if you will, but I cannot fathom fear of these foes whom we never see. Can you draw one of these Others for me, Lord Snow? Can you bring me one’s head?”

“The Others... shatter, my lady, when touched by Valyrian steel or dragonglass. Sam Tarly told it so, and I saw the same when I fought one of them off myself.”

She thumped his shoulder heartily. “A Slayer too, eh? A wonder they’re not singing songs about you already.”

*They do sing songs, Jon thought, just not the sort you are thinking of.*
“Well, I’ll leave you to your patrol,” Alysane said. “The campfire is doubtless getting lonely without my presence. You’re welcome to join us.”

“Not tonight, I fear.” And not for many nights, like as not. When Alysane was gone, Jon turned his gaze eastward, deeper into the Haunted Forest, towards Storrol’s Point and Hardhome, towards to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. I left Cotter Pyke the command, Jon thought, and Ser Denys Mallister at the Shadow Tower, but what of the others? Bowen Marsh had been overthrown by Mance’s men at Castle Black, true, but the Old Pomegranate was not without friends, and those friends might see Marsh’s imprisonment as a calculated move against him.

Damn them all, Jon decided.

An hour before midnight, Black Jack Bulwer and Tumberjon came to relieve him of his duty. “Satin’s waiting at your tent,” Tumberjon told him, “he’s been there nearly an hour.”

He had forgotten Satin. Jon had not expected to see the Oldtown boy on this ranging, yet here he was, and he was committed to serve his lord commander as best he could. “I am not hungry,” Jon told his rangers, and felt absurdly guilty for doing so. Every moment I spent guarding this perimeter, I left one of my brothers in the cold.

Nor did he return to Satin at once, but instead hastened to Mance Rayder’s tent. The King-beyond-the-Wall’s ‘tent’ was no proper pavilion like the ones the Northern lordlings had raised at Hunter’s Hermitage, but it matched them for size several times over, and inside there was enough space for most of the twenty-four wildling chieftains to meet. Two lanky spearwives stood outside with crossed spears, rubbing sleep from their eyes. “All hail the Lord Crow,” one muttered as Jon approached. “I swear, you’re lucky that Mance is late to bed and early to rise; if you came to my tent at this ungodly hour, I’d send you right away.”

His own Sworn Brothers would never have dared to speak to him so brazenly. But courtesy meant little to the free folk. “Then I’d best not come near your tent,” Jon muttered.

He found Mance seated on a camp stool, with a cup of mulled wine in one hand and a flagon on a nearby table. “Want some?” he asked, already starting to pour. “You’ll find it warms you more than most; I have a liking for cinnamon.” He stirred Jon’s cup with a spoon. “All men like their mulled wine a little differently, but it’s the same thing in the end.”

Jon frowned. “Are you making a point about the free folk and the Night’s Watch… cinnamon and cloves… yet the same wine…?”

Mance laughed throatily. “You think too much, Lord Snow. Sometimes a man has to take a little time away from his woes and his troubles. But if you must find some worth in my words, then let it be this; the Others feed on darkness and despair. What better to oppose that than with some joy in the world?”

“You sound like Melisandre,” said Jon.

“Perhaps the red woman had the right of it. She certainly knew what she was doing when it came to keeping me alive. I owe her something, as a man of my word.”

“I doubt either of us will see her again. Stannis is gone for good. He will take the Iron Throne, or die in the attempt.”

“If I were you, I’d throw my support behind this new southern queen—”

“The Night’s Watch takes no part in the wars of the realm,” Jon reminded him.
“As you will. But while we were at Castle Black some queer folk came in from Eastwatch, claiming she has three dragons. Would that we had a dragon here… we have a dragon sword, aye,” He indicated Dark Sister, hanging from his belt, “but no dragons…” There was no use dwelling on such things, though, and Mance knew it. “You look like you have a purpose here, Lord Snow, not just a desire for idle conversation.”

“Aye. Hardhome is barely a week away, and yet we don’t have even an inkling of a plan.”

“Too much planning can be as bad as too little,” said Mance. “It leaves you open to the unexpected. And if you do come up with some complicated plan, Lord Snow, you should not expect the free folk to follow it. Numbers will be our strength.”

Jon opened his mouth to dispute that, but his words were lost to a low wail from the east: Aaaaawhoooooo0000000000000, it came, a single loud ululation that knifed through the silent night before dying down in a whimper. They both stood, reaching for their weapons, waiting for the call to come again.

It did not. One blast means rangers returning. Jon turned and met Mance’s eyes. “Tormund?”

“Perhaps.” Mance sheathed his sword. “No, I would have known by now. We both know Tormund is not the sort to come sneaking in quietly under the cover of night.”

“Better one blast than three,” Jon said gloomily. He ducked out through the flap of Mance’s tent, and came face to face with Whoresbane Umber and Asher Forrester.

“We heard the horn,” said Asher.

“Everyone in the damn camp heard the horn,” said Whoresbane. “The question is: who did it blow for? You send any scouts down that way, Lord Snow?”

“No. I thought it best to stay together.”

“Aye,” said Asher, “I wouldn’t like to be lost tonight. I’m getting chills, and not from the cold.”

Jon could not blame him. Not for the first time, he felt cold fingers of dread crawling up his back. He clasped his hands and ran them over Longclaw’s hilt. The white wolf on the pommeled looked unimpressed… but the other white wolf was nowhere to be seen. Where is Ghost?

Aly Mormont came to the hill next, then Harrion Karstark and Donnel Flint of Widow’s Watch, and Ser Rickard Ryswell. Then Devyn Sealskinner and Old Halleck, then Leathers and lanky Iron Emmett in their blacks. “Those aren’t our men out there,” said Emmett, “Toad was shitting bricks when he heard the horn, seeing as he never saw anyone going out. Like as not they’re just Mance’s men.”

If these are Mance’s men, then why did he seem so surprised? Jon wondered. “Are Bernarr and Tumberjon still out on their patrol?”

“Aye, m’lord,” said Leathers, “and Matthar too, and a couple of others. Tumberjon came back and got a dozen brothers to search the perimeter with him, and some wildlings as well. A couple of them Northmen went too, the one with the buckets on their banners.”

“The Wulls.” Jon was reassured by that. Big Bucket Wull was a trustworthy man, and a capable fighter, which might be more important if things went sour. “With luck they won’t venture too far out.”
As more wildling chiefs crowded up into the clearing outside Mance’s tent, Jon felt a little less uneasy… until Leathers said, “There’s something strange in the air tonight, m’lord. Wun Wun felt it too. Says that the cold’s different, like it’s gone all funny.”

“Giants probably feel funny all the time, ‘cos they’re giants,” Iron Emmett said. “Must be hard, having your head in the clouds for hours and hours.”

Jon was not so certain.

Another ten minutes passed; by then more than forty chiefs and leaders had gathered outside Mance’s tent. Tumberjon returned, along with Left-Hand Lew and Jeren of the stewards, announcing that Lord Norrey was raising a second party to join Big Bucket’s search. Impatience gnawed at Jon as the minutes lengthed and lengthened...

Then at last Satin appeared, red and flushed. “That wildling woman with the mask, my lord, she’s bringing them over,” he said. And Morna o’the White Mask was not long arriving after that. When Jon saw who was with her, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief.

Mance spread his arms wide to greet the first man. “Toregg.” Then his face creased with worry. “Your father?”

“He made it out of Hardhome, but most weren’t so lucky. Mother Mole and half her flock got out, and my father too, but we can’t say the same for all of them. That fool Gerrick Kingsblood is dead, and Bluefingers, and countless others.”

Dolorous Edd nodded. “It was bloody horrible. And too cold by half.”

“It were the white walkers that did it,” Val said. In the low moonlight her honey-gold braid shone especially bright. “The Night King came down with thousands of wights. Thousands died, on our side and theirs, but when the battle was over he just raised his arms and they all climbed back up like they’d never been dead in the first place.”

“Are they coming this way?” asked Whoresbane.

“Stopped following us after a while,” Toregg replied. “Tormund’s got the rest of them, but he sent us ahead to bring the word. It’ll take us a few days, maybe a week, before we’re all together. We should start heading back to the Wall.”

Jon spoke up. “When we parted ways, we were headed north of Hardhome, up into the Frostfangs. How did you find your way back to Tormund?”

Val stepped forward. “The truth of it was that we’d given you up for dead, Lord Snow up for dead, sad as it is. But not long after we lost you a few rangers popped up, bold as you please, out in the middle of nowhere. They took us to a place called the North Grove.”

A young man in worn Night’s Watch leathers stepped forward, a faded fur cloak across his shoulders. It was a moment before Jon recognised him. “You were a deserter,” he said icily. “Gared Tuttle. You killed a man and threw him from the Wall.”

“That I did, m’lord,” replied Gared, “and I fled, though not without reason.” His eyes moved from Jon to Asher Forrester. “Lord Asher. I went north to answer your father’s last command, to find the North Grove and—”

“What the fuck’s the North Grove?” asked the fat chieftain they called the Great Walrus.
“Ironwood trees,” said Gared. “The last stronghold of House Forrester north of the Wall. But it’s the ironwood itself that matters; it makes for a good strong shield, and the Others hate iron… just as they hate the ironwood. Their swords won’t break through it. They can’t.”

For a moment there was complete silence. Then whispers turned to spoken words, and then to shouting, and the tumult grew and grew. Shields that stop the Others? Why not? Eventually, Mance managed to bring back some sort of order by banging two shields together over his head. He looked at Gared. “So what you’re saying, boy, is that a man armed with dragonglass and ironwood would be more than a match for a fully armed Other?…”

Gared nodded. “Aye. Perhaps the gods are on our side after all.”

Jon was not so sure. “That won’t be enough,” he said quietly. With Emmett’s help he pushed through the crowd. “That won’t be enough!” he said loudly. “Aye, we may have shields to deal with the Others and dragonglass to destroy them, but those weapons are useless if we haven’t the men to wield them.” He turned a full circle, once, twice, and his eyes came to rest on Tall Toregg. “Men like you. Standing together.”

“We are not afraid to fight,” Devyn Sealskinner proclaimed.

“That is what you say now. But men change. And when they venture out into the night and see what is coming for them, they will change their minds very quickly indeed.”

“We do not kneel,” said Mance Rayder stolidly, “not to your southern kings and certainly not to our northern foe. We do not flee either.” A sound of general agreement rumbled around them, but not all of the wildlings joined it. So few speak for so many, Jon thought, but when the fight comes, the many will break and flee. “Nonetheless,” the king went on, “that is for the morrow. Tonight, we could all do with a few hours of rest. Morna, Halleck, take up your duties on the perimeter…” The rest of his words were drowned out.

Jon was turning to go when Val caught his arm and held him back. “We thought you dead, Lord Snow,” she said, anger brimming her voice, “thought those cold things had carried you off.” Then her voice softened. “I—I prayed for you.”

“You did?”

“No!” Val said, indignant, “Not like that, only… you’re the only crow commander in thousands of years that’s tried to bring our people together. To save the lives of not only your crow brothers, but of the free folk too, men and women and children. Without your help, I did not know if we would ever get south of the Wall.” She met his eyes with her silvery-blue ones. “So thank you, Lord Snow. Thank you for not being dead.” She went away without another word.

Jon led his Sworn Brothers back down his hill, Dolorous Edd now among them. “Tumberjon,” he instructed, “go with Toad and ten others; send men out to bring back Lord Wull and the Norrey. Tell them that there is no danger here… for now.” It would not hurt to be over-cautious. Tumberjon and Toad went. “Edd,” Jon said, “Toregg said Tormund is a few days away; do you have anything to add?”

The dour-faced steward shrugged. “Nope. Well, nothing useful. I can tell you all about acorn paste, though, if you want. I could probably study acorn paste at the Citadel now, only it’s not very useful unless you’re starving. And you need some acorns, of course.”

Jon did not have any acorns, nor did he think that Edd’s knowledge would come in helpful. But if our food stocks run out, we may come to rely upon Dolorous Edd and his acorns when things turn
Satin conducted Jon back to his tent. “Will you need me to patch up your boots, m’lord?” he asked as Jon stepped inside. “They’ve got some wear on them, that’s all.”

“No. If it comes to it, I’ll get some more when we return to Castle Black. You should get yourself some sleep, Satin. Tomorrow will be a long march.” Mance would want to meet Tormund halfway, to spare both armies a couple of days’ march. The faster we meet up, the faster we can put the Wall between us and them.

That night, sleeping on a scratchy straw pallet beneath his cloak, Jon Snow dreamed the wolf dream.

He was far away from the camp, beyond the city of tents, beyond the frozen stream and the patrol torches, walking a path that cut through the heart of the haunted forest like an icy wound. The white wolf perked his ears up. Was that the sound of water trickling over there? That was strange. Everything ought to have frozen over by now, unless men were about, changing the world as they often did, if only for a few days before the will of the seasons overpowered them and time went on as it always had and always would.

Yes. Men are here. He smelled blood, and the smoky scent of charred meat. The air was hazy with woodsmoke. Cautiously, he crept on. Snow crunched beneath his paws. He passed through the last of the foliage, and saw them.

There were not nearly so many here as there were at the other place, but the number was still in the hundreds. The white wolf smelled man-smells, of blood and piss and sour sweat. He turned his gaze to the night, where banners flapped insolently in the wind. Not the black cloth squares of the Night’s Watch, nor the felt-and-fur pennants of the free folk, but an old, ancient device, a man splayed against an X-shaped cross, red on black.

When he turned the trees of the great black forest had risen up around him, and suddenly he was no longer a wolf but a man, lost and lonely. Snow, the leaves whispered, snow, snow, snow. Far off, a raven cawed and took flight, flapping great black wings. Death, it called out, death, death, death.

The wind picked up. Suddenly Jon heard the howl of another wolf; aaaaawhooooooo, it went, aaaaawhooooooo. As he looked in the directions of the sound, shards started flying through the night, humming as they went. He reached up to touch one… and cried out in pain as it sliced through his palm, scattering brilliant droplets of bright red blood in the snow.

Aaaaawhooooooo, the wind screamed back, aaaaawhoooooo... Jon opened his mouth to reply, but no sound would come forth. He was cold all over, save for the one spot in his chest where he burned white-hot. “Promise me, Ned!” a woman’s voice screamed. “Promise me!” The night air smelled of blood and roses.

The Other appeared from the trees, slender, twisting a pale blue shard between its fingers as it advanced. When it stood mere feet before him it paused, and for a moment some flicker of emotion lit those ice-blue eyes. Recognition, was it, or... sadness?

It raised its ethereal blade high, and swung.

Jon woke gasping for air like a drowning man. Sweat drenched his brow and plastered his hair, but there were goosepimples all along his arms, and the cold bit at every inch of exposed skin. He pulled his cloak around himself so tight it seemed like to rip, and stumbled to his feet. His heart was beating as fast it had ever had, and he felt a strange chill on his left side, though it was fast fading. The Other, Jon remembered, when it cut me, as I was escaping the cave. The scratch had scarred over with unnerving quickness, and it had been barely noticeable until just now. But when Jon put his fingers...
upon it a chill went through him, making his teeth chatter. “Cold,” he muttered confusedly.

_The wildlings will have seen stranger things_, he thought, _one of them will know what this means_. He buttoned his shirt again and shrugged back into his black cloak, strapping Longclaw at his waist. _Night gathers_, he thought, pushing through the tent flap into the new-broken morning, _and now my watch begins_.

Chapter End Notes

A bit fillery, I admit, but I liken this chapter to a few of Jon's POVs from _A Dance with Dragons_. Mostly this chapter serves to update us on what's happening north of the Wall, since our visits there are going to be few and far between over the next 20 or so chapters. Things start to get really interesting up there soon, though.
The tunnel under the Wall seemed to stretch on forever. Only the slowly growing speck of light at the far end gave an indication of how close they were. “Hodor,” said Hodor, his voice echoing all around, “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor…”

Bran could not help but smile. He was weary from the trek through the wilderness, even though he hadn’t had to do much. The garrons were trained to head back to Castle Black without deviating from their path, so even a cripple could ride them. It had been a smooth, boring journey, no blizzards, no wights, nothing like their journey up to the three-eyed crow’s cave. All the same, after five days’ riding he was looking forward to a chance for rest.

Castle Black was smaller than the Nightfort, but overcrowded almost to the point of madness. It was loud too. Horses whickered and brayed in their stalls, hammers beat down upon anvils, swords crashed against on shields, dogs barked in their kennels. The air smelled of blood and leather, and snowflakes kept falling, melting in his hair and cloak. Summer’s fur was getting whiter and whiter with every day, like Ghost’s.

Thinking of Ghost made Bran ache for Jon. He was no child; he understood why his brother had done what he had… yet some part of him yearned for foolishness, for the chance to be close to Jon, just one more time. *Goodbye does not mean goodbye forever,* he hoped.

*But Robb never came back, nor Mother, nor Father. Nor Arya nor Sansa… and Rickon...* Bran had done to Rickon as Jon had done to him. *What does that make me, if not a bad brother?*

*We should have stayed in Winterfell,* he thought for the thousandth time. That made him want to cry all over again. But he was a man grown, a Stark of Winterfell, and he needed to be strong, like his brother and his father before him. *Can a man be brave when he’s afraid?*

The welcoming party was larger than Bran had expected. They numbered a hundred or mayhaps more, men and women and children alike. The man holding the Stark banner was a son of Greatjon Umber. The Lord of Last Hearth himself stood alongside Lady Maege Mormont, grey-haired and stern-faced, with lady’s daughter Lyanna, named after Bran’s aunt. Harrion Karstark was there, and his sister Alyss. Laurence Snow, Lord Halys Hornwood’s bastard son, now the lord of that house. Donnel Flint and young Lady Tallhart, a girl of Bran’s age. There were a few who had the look of
the mountain clansmen, the lords Wull and Norrey among them.

Bran felt he ought to say something, rather than sit there gazing at them stupidly. *I’m not Lord Stark*, he almost said, but he was – Robb’s heir by all the laws of gods and men, the lord of Winterfell and the Warden of the North. “My lords,” he called, “My… loyal bannermen. Thank you for your… loyalty.” Suddenly he remembered an oath Maester Luwin had taught him long ago. “So long as I am your lord, I vow that you shall always have a place by my hearth and meat and mead at my table, and pledge to ask no service of you that might cause you dishonour. I swear it by the old gods and the new. I swear it by earth and water. I swear it by bronze and iron. I swear it by and ice and fire… oh, and may your winters be short and your summers bountiful.”

The Greatjon nodded. “A good oath, my lord. Though ’tis a little too late to wish for short winters, I think.”

A man in black pushed through the press. “Lord Stark. I’m Mully, um, Mully of the Night’s Watch. I’m… the commander. Not the Lord Commander, but they put me in charge. Bowen Marsh is in a cell, so someone had to lead.”

“Jon said that they wanted to seal the tunnel and trap all the wildlings on the other side.”

“Jon Snow?” Lady Mormont asked.

“Yes,” Bran said, “he’s stayed beyond the Wall with the rest of them.”

Summer padded up at Bran’s side, his amber eyes flaring. “It has been too long since I last saw a living direwolf,” the Greatjon said. “Your wolf is bigger than your brother’s was.”

“Lord Rickon’s is even bigger,” said Lady Mormont. “And twice as fierce. The damn thing is like to bite your head off if you get close.”

“You saw Rickon, my lady?”

“Aye,” she said. “At Riverrun, healthy and hale. I’m afraid Lord Stannis wouldn’t let us bring the boy back north; he wants him to marry his daughter. The girl is sweet, aye, but young Rickon belongs in the north with his bannermen, not in some southron war.”

“There must always be a Stark in Winterfell,” Bran said. *Else the Others will not stop coming. Bloodraven knew that as well as the rest of us. I must be the Stark in Winterfell myself,* he knew.

Mully coughed. “We’ve put you up in the King’s Tower, close by King Stannis’s old rooms. There’s a fair few steps, I’m afraid.”

“Hodor can carry me,” Bran replied.

The Greatjon smiled. “The giant stableboy. That one’s got Umber blood, I tell you. Strong as three aurochs. Give him a sword and armour; he’ll be unstoppable.”

*Hodor wouldn’t fight, though. He’d just shiver and shake and hide, like we did in the crypts.* Bran drew breath sharply; he had almost forgotten. “Is Theon here?”

“Theon Greyjoy is in the ice cells awaiting his execution,” Lady Mormont said tersely. “A kinder fate than he deserves.”

Alys Karstark said, “I hate the man as much as any of you, but what the Bastard did to him was bad enough.”
“The Bastard of Bolton?” Bran asked.

She nodded. “Ramsay, he… he isn’t dead. He wasn’t at the Dreadfort when Mance Rayder rode there. There were rumours that Bolton banners were seen up near Sable Hall a few days past. Might be he’s sheltered in one of the old castles.”

“Might be he’s gone beyond the Wall,” the Greatjon said, “hoping that we can’t get him there.”

“He might be right,” said Bran. “But there are far worse things he could run into beyond the Wall.” The Others would make short work of Ramsay Bolton, no matter what he is. “I want to see Theon. Before I do anything else.”

“You will,” a voice called. “But this lot won’t take you there.” Black leather boots climbed to her ankles, breeches above that, and a padded tunic over a shirt of mail. A two-headed axe was hooked through the straps of her belt. “You’re the Stark lord?” she asked.

“You’re Asha Greyjoy,” he knew. There was a weirwood at Deepwood Motte, the castle she’d held. Her eyes hardened like chips of ice. “You want to see my brother? Why? To kill him?”

Bran’s mouth was dry. Do I want to kill him? he wondered. Theon burned Winterfell, he killed Ser Rodrik and Joseth and Mikken, Maester Luwin and Septon Chayle. He killed those farmer’s boys too… but he paid the price for it. Ramsay made him into something else. He cleared his throat. “I want to see him,” he repeated.

Asha frowned. “As you will.” Her lip curled. “Come on, then.”

“Not so fast, wench,” the Greatjon said. “You must be a fool if you think we’ll let you go running off with our lord like that.”

She let out a tired sigh, unhooked the axe from her belt, then her dirk, and dropped them both in the snow. “I’m unarmed. The girl has her knife and her bow, and the giant looks like he could twist my head off without a moment’s hesitation.”

Hodor wouldn’t hurt her either, but it was better not to mention that. “We’ll be fine,” he told the lords, “but send a few men with us, if you have to.”

The Greatjon nodded. “Roderick, Harwyn, go with them.” Two burly Umber men stepped forward. “We’ll meet you in the hall for the feast when you’re finished.”

Bran rode on Hodor’s shoulders as they followed Asha across the yard. The Umber men went with them, and half a dozen black brothers. A few wildlings stopped and pointed, but Bran had grown used to stares long ago. Bran the Broken. He wondered how they would look at him if they learned that he was the three-eyed crow as well. At Hunter’s Hermitage, some of the wildling chiefs had seemed almost afraid when they’d heard Bran’s account of his dealings with Bloodraven and the Children of the Forest.

Old Nan had always spoken of the Children as benevolent creatures, but perhaps in the far north, the wildlings were told different tales. Perhaps they know the truth.

The tunnel was chilly. Icicles hung from the ceiling, pointing down at those below with witch-like nails. “How deep does this go?” Meera asked.

“Not as far as you might think,” replied Asha Greyjoy. “Don’t know how far it goes beyond the Wall, but it’s only half a hundred feet under it, if that. That doesn’t make it any less cold.”
“Why did they put him here?” Bran asked.

“You’d have to ask your Lord Umber, but I think you already know.” She stared at the floor when she spoke. “Theon’s done bad things, there’s no denying that. I’m not such a fool to believe that my brother has been redeemed in the eyes of you Northmen, but I’ll be damned if I let him die without a fight. So tell me true, what do you want with him?”

“I want to listen to what he has to say. But I don’t want to kill him.”

“So you say.”

As they went deeper, Bran could hear men shouting to be released, their fists banging angrily on the doors of the cells. “Let me out!” came a voice from behind one. “Let me out, I am Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, I was Lord Steward, my words are not to be taken lightly…”

“He’s been saying that for days,” said one of the Greatjon’s men. “Almost impressive how long he’s kept it up.”

“They all quieten down soon enough,” replied a black brother. “The cold breaks them in the end.”

It was a couple of minutes before they reached Theon’s cell. One of the brothers turned a key in the lock, unveiling the gloom beyond. For the longest time, Bran was not sure where to look. All he could make out was a faint grey shape, hunched and twisted, like a gargoyle with the features all worn away. It wore a shirt and breeches of shapeless grey roughspun, and a sprawling black cloak that threatened to swallow it.

“Theon,” Asha Greyjoy said softly.

When the shadow fell away from him and his face was revealed, Bran felt his breath catch. Gone was the smirking, handsome youth who’d been his father’s ward, and gone too was the prince of Winterfell, with the mad light in his sea-grey eyes. He looks more broken than even me, Bran thought. Grey hair curled around Theon’s face, thinning, flecked with snow. His shoulders sagged and the skin hung limp from his cheeks. Summer advanced, then drew up onto his haunches and stopped, snarling at empty air. Even he feels pity.

“Have… have you come to kill me?” Theon asked. His eyes gleamed with the colour of fear.

No, thought Bran, though that might well be a mercy. “It’s alright,” Asha was saying. “It’s alright, you’re safe.”

Theon peered into the darkness, furrowing his brow and squinting like a blind man. “Is… is that…”

“Theon,” Bran said.

He ought to feel anger, he knew, or the desire for revenge, but the only emotion he could muster was pity, and little enough of that. He does not deserve pity, he reminded himself, not after what he did.

Something gave the broken man courage. “Bran…” he croaked, “I… Winterfell. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

Theon’s fingers gripped the hem of his cloak, hiding. The cell was rank with the smell of piss. “Forgive me, I only wanted…”
“It doesn’t matter what you wanted. We both know what happened. Your remorse won’t change that. How did you get here?” He wanted to hear the story from Theon’s point of view.

“I… I… escaped… from Ramsay. When Stannis came to Winterfell with his army, I ran away. Mance said that we should come north, to the Wall, but when they overthrew Bowen Marsh they threw me in a cell too.” His breath steamed in the chilly air.

Bran felt a sharp sting of pity, but only for half a moment. “The Greatjon wants to have you executed, I think. They all do.”

“I… I deserve it.”

“No. You’ve been punished enough. I heard…” I heard what they did to you. I know what they did to you. I saw what they did to you. The weirwood had shown him wonders, but also horrors.

Theon cringed slightly, his shoulders hunching, eyes blinking. He did not speak. And did not speak. And did not speak.

“You won’t die,” Bran said, “not today, anyhow.”

Theon lurched towards him, stopped, and bowed his head. “Thank you.” In that brief half-moment, the fear left his voice. Can a man be brave when he’s afraid?

“You were the prince of Winterfell for barely a moon’s turn, Theon, and its ghost for a while longer. But now the wolves have come again.” He patted Hodor’s shoulder, and the giant stableboy turned away. Then they were gone.

“They’ll have finished with your room by now, m’lord,” Mully said as they wandered along the ice tunnel towards the faint glimmer of fading daylight. “If you want a change of clothes—”

“No, it’s fine.” Bran’s furs were cold with snowmelt and sticky with sweat, and hardly the thing for a lord to wear to receive his guests, but he did not want to keep the Greatjon, Lady Mormont and the others waiting. “We’ll go to the feast now.”

Mully grinned. “I tell you, Lord Stark, that’s the second-best thing about your return. Three-Finger Hobb’s finally done us all some proper fare, instead of stew for the hundredth time this week.”

He spoke truly, as far as Bran could tell. A suckling pig was turning slowly over a spit in the middle of the Shielddhall. There was roast beef too, and venison, and a dozen other meats. Bran sat at the head of the high table between Alys Karstark and the Greatjon, with Meera a couple of seats away next to Lady Mormont and Larence Hornwood. The stewards came to him first, to give him a choice portion from the roast, as befit the prince of Winterfell.

After weeks and months of salt beef and bloody meat and dried grass, anything would have sated Bran’s appetite, but the feast did more than just that. As well as the roasts there was trout sauced with mulberries, honeyed chicken, rack of lamb crusted with rosemary and rock salt, countless tureens of buttered neeps and pease and leeks.

Alys Karstark repeated what Mully had said to him earlier as the servants brought round the first of the sweets, poached pears and crushed ice sorbet. “We haven’t eaten half so well here since my wedding feast, my lord.”

“You’re married?” If he were to be the lord of Winterfell, he would have to take an interest in his subjects.
She nodded. “To Sigorn, Magnar of Thenn. My new husband is brutish, and a savage in some ways, but he is a good man.”

“I hope you are happy with him,” said Bran.

Alys smiled. “You’re almost as solemn as your big brother, Lord Stark. Almost.”

“We are living in dire times, my lady.”

“There’s still a place for merriment. You are too young to act so soberly.”

The Greatjon nodded from Bran’s other side. “The dead march on the Wall, so they say. Best we feast now, and make them envy the living. Jealous foes act like fools.” He nodded to Bran’s cup. “Go on, my lord.”

Bran stared at him. “I shouldn’t, I have to—”

“You shouldn’t, aye,” said the Greatjon, “but Starks rarely do what they’re told to do. Drink up, lad.” He drained his own horn and set about refilling it. Bran hesitated, but then he looked across the hall and saw Lawrence Hornwood red-faced and laughing. The Greatjon’s uncle Mors was playing dice with Ryam Flint. Even young Lyanna Mormont had two cups, while he sat up here, silent and stoic. Summer was whining at him from under the table.

Bran took the horn. The ale was like fire as it went down his throat, burning the back of his mouth. His eyes were watering when he had finished. “That’s strong.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “That’s really strong.”

The Greatjon laughed. “That it is, lad, I won’t argue with that. Good ale, from the Last Hearth.”

“Doesn’t the Wall have its own ale?” He could not help but wonder how many of their provisions they were using for this feast.

“Aye,” said the Greatjon. “But it’s weaker than a nun’s piss.” He laughed. “A bit of adventure in your life, eh?”

“Bran always has been an adventurer,” said Alys. “Climbing up the trees in the godswood till you’d gone so high everyone lost sight of you, clinging to the stones of the castle, teetering on the parapets… running, jumping… your poor lady mother looked like her heart might give out watching you.”

And then I fell. Bran glanced sadly down at his broken legs. “I don’t do that anymore,” he said. The only time I walk is as the winged wolf. Summer’s hackles rose and his tail brushed against his master’s knee. Bran did not feel it on his leg, but he felt it inside him. Wolf boy, boy wolf, Bloodraven had said once, you are one and the same.

“I’m sure you still have adventures, though,” Alys said. “I can’t think of many men who have spent as long as you have beyond the Wall.”

Coldhands, Bran thought. “What’s it like out there?” she asked.

“Cold.”

She punched his arm. “You’re jesting with me, Brandon. Truly?”

“Cold,” he said again, refilling his cup, “that’s really about all of it.” If you can somehow forget
about the dead men and blue-eyed monsters moving between the trees. He took a sip, letting the foamy ale trickle down his throat. Well, there’s a reason to keep drinking.

Down below the dais, Hodor was singing a nonsense song. But Meera still looked sad. She mourned Jojen, just as Bran did, but she had become reclusive too. It hurt Bran to see her looking so pained. Perhaps the ale could wash away her woes too, if only for a time.

He held the flagon out to her, but she waved his hand away. “I’m going to bed,” she announced suddenly, rising. Bran watched her until she was gone from the hall, then his senses returned to him. “Hodor!” he called.

Alys Karstark grabbed his arm. “She needs space, Bran. Her brother, he… he went beyond the Wall with you, didn’t he?”

“Jojen,” said Bran, feeling soul-wrenchingly guilty. “He died.” He died because of me.

“I should go and see her.”

“You should,” said Alys, “but not now. Not yet. Sometimes, people need space to breathe, to be with themselves, even if it makes them lonely. You wouldn’t want someone to follow you everywhere you went, would you?”

Hodor did, but that wasn’t the answer Alys wanted. “No.” And so he did as she had told him. He arm-wrestled with Lord Karstark (and lost convincingly), and clapped along when a black brother sung ‘The Name Day Boy’ and ‘Fifty-Four Tuns’ and ‘Six Maids in A Pool’. He laughed when Laurence Hornwood stumbled in his stupor and fell on his way to the privy, and again when Hodor and the Greatjon Umber ended up dancing a duet on the floor. But all the while his thoughts were with Meera. He was incredibly grateful when Hodor finally grew tired of dancing and they had an excuse to go up to bed.

Hodor carried him up the winding stair, rocking in his step. He might have been drunk, Bran thought, but it was difficult to tell.

The King’s Tower was reasonably spacious, and Bran’s room was one of the larger ones up here, but there was still barely enough room to wedge in a large bed, a couple of bookcases, and a table and chairs beside the fire.

Hodor carried him over onto the bed. His mattress was stuffed with straw rather than feathers, but it was still the most comfortable place Bran had slept in months. He liked the low ceilings; it made the room feel especially cosy as he tucked himself in under the eaves. Snowflakes and hailstones beat down from above. Some thwacked off the window panes, while others drifted down like tears.

Hodor helped him untie his shoes and take off his cloak, but left him alone after that. Bran pulled off his breeches and his shirt and put on nightclothes for bed. His legs flopped down brokenly over the side of the pallet, but he felt a curious new strength in his arms. He had not lost his armwrestle to Lord Karstark that badly. He was still growing in places, despite his broken limbs. Untamed, his hair had grown long and scraggily almost to his shoulders, the reddish-brown strands interwoven with frostgrass and snowmelt and pine needles.

He could almost imagine his mother telling him to cut it, in the stern but slightly amused voice that she spoke with whenever he made her angry. “No more climbing, Brandon,” she said, so many times. I should have listened. It was all his fault, he knew. If I hadn’t gone up that tower, if Father hadn’t gone south, if Mother hadn’t left… if Robb hadn’t gone to war… if I was still the prince in Winterfell, if we hadn’t crossed the Wall and gone to that cold dark cave beyond the Wall where Jojen died—
How old are you, boy? a man’s voice asked. He remembered crows cawing and the rush of the wind under his arms, that brief moment of flight before the sheer nothingness of the impact. *The things we do for love.*

All at once it became too much for him. *I killed Jojen. I murdered him. I didn’t want to, but I did. He died, and everyone else died too.*

*I killed them all.*

For the first time in months, maybe years, grief consumed him wholly and mercilessly. He pulled Summer close and forced his face into the direwolf’s fur, sobbing till the wolf was soaked with his tears. He was broken, crippled, useless, a vessel for the nightmares and prophetic nonsense of several vengeful gods. *I hate them. I hate them all.*

He did not know how long Meera had been standing there when he finally looked up. Her eyes were red-rimmed too, her shoulders shaking a little. “Bran,” she said quietly, her voice hoarse with sorrow.

He gulped and swallowed. “Meera… I…”

She came closer, unsteady on her feet. Candlelight flickered gently across her pale cheeks as she approached. She *had* been crying. “Oh, Bran,” she said, and fell down at the side of his bed.

It took every ounce of courage he had to say that one word. It came out so quietly that he had to say it three times. “Sorry, sorry, sorry… Meera, oh, I’m so sorry.”

Her voice cracked. “Bran, it isn’t your fault, no, my sweet prince, no, it isn’t.” Her arms were around him, tight as a vice across his chest. It was a long time before he realised that he was hugging her back. He tried to say something else, but his words caught in his throat. That was all right, though. *Meera was here,* and Summer, and Hodor too, somewhere in the next room. Even as the snow ceased to beat its song against the glass of his window, even as the moon rose from behind grey clouds and their beams cast a glow through the darkness, even as the candle wavered and flickered and finally died, she stayed with him like that, together.

He did not remember falling asleep, but he must have done, for when he opened his eyes at last it was morning and the stillness of the evening had given way to a cacophony in the yard below. Bran felt hands brushing over the nape of his neck, skimming through his hair. “Meera?” He grunted and rolled over onto his back. “Meera, is that—”

“Come on,” she said, “we’ve got a lot to do today, and only so many hours to do it. Up!” She was fully dressed for the day… and smiling.

Bran was not so eager to rise. He desperately wanted another hour’s sleep, to lie there at peace with his wolf… and with Meera, he supposed…

But that was not to be. He dragged himself up from the bed, and called for Hodor.

“Blacks,” Meera said brightly, waving an undershirt before him. Bran donned two, one cotton and one wool, then a jerkin of black leather, woollen black hose, black lambswool socks and black boots. Meera helped him with the laces, then passed him a black cloak. “It’s too big for you, but it’ll do for now.” Bran did not mind. The cloak was snug and warm, sewn up with wool and trimmed with sable.

It was too cold to use Castle Black’s walkways and above-ground passages, so the black brothers had retreated to the wormways beneath the earth, sleeping in cubby-holes and crannies, ascending only to train with sword and bow in the yard, to see to the horses or to clear the snow away before it
grew deep enough for a man to drown in. The passages were confusing and twisty, but eventually they found their way to the Shieldhall.

Yesterday the hall had been full to bursting for the feast, but this morning only half of the benches were full. Bran took a seat beside Lawrence Hornwood, who was red-faced from some hard practice in the yard, his hair was matted with mud and snow. Beside him sat his betrothed, Talia Forrester, while Beren Tallhart and Alys Karstark sat further down the table. Across the hall, Crowfoot Umber was playing cards with Devyn Sealskinner and two buxom spearwives. Three men of the mountain clans played a game with axes in the corner.

Breakfast was fried bread, bacon, boiled eggs, blood sausage, and toast with blackberry jam. Meera brought tankards of ale for all of them. “Hodor,” said Hodor, grinning happily at the spread before him.

“Hodor,” Lawrence agreed.

“Did you find your books?” asked Talia.

Meera chewed her bacon. “Yes and no.”

“Books?” Bran asked.

“I’ve been up for hours, Bran,” she sighed, making him feel a little ashamed at his own tardiness. “I went down into the library – heaven knows that it’s in something of a mess right now – looking for something, on the Children, the Others, where to find dragonglass, the Pact, anything. But everything’s either so faded that I can’t read the words, or written in the language of the First Men.”

“Didn’t the First Men speak the Common Tongue?” Lawrence asked.

Talia shook her head. “It was a dialect of the Common Tongue, but it’s – and I beg your pardon – bastardized.” She smiled. “Books have a funny habit of being elusive.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Meera. “I’m not much of a reader myself.”

Lawrence shrugged. “I don’t blame you—”

“You can’t go wrong with a few stories, though.”

“I s’pose so.” Lawrence tipped back his tankard, “like the ones about the goblins that live in the Hornwood.”

Talia grinned. “I hear they have a taste for human flesh. That’s what Asher told me.”

“The Hornwood goblins are friendly,” insisted Lawrence. “If a traveller follows the goblin to its lair, they get a wish granted.”

“And if they look away, the goblins drag them down into the darkness and eat them alive,” Bran added. “Doesn’t matter, though. Summer would keep me safe.” Under the table the direwolf whined in reply. “He won’t hurt you,” Bran told Lawrence and Talia. “He doesn’t hurt my friends.” Only I do that.

“You Starks are lucky with your direwolf sigil,” grumbled Lawrence, “I can’t very well go riding a moose into battle, now can I?” House Hornwood’s banners had a brown moose on them.

“You could have a helm with antlers,” suggested Bran. “King Robert had a helm with antlers.” He’d
seen the king wearing it into battle at the Trident in one of his dreams, fighting under banners of green and orange and red.

“I suppose I could have an ironwood shield if I went to war,” Talia said.

“I wish I could have gone to war with Robb in the first place.” The words were out of Bran’s mouth before he quite could stop them. “I was twelve, I was old enough. I could have been his squire at the Whispering Wood and the Fords and the Crag, and… I could have stopped the wedding - if, if, if... I could have helped him. I knew how to fight…” He brought his fist down on the table.

Then he spotted Lyanna Mormont coming up behind Larence’s shoulder. Her expression was chilly as ice. “Brandon Stark,” she said curtly. “My mother and Lord Umber would like to see you.” She strode off without looking back.

Larence screwed up his nose. “She often does that. Best you get after her, Bran, before she decides it’s easier to kick you in the balls and drag you. Not… not that it’s ever happened to me personally, of course.”

Bran wolfed down a last mouthful of toast. Meera helped him up onto Hodor’s back and they hurried along, following Lyanna Mormont back out into the wormway. Hodor almost had to run to catch up with her purposeful strides. “You have an impressive mount, Lord Stark,” she told him, glancing up, “but wouldn’t you rather ride a horse?”

He squinted at her. “I… I am crippled, my lady.”

“I noticed,” Lyanna said sharply, “but a cripple can ride a horse. You were on a horse when you entered Castle Black.”

“The… the horse was trained.” Bran’s old horse Dancer had responded to his voice commands, but Dancer was dead.

Lyanna sighed. “Then train your horse, Lord Stark.” She ushered him inside a half-dark storeroom, shoved Meera in after him, and left them there.

“My lord,” said the Greatjon, looking considerably more sober than yesterday, “take a seat.”

Hodor lowered Bran into place. Meera leaned on the back of his chair. “Lady Meera,” said Maege Mormont. “We need to speak with Lord Stark alone.”

“Why?” Meera asked.

“We have matters that we need him to hear in private.”

“We’ve travelled together since Winterfell, my lady. I’ll not leave him—”

“Meera,” Bran sighed, “these are my bannermen. They won’t hurt me, and besides, I still have Summer with me.” The grey wolf slunk down beside his legs and sat on its haunches. “Go on, go with Hodor.”

She was reluctant, but she did not linger. Maege Mormont closed the door of the storeroom fast behind her, plunging them back into near-darkness. Only the Greatjon’s oil lantern and the amber glow of Summer’s eyes gave the room light. A fly buzzed through the air; Lord Umber killed it with a slap of his meaty hand. The sound echoed.

Bran heard the rustling of paper, and Lady Mormont laid a scrap of parchment down on the table.
The words were weathered by age, once-black ink fading to dark maroon. Bran had to squint to see. The first thing he made out was his brother’s name, signed at the bottom of the paper. Robb.

“His Grace gave this over to the custody of Jason Mallister shortly before the Red Wedding,” explained Lady Mormont, “both he and your lady mother believed that Theon Greyjoy had murdered both you and Prince Rickon when Winterfell was sacked. Queen Jeyne was large with King Robb’s child the last we heard, but we have not yet gotten word of the child, not of his or her sex, nor whether the babe survived its birth.

“It does not matter,” said the Greatjon. “Winterfell is yours, my prince, and with it the titles and lands of the Kingdom of the North. Should you wish it, the Last Hearth will rise for your claim, as will Karhold and Bear Island, Ryswell and Dustin and Manderly. In the south, your lord uncle Edmure Tully will not hesitate to raise the Riverlands for you. This child of the Young Wolf is a babe in arms, who can neither sit a horse nor wield a sword nor lead an army.”

“And I am a cripple,” replied Bran. “My lords, do you not serve King Stannis Baratheon? Mance told us—”

“The North Remembers,” said Lady Mormont. “Aye, ‘twas Stannis who relieved us of the Boltons, and Stannis who raised his fiery stag over Winterfell after the battle, but he could not have done that task without the Northern swords who flocked around his banners. I was not there at the battle in the crofter’s village, my prince, but my daughter Alysane told me how it happened:

“Roose Bolton sent his horsemen out first, the Freys and the Manderlys, several hundred mounted horse with six thousand foot to their flanks. They stormed across the lake to where Stannis had his camp in the shadow of the watchtower. But as the Freys advanced over the water, the ice gave way beneath their horses, long-weakened by Northern axes. Northern axes! The Manderly cavalry took them in the rear when they tried to retreat, and cast them back into those cold waters. Wull and Norrey and Harclay men fell upon them with axe and fire and sword.

“Meanwhile, inside the castle, the Dustins and the Flints and more Manderlys turned against the Boltons, and cut them down, opening the gatehouse for Mormont men and Umber men to flood through into the bailey. Our men far outnumbered those that Stannis Baratheon brought to Winterfell. So you see, my prince, Stannis is but one man… his claim remains viable only because of the swords of our own loyal Northmen. Your loyal Northmen.

“We mean to let Stannis do away with the Lannisters if we can, but we will not risk our lives unnecessarily for his claim. It is Northern independence that the Young Wolf called for, and it is Northern independence that we will have.” Her eyes gleamed with a strange fervour. “You are the eldest remaining son of Eddard Stark, Lord Brandon. The Kingdom of the North is yours. Our swords are yours, from this day, till the end of my days.”

“Robb’s will says otherwise,” Bran pointed to the paper. “‘In the event of my death without an heir of age to call mine own, I henceforth name my bastard brother Jon Snow as the heir to the Kingdom of the North.’ He calls for Jon, not for me.”

“The will is moot,” Lady Mormont told him. “Since you and your brother both live, my prince, there is no precedent for King Robb’s will. And Jon Snow is the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch anyway, and a bastard too—”

“He is my brother,” Bran said.

The Greatjon ignored that. “Once you take your place in King Robb’s stead—”
“I will not.” The words were out of his mouth before he knew what he was saying. “I… I can’t. A cripple boy cannot be king.”

“You would have advisors.” There was a new note of steel in the Greatjon’s voice, and bitterness too. “There would be no war between us and the south this time.”

_I have to be strong. I have to act like a lord._ “You don’t believe that, my lord, and neither do I. When my mother and father rode south, they never returned north again. When Robb went south, he never came back. You have both lost children, siblings and friends to war. Why should we risk losing even more if Stannis decides to turn on us for betraying him?”

The Greatjon was about to say something but Lady Mormont grabbed his arm. “As you will, my prince,” she said to Bran. “Thank you for your time.”

“I will to ride south to the Last Hearth later today,” the Greatjon continued. “King Robb left me with a few duties that I need to carry out.” He did not wait for Bran’s answer, but shoved his way through the door and went out. Lady Mormont followed close behind.

For a while, Bran sat alone in the darkness. The things that Lady Mormont and the Greatjon had said rang in his ears. He felt curiously dizzy. “They wanted me to be the king in the North,” he said aloud to himself. “But I’m not. I’m the prince of Winterfell. I’m the three-eyed crow. I’m the last greenseer.”

“You’re Bran,” said Meera from the doorway behind him. “You’re Brandon Stark of Winterfell.”

“You’re right,” he muttered, “the crippled prince. Is Hodor with you? I want to go riding.”

“Bran… your horse…”

He remembered what Lyanna Mormont had said. “I can train a horse. How hard can it be? Besides, I’ll be leaving Castle Black soon. Winterfell needs me, and I won’t be carried into my father’s castle.”

Meera sighed. “We’ll be leaving Castle Black, you mean. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

Bran glanced at her curiously. “You can stay here, if you want.”

“Why would I? There’s nothing for me here.”

“There’s… there’s… don’t you want to go home? To Greywater Watch?”

Meera shook her head. “Bran… don’t you understand? This _is_ my home. You’re my home, and so is Hodor. We’re your home, too.”

_I suppose you are._ Bran breathed out a heavy sigh. “Come on, then. Let’s go find our horses.”

Chapter End Notes

Admittedly, I think this chapter could have been better done in terms of its thematic links, but it had a LOT to establish and I don’t think it was too messy in the end. The ideal solution might have been to have Bran arrive early in the day and finish with him apologising to Meera at night, but then we lose out on so many of the cool transitional
Castle Black has become an absolute mess of characters converging. The Greatjon and Maege Mormont have turned up recently, and then there are the new arrivals in Bran, Meera and Hodor, and of course Asha and Theon. We've got at least one more chapter with Bran at Castle Black (which will probably end up as long as this one), which has to deal with the latter part of this transitional stage in his arc.

^IDK if any of that made sense...

Time for an unpopular opinion: I DON'T like Lyanna Mormont, at least not the way she's presented in the show. The actress has done a very good job, I'll say that, but the way she's written makes her feel very gimmicky, as though D&D are standing at my ear with a megaphone shouting "LOOK! THIS GIRL IS A BADASS! SHE'S A BADASS! ISN'T SHE JUST A COMPLETE BADASS?"

... I also feel like Lyanna Mormont, despite her virtues, prevented the story of so many other characters we could have had to show that the North remembers (or mostly forgets, in the case of the show)

That being said, Lyanna Mormont will still appear in this story, and she'll somewhat be based on how she was in the show, though she won't be singlehandedly fighting bears or anything.

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So in this chapter, we saw that Lady Mormont (Maege, that is) and the Greatjon are buying into some sort of Northern Conspiracy that was hinted at in Davos III, intent on abandoning Stannis and rallying behind a Northern ruler. Of course, Bran refuses him, and the Greatjon heads off to Last Hearth, likely with different plans in mind.

Lady Maege and the Greatjon are considerably more subdued here than we are used to seeing them. I think it's important to remember that they've both lost family as a result of the Red Wedding, and they've sobered up quite a bit instead of being loud and blustery as always. The Greatjon will probably return to how you recognise him soon, though.

On the lord of Winterfell situation: Bran is nominally the lord of Winterfell, though most people (both in the south and in the north) seem unsure who actually holds the post. There's not much communication between Riverrun and Castle Black (for example, the Greatjon and Lady Mormont have not yet heard about the birth of Robb's son).

It's not mentioned here, but Wyman Manderly is acting as the castle's castellan in the absence of a Stark.

You'll notice that there are no Bran visions in this chapter. This is because despite all his magical abilities, Bran is still a boy, not some magical demigod, and he has emotions and feelings to run through, so I wanted to make this one a bit more personal and emotional.

Thanks for reading.
Storm’s Beginning

Chapter Notes

A new theatre, a new POV.

This chapter was partly inspired by samples from George R.R. Martin's THE WINDS OF WINTER, namely chapters Arianne I and Arianne II, which are available online.

Chronologically, this chapter takes place shortly before Chapter 51, Daenerys V.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THE DORNSH PRINCESS

They saw Storm’s End from miles off. One tall black tower protruded sternly into a sky near as black, a fist upraised, the walls lined with ballistae and mangonels that seemed small as ants. Grey waves skirled across the dark waters of Shipbreaker Bay, thundering in their advance. Storm’s End did not stir as they crashed against its bleak shores. “The curtain walls are eighty feet thick,” Elia Sand told them.

“I know,” said Arianne. “I know the stories too. Durran Godsgrief built the castle for his beloved wife Elenei, to shelter them both from the wrath of her parents, the god of the storm and the goddess of the waves. It took him seven attempts to raise a castle strong enough to ward their attacks off. Some say the walls are inlaid with runes and special spells.”

Elia snorted. “A child’s tale. The only thing that is true about any of that is that the castle will not fall easily to storm winds. For a time it was famed as having never been breached by siege, too, but Aegon’s invasion brought an end to that.”

It was a moment before Arianne realised that she was not talking of the Conqueror who flew on dragonback, but the dragonking who sat the Iron Throne now. My future husband, she considered, and my king. She was nervous at the prospect of meeting him, yes – she would have to be a fool not to be – but in her heart Arianne had some inkling that Aegon would be suitable as a husband. Father arranged this marriage for me, after all, and when has Father ever been anything but cautious? Even if it did result in his precious alliance, he would not be so cruel to sell me to someone unworthy of my hand, king or no. Or so she presumed.

All the reports they had received from King’s Landing had given a glowing assessment of the king, boasting nothing but good qualities. An accomplished swordsman and excellent archer, fair of face, learned in this and that and the other, kind and brave and kingly at heart. Arianne was no child, she could make a judgement by herself. But it worried her that these reports had nothing bad to say about their young king…

Three weeks had passed since their landing at the Weeping Town, where Daeron the Young
Dragon’s body had arrived from his Dornish conquest. The women did not weep as she arrived, but the sky certainly did, and it had not stopped weeping since. The Stormlands were a dull country; leagues of grey land beneath greyer skies, and so rainy that some days they hadn’t been able to ride. They had spent the better part of a week holed up in Seaworth Keep, nestled deep in the Rainwood, sleeping and eating and reading and not doing much else. Elia Sand had convinced Arianne to go out riding with her one day, along the stony grey shore, and they had come across a cave nestled in the midst of the grey rocks, its ceiling inscribed with pale white runes.

“The Andals were here once,” Ser Daemon Sand said, glancing up disdainfully at the carvings, but young Maester Kedry disagreed. “These are old patterns, older than the Andals, even older than the First Men, I should think.”

Ser Daemon snorted. “The children of the forest, mayhaps?”

“There are dragons in the world now, ser,” the maester replied, “fire made flesh. The Children are hardly the most far-fetched of stories.”

“Men have seen dragons with their own two eyes, maester. No living men has ever set eyes upon a child of the Forest.” With that the argument was over, though Arianne did muse about it during the long bland ride to Griffin’s Roost. They spent two nights there, hosted by Lord Jon’s cousin Ser Raymund Connington, who spent his evenings loudly complaining that the Lord Hand had neglected to name a Connington as heir to the castle should he die.

“He has a point,” Tyene said as they supped one night. “The Hand is not likely to sire a son.”

“Why not?” asked Arianne.

“It is said that Lord Connington has no interest in the fairer sex. My father told me that his lordship was enamoured with Prince Rhaegar, more so than most of the girls at court. He doubted that the prince returned those affections, though, selfish as he was.”

“Have you ever heard your father say a good word about Rhaegar Targaryen?” It was a half a jest, half genuine curiosity. Tyene only shrugged, though. Arianne was left wondering for half the night, as the storm swirled outside her window. Her uncle’s dislike of Rhaegar Targaryen stemmed from the Crown Prince’s spurning of Princess Elia at the Tourney at Harrenhal. What if Aegon follows in his father’s footsteps and does the same? Arianne had wondered. What if he chooses some other woman, and casts me aside, the unwanted bride? She was two-and-twenty; by her age, most noblewomen were married and burdened with children. Would Father seek to find me another husband, or would I be left to play the sad, spurned princess, cursed to die ancient and wrinkled and childless?

The thought of that gave her a sudden and rash urge. She sent for Ser Daemon Sand, full knowing the stupidity of the notion. Arianne had come to regret her decision when he arrived to her chambers, but by then it was too late to do anything about it. If proof of my follies was ever needed, this is it. Of all the knights in Dorne I choose this one, and of all the places to have him I choose here. Raymund Connington would have no qualms about telling the king, I know that. Aegon would not be expecting her to come to his bed a virgin, she knew that, but this would be taken as insult.

Thinking of Aegon made their passion lose its savour. She pushed Ser Daemon off, forcing their lips apart. His breath smelled of wine, though he did not seem drunk. “Have I displeased you again, Arianne? Has my play not improved in the last eight years?”

“My play? This is not a game.” And it never was. My father saw to that long ago.
“No, but it is sweet, you must admit that.” He brought his slender fingers to her nipples, stroking in slow circles. “And if you did not want that, then why did you bring me here?”

“I do not know,” Arianne said coldly. She pulled up the blankets to cover herself. “Leave me.”

For one dreadful moment she feared that he might refuse her, that he might force her down into the bed and try and take her that way. But Ser Daemon merely smiled, and climbed off the bed, dressing in darkness before going back the way he had come in. Arianne lit the candle at her bedside, and sat there for what felt like hours, alone with her doubts. *That could not have been any worse,* she surmised.

But when she went down to the Great Hall the next morning to break her fast, she found Ser Gerold Dayne staring at her across the room, without a word, his purple eyes glowing in his fixation. *He knows.* Arianne felt fingers of dread creeping up to her heart. *Oh gods, he knows.*

But if Darkstar did know, he never spoke a word of it. Arianne almost allowed herself to believe that he actually knew nothing, but years in Dorne had taught her caution. *Ser Gerold is a swordsman, and a skilled one at that. He will bide his time and idly spar with me, and strike only when the time is right.*

But that time had yet come, and they had not shared a word between them in weeks when Arianne’s party finally came upon Storm’s End. Beyond the castle walls the camp sprawled for half a mile, sodden tents shrouded in pale mist. “The Golden Company,” announced Jeyne Fowler, and squinting, Arianne could make out the weathered golden pennants that flew above the tents. A fierce gale was blowing, so the flags beat fiercely back and forth with every pass of the wind.

“I don’t see any elephants,” Elia Sand complained, “Kedry said they had elephants.” She shot the maester a disapproving look.

“Kedry cannot know everything,” said Arianne. Indeed, it was horses rather than elephants that rode up to meet them, and the pale-skinned folk of Westeros who rode them rather than the natives of Slaver’s Bay and the Summer Isles and the Free Cities of Essos.

One of the men jumped down from his horse and approached. “Good morrow to you. I am Ser Laswell Peake, a serjeant of the Company. What business do you have with us?”

“I seek an audience with Lord Jon Connington,” Arianne told them, though she did not return the courtesy of her name. Nor did the Dornish party fly any banners… though she wagered that she would be recognised from a good way off.

“Lord Connington is not here,” said Ser Laswell Peake.

“The Targaryen standard flies over Storm’s End,” Arianne said, pointing, “and so does the red griffin. Unless Lord Connington has left the castle on business, he must still be present.”

The serjeant looked a little embarrassed. “Aye, my lady. But you cannot go up to the castle without his lordship’s warrant.”

“And she has it.” A woman’s voice, followed by the woman herself on a chestnut horse. Beside her came another stout lord in mail and dark leather, and above their heads waved the sigils of Selmy and Estermont, noble houses of the Stormlands. “Princess Arianne, we come at Lord Connington’s request, to bring you to him. Alone, he says.”

*They have been waiting for us, but for how long?* “Thank you,” said Arianne, “my companions will wait here, save for…” She glanced to them. “Elia, Nymella, Sylva, Drey, Garin… and Ser
Daemon.” She regretted that choice almost as soon as she made it, but if things went sour, she would not mind having Daemon Sand at her side. “I will not be entirely without friends,” she explained to the Stormlords.

“Seven of you,” said Lady Selmy, “well, that should suit. Come.”

Arianne could feel Ser Gerold Dayne glaring at her as she rode off. The camp was nestled beneath the walls of Storm’s End, but it was still high enough for the mist to swallow it like some great grey beast, and the rain made the place even more eerie. Most of the Company’s men must be inside; she saw only a few guardsmen about, raindrops drumming down off their metal helmets and shields as they congregated around braziers. “How many are there inside the camp?” she asked Ser Laswell Peake.

“Seven thousand and two hundred fighting men at the last count, though a good three or four hundred of those will be out foraging and hunting today. Mostly the grooms and the squires.”

“And how many men does Lord Connington have?”

“Ten thousand men, garrisoned half here and half up at Griffin’s Roost and Bronzegate, up in the Kingswood. And a couple thousand sellswords to boot, mostly the Second Sons who are loyal to Queen Daenerys.”

*And are you not loyal to Queen Daenerys, ser?* Arianne glanced up at the walls once again. The golden dragon on black was Aegon’s personal symbol… as it had been that of Aegon the Second before him, he who fought Rhaenyra during the Dance of the Dragons. *What is Lord Connington trying to say?*

The walls rose up all around them, and then they were through. Arianne twisted in the saddle as the spikes of the portcullis came rattling down behind her. *Lord Connington is guarding this place more closely than a septa guards her maidenhead.* Any intruder wanting to enter would have to scale those high stone walls and sneak past guardsmen at every turn. *What secret could possibly be so important?*

Arianne expected that she would soon find out.

When they had dismounted from their horses, Ser Laswell Peake approached her and bid her follow him, but when Ser Daemon and Drey Dalt made to head after her, he pushed them back and said, “The princess goes on alone.”

“Either all of us go or none of us do,” protested Elia Sand.

Arianne glared at her. *There are times when your wilfulness is much appreciated, Elia, but that is not now.* “I will go alone,” she said. “Lead the way, Ser Laswell.” She turned on her heel without a look back.

The Golden Company man led her through a cloister and up a flight of steps, then along a stone wallwalk and into the castle’s great tower. The air was musty and damp, and everywhere rain was dripping down, from parapets and crenels and the bleak grey sky. “How many men does Lord Connington have guarding the castle?” she asked Ser Laswell Peake.

“I cannot tell you that, my lady.”

“You certainly can. I am to be your king’s wife, you know that.”

The ploy did not work; she had not expected it to. “You should ask Lord Connington, my lady.”
Has Lord Connington stolen your wits? she wanted to ask. Instead she continued in sullen silence.

Arianne had expected the castle to be cold and draughty, but it was nice and warm inside, thanks to all the fires burning in the rooms and the corridors that linked them. They passed a regiment of company men drinking in one of the smaller halls. When their commander saw Ser Laswell he stood up and waved. “A friend of yours?” Arianne asked.

“Ser Tristan Rivers. One of Harry Strickland’s serjeants.” He frowned. “A friend of sorts, I suppose, but no man should be drinking at this hour of the day. If a fight were to come now—”

“Ser Tristan Rivers, you said? A bastard name. I know that there are many bastards in the Golden Company, but there seem to be a fair few exiles as well. Such as yourself. How does a knight of House Peake end up with Essosi sellswords?”

“Blame my father, not me. He was a household knight from the lesser branch who threw his lot in with the Targaryens during Robert’s Rebellion. Not a problem, but he slew Robert’s cousin Erron Estermont at the Battle of the Trident, and the Usurper swore a one-man mission of vengeance against him. Or rather he sent his knights after him. My father fled across the Narrow Sea, taking nine-year old me with him as his page, and promptly died of the pox. Myles Toyne said that death wasn’t an excuse for him to break his contract, so he passed it on to me.”

“Well, that must have worked out rather well for you, then.”

He shrugged. “I suppose so.” The knight nodded down the hall. “That’s Lord Connington’s solar.”

Arianne had expected the lord’s rooms to be higher in the tower, though she supposed it was more practical for them to be located down here. Ser Laswell knocked on the door. After a moment a squire came to greet them, and immediately started to blush upon seeing Arianne.

“Well, I am certainly well-versed to seduce Aegon if he is a blushing man-maid, she thought, but she’d rather have something meaningful with her husband-to-be. “Is Lord Connington in?” Ser Laswell asked.

“Um… yes. Who should I tell him it is?”

“Ser Laswell Peake, you fool. Don’t you know me? And Princess Arianne, of the House Martell.”

“Oh.” The squire reddened again and went back inside.

“I am sorry for the lad’s slowness, my lady. A lot of squires are stupid nowadays.”

So are their masters, Arianne thought. But until she knew the intricacies of the plan her father and Lord Connington had made, it would be wise not to voice those thoughts.

The two men inside the solar were as different as chalk and cheese, and Arianne knew which was which at once. Lord Jon Connington was all in red, hair and beard, tunic and breeches, with griffins clasping his cloak, while the other man was in black leather over golden mail, with a golden cloak to match.

“My lords,” said Ser Laswell Peake, “may I present Princess Arianne Martell, future consort to our King Aegon.”

Lord Connington bowed his head. “My lady. I am Lord Jon Connington.”

“And I am Ser Harry Strickland, Captain-General of the Golden Company,” said the other man. Arianne was surprised at that; Strickland looked more like someone’s seneschal than the captain of a sellsword company. He must be fiercer than he looks. “My lords,” she said cordially, “I am pleased
to meet you.”

“The honour is ours,” said Lord Connington. “Laswell, you should go back to your duties. My lady, please have a seat.” He beckoned to a chair by the hearth.

Arianne sat. “No doubt you were expecting us before now. The rains held us up.”

“They will only worsen,” Harry Strickland said gloomily, “and soon comes the snow.”

Maester Kedry had mentioned that too, she remembered. Winter is coming. Arianne had never seen snow growing up in Dorne, and the girl in her was anxious to see what the world would be like when carpeted in white. But at the same time she knew how impractical things would be, how long it would take for armies and retinues to wend their slow way across the realm. It is good that I am here now, instead of still travelling the road.

The shadows from the fire flickered across Lord Connington’s face. “At least you are here safe, then. There are outlaws roaming from the kingswood all the way down to the Weeping Town; broken men, we think.”

Ser Harry added, “Not enough to cause on any lasting harm, but irritating, like a rash you cannot scratch.”

“Still, that may prove useful yet.” Lord Connington poured three cups from a flagon on his table. “I mean to tell Daenerys Targaryen that I have been wounded while out seeking these outlaws, and have returned to Storm’s End in order to recuperate. That should buy us another two weeks of excuses, at least.”

“What have you been doing out here?” Arianne asked.

“Waiting, mostly,” said Strickland, “I have dispatched Ser Franklyn Flowers to build ships on Estermont, and Lysono Maar the same at Crow’s Nest, but they will not be done for many moons. Other than that we have received the lords Errol and Gower, Grandison and Fell, and the Evenstar of Tarth. The bastard Rolland Storm is the lord of Nightsong now, after we took the castle back from the Lannisters. Lord Sunglass has turned from Stannis’s banner to fight under ours, and young Lord Bar Emmon too. All have put their shipwrights to work in the hope of building up a new fleet.”

“Why?” Arianne asked.

“Stannis Baratheon’s fleet broke up on Blackwater Bay,” explained Lord Connington, “and the Lannister and Redwyne fleets were burned along with Euron Crow’s Eye on the Honeywine. The great naval powers of Westeros are broken for now, but they will rise again. King Aegon must have ships to challenge them.”

He had omitted Daenerys Targaryen, Arianne noticed, who had arrived in Westeros with two hundred ships of the Meereenese, Ghiscari and Iron Fleets, now moored at Dragonstone. “The Redwynes are on our side now,” she said, “and Stannis’s ships are all the way over in White Harbor. That leaves only the Lannisters…”

“And they will be dealt with soon enough,” Connington finished. “You know, of course, that Aegon has gone north to placate the Riverlands and the Vale. You do not know that he has Jaime Lannister in his custody, though. Call it a stroke of luck.”

“The Kingslayer.” Arianne frowned. “What of it? I presume that Aegon will be returning him to King’s Landing, to stand trial…”
“And Daenerys Targaryen will be very surprised when he arrives, since she does not know of his presence. She’ll be pleased too, I’d wager, but you are wrong, my lady. Jaime Lannister has more uses to us alive than as a head rotting on the ramparts of the Red Keep.”

Well, Daenerys will not be pleased to hear of that, I should think. “Let us talk of Aegon, not Jaime Lannister. When will the king be returning to King’s Landing?”

“Not for some time. And he will certainly come to Storm’s End first, as is only natural. He will be so anxious to meet his bride.” She could not tell if Lord Connington was mocking her. “You will wed here once Prince Oberyn and the Tyrells bring their men up from Highgarden. Stannis Baratheon’s red witch burned the godswood, but the sept still stands. Once your wedding is over, we will ride up to King’s Landing. As Ser Harry says, the snow will slow our passage.” He took a sip of wine.

“Won’t that take time?” The sooner they were back in the capital, the better, she thought.

“Oh, it will, my lady. But we have time in abundance…”

But Daenerys does not. “And then I will be a queen?” she asked, hopeful.

“No, my lady. You will be the queen.”

That evening she supped with her cousins Elia and Tyene and Spotted Sylva Santagar in her chambers halfway up the Great Tower. “Me and Garin went down into the caves earlier,” Elia was saying, as a storm wind whipped out to sea. “He reckons the children of the Forest were down there once, too. There’s all carvings and everything.”

“The children of the Forest are gone,” Arianne said, as Ser Daemon Sand had earlier.

“You’re almost as dull as Quentyn nowadays, coz. If dragons are real, why not the Children?”

Arianne shrugged. “Well, dragons are definitely real. I’m supposed to marry one.”

“Cheer up, Ari,” said Sylva. “I know you’re having your doubts—”

I wouldn’t be my father’s daughter if I didn’t. “It’s not that—” Arianne began.

“Don’t worry,” added Elia, “hopefully you’ll like him and he’ll like you and you’ll have lots of screaming babies and everything.” And if Lord Connington’s plan goes wrong, I may end up being burned to a crisp alongside him. “But if you don’t, then Tyene can poison him, and we’ll all run away together when they come looking for us. It’ll be an adventure, you’ll see.”

Chapter End Notes

I have mixed feelings about Arianne. I like her character, but I generally don’t like Dorne or anything they stand for, so it’s hard for me to sympathize with her motives.

Arianne is the first of the ‘new’ POV characters, who’ll be appearing throughout the second half of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. You’ll have noticed that she, along with Mya Stone and some others, receives an epithet chapter title instead of her name.

On that note, a question for reviewers: do you prefer chapter titles or simplistic naming conventions, as per GRRM? I like to run with titles, but I understand it’s probably
irritating if you're just reading particular storylines or are looking for certain chapters (ie. on a reread)?
“A dark and stormy night, Your Grace,” Ser Jasper Peckledon proclaimed.

From somewhere beyond the ramparts came the distant crash of thunder. “Stannis will have a hard time fighting through this,” said Ser Lorent Lydden of the Kingsguard.

“That will not stop him,” Tommen replied. For five nights straight the foe had attacked at the three eastern gates of the city. Each night their defenses grew weaker and weaker. Engineers and builders were up all hours, hastily rebuilding wooden hoardings and battlements, repairing wall-mounted ballistae, boiling oil in big metal cauldrons to throw down on the enemy.

The King’s Companions had played their part in carrying messages, cutting down trees to make cavalry stakes and sharpening steel for the battle, but their king did not join them. _I fought my battle at Sarsfield_, Tommen thought, _and I lost_. Half of him wanted to go out beyond the city and surrender so that no one else would have to die, but instead he stood and watched as his men died all around him.

The wind was fierce tonight, burning against his cheeks. _It will snow soon_. He wondered if that would halt Stannis’s advance, or just make him more incensed to attack. _He’ll attack, most like, and men will die in their thousands._

_They’ll die for me._

Brazier flames flickered along the wallwalk. Crossbowmen waited impatiently, checking their strings over and over. Men-at-arms checked the straps of their armour and stamped their feet to keep warm. A minstrel was singing ‘The King without Courage’ to lift the spirits of the men:
Oh, the king without courage in his castle of stone,
Afraid out to venture, and frightened to roam,
The king without courage, he slept on his own
A wench he’d not savour, ne’er hearing her moan,
And for his lack of courage, the kingdom did groan,
He ne’er took off that armour, but left her alone.

“Your Grace.” Tymond Vance bowed in his arrival. Strongboar stood to his left, holding a massive warhammer. A gaggle of King’s Companions waited on the steps behind them, armed with swords and shields and crossbows.

“How many?” Tommen asked.

“Eight-and-fifty, Your Grace. The rest are at the other gates, or with the officers.” The pages and younger squires had the duty of running messages and delivering refreshments during the fighting.

That did not stop them dying, though.

“Line them up on the walls,” said Tommen. “Send half of them down to Captain Forley, and the other half to Captain Vylarr. You two, bring five of your best and stay with me.”

Tymond and Strongboar set about their task. The minstrel kept singing:

The king without courage, so willing to cower,
Till the bells came a-ringing at unholy hour,
Till the swords came a-singing with frightful great pow’r,
Said the king to his foe, “No, I’m harmless, sweet flower,"
“I know,” said his queen, “now don’t look so dour,”
“And bed me, you fool, for I’m getting sour!”

The king without courage stood high on his tower, Tommen thought, wond’ring how many would be dead in an hour.

He did not have to wait long to find out. “Here they come!” Captain Forley shouted. Drums beat and trumpets sounded to call the men to their posts.

Ser Lorent Lydden glanced over the rampart. “They’re hiding under turtles,” he said. “We need to drop rocks on them, Your Grace.”
Tommen nodded to Strongboar. “Get the rocks.”

Captain Forley’s men were doing the same. The falling rocks faded into the dark as they went down over the wall, but Tommen heard the sound of them thunking off shields. Some of them made squelching noises instead.

Ty Vance unslung his bow. “Will flaming arrows help, Your Grace?”

“Stannis will have coated his turtles with cowhides,” Tommen said. “We’ll just have to hope that they break under our pressure.” Rocks were raining down from every part of the fortifications now. Some of Stannis’s men broke away from their turtles and sprinted towards the walls. “They’ve got grapnels and ladders!” Captain Vylarr called. “Rain fire on—”

“Arrows, get down!” someone else screamed, drowning him out. “Down!” Strongboar added his voice to the call. The King’s Companions ducked down behind the crenellations and hid behind their shields. Arrows thudded into the wood and out over the bailey.

“Quickly now!” called Captain Vylarr, “notch, draw, loose!”

The Lannister men returned their own volley.

“They’re climbing!” called Ser Lorent Lydden. He took hold of one of the ladders and shook it back and forth.

“Down!”

They ducked again. When Tommen looked up, Ser Lorent was staggering back, a feathered shaft between the plates of his armour. He took one step, another, a third, then fell over the rampart and disappeared into the night.

There was no time to mourn. Ser Jasper Peckledon shoved Tommen over, back towards his men. Ty called out orders for them to raise their bows. “Notch, draw, loose!” And the arrows entered the night air, trailing streams of fire, then fell floundering to the earth. BOOM DOOM BOOM DOOM BOOM, went the drums.

One of the turtles was moving more slowly than the others. There’s a ram underneath, Tommen realised. He went to the edge of the wall and pointed down. “Ram, look, a ram!”

Some of the Companions were busy pushing back ladders, others loosing arrows. Strongboar was helping one of Lord Jast’s spearmen to load barrels onto a slide, wrapped in oil-soaked rags. They put a torch to the barrel and let it fall. When it hit the earth it exploded in a cloud of fire and sand, and someone started to scream.

They’re just sons of someone else. Dying for me, when I should be dying for them. Tommen wanted to cry, but he had forgotten how to be afraid. The fear would return later, though, with his nightmares. It always did.

The Baratheon men gathered beneath the portcullis, still pushing the ram towards the gate. Captain Forley gave orders to throw down more flaming barrels. Arrows soared over their heads, whistling and whirling in the night air.

It should never have come to this, Tommen thought, crouching behind a merlon. He remembered the long ride back from Lannisport, and what Ser Addam Marbrand had told him on the last day of their journey. “You’ll be home soon, Your Grace.”
“Home,” Tommen had replied, feeling hollow. They said that I was home in King’s Landing, in the shadow of the Iron Throne. They said that I was home in Winterfell, though that was never our place. They said that I was home in Casterly Rock, where the stones are seeped in blood and the towers are built from bones. I have no home.

If he died now, on this wall, in this battle, he wondered what would come after? Will Lord Tywin be in the seven hells too? He will be pleased to see me. We can talk about defeat together. We can discuss giving everything for nothing in return, how his legacy is worth less than a pile of dung, how his massacres pale before mine. He might even smile at that. Do the dead laugh?

The ram was battering the gate now. Each time the great wooden arm swung back and forth the world shook with the impact. “This is doing us no good,” said Ser Jasper Peckledon. “We need to launch a sortie outside the gate.”

Captain Vylarr thought the same. “Send the silent giant to lead, Your Grace.”

Ser Robert Strong stood at the king’s shoulder with one hand on the hilt of his greatsword. His head turned slowly to look into Tommen’s eyes. Do you know fear, ser? the king wanted to ask.

“Your Grace?” Captain Vylarr repeated. “The sortie?”

They’re just sons of someone else. They’re fighting for a king who is too afraid to fight alongside him. All he could do was nod dumbly. “Yes.” His voice was choked. “Send them.”

The rain was threatening to vanquish their torches. Can a man drown in rain? Tommen wondered. What about tears? He’d cried, yes, but eventually he’d cried about everything there was to cry about. And what about wine? His mother used wine to drown her sorrows, sometimes.

Below, Ser Robert’s men poured out of the sally port to do battle. Steel clashed on wood and steel. Captain Forley and his archers crouched down behind the battlements, loosing the occasional arrow at Stannis’s archers gathered on the knoll. “We should be down there,” the old captain said sourly. “Fighting the war, not cowering behind the walls.”

Go, then. Go and fight and die. Tommen turned away from him. “I need to report to Ser Kevan,” he said to no one in particular, and went off into the night. I’m the king without courage who decided to flee, even now better men are dying for me.

In the ground floor of a guildhall on the Stony Street, they had set up their war room. Tonight the place was crammed with knights making reports and squires delivering messages, but as always Ser Kevan Lannister stood in the midst of it all, beside a long map table decorated with counters of black and red wood. The air was smoky with the glow of a dozen torches.

“Your Grace.” Ser Kevan frowned on seeing him. “You could have sent one of your captains down. Our men need to see you up on the walls.”

When the men look at me, all they see is my fear. How is that supposed to help their morale? “Ser Robert has led a sortie through the sally port,” he said. “With three hundred of our men-at-arms, a dozen knights among that number.”

Ser Kevan moved a couple of counters. “So he has. Ser Preston came by earlier. Stannis has rams, he said.”

“Yes. And turtles.” The room was hot and stuffy, and beneath his armour he was sweating. “I… I felt sick,” he said, quietly so that no one would hear. Sick of all the fighting, of all the dying, of all the living.
Ser Kevan furrowed his brow. “Go back to the walls, Tommen.” For a moment, he sounded just like Lord Tywin.

“No.”

“Go back to the walls now, or I’ll have you dragged there.”

“I won’t.”

Ser Kevan sighed. “Why should your men fight and die for you if you will not fight for them?”

Don’t you think I’ve asked myself that a thousand times? “I… I don’t know.”

“You need to be brave. Like you were on the Tumblestone.”

Lord Tywin died at the Tumblestone, Tommen wanted to remind him, Uncle Jaime disappeared and is now probably dead, our armies were destroyed, my friends captured and killed, half of the Riverlands burned to ash. Lady Genna had her throat slit and they threw her in the river, my lord. Your own sister, don’t you remember?

“I’m sorry,” he said. The torches were making his eyes water. “You are a lion, my son, you mustn’t be afraid,” he remembered his mother saying.

But I’m not a lion. I’m not. I’m a—

A messenger forced his way into the tent, shoving Tommen inside in his haste to get to Ser Kevan. “My lord!” he gasped, his breaths ragged and rasping, “my lord, it’s the Serretts and the Stackspears, they’ve turned, they’ve gone over, they’re inside our walls, at the… at the gate…”

“How many?”

“I don’t know. More than we’ve got… we need men, and fast.” Then he started to retch, out of breath and gasping.

Ser Kevan banged two cups down hard on the wooden table, over and over until the hall was silenced. Outside the drums were thundering.

“The Stackspears and the Serretts have turned their cloaks,” Ser Kevan told everyone. “Ser Morros,” he said to the knight who had brought the message, “you and the king will take four hundred men and head out to face them.” Most of the King’s Companions had come in behind Tommen when he was not looking.

No, he wanted to say, I can’t, I won’t, but he found himself being herded along with the rest of them. Out into the night they went, as the great grey clouds howled like ghosts.

It was less of an ordered march and more of a shambling run. Four hundred men was just been some number Ser Kevan had plucked out of his head at random. They could have been forty or four thousand, from the way they came and went, every man running a different path through the twisty city, this way and that, splashing through puddles and kicking up cobblestones in their wake.

They met the foe in a square by the gate. Lannister men were raining down arrows from the ramparts while the turncloak soldiers ran along the walls cutting them down. The King’s Companions swirled around Tommen like a cloud. “Seven hells,” said Strongboar, “seven fucking hells.”

“Best draw that sword of yours, my lord,” said Tymond Vance.
Lawbringer. He’d spent hours honing the blade, because he had nothing else to do. When Tommen drew it from the scabbard the silvery steel rippled in the light on the moon, and raindrops glistened on the blade.

A king must be brave, he thought hollowly, pulling down the visor of his helm as they went onwards.

Whether minutes passed or hours, he did not know. He felt nothing, knew nothing, except this fight. A man with two crossed spears on his tabard came at him from the left. Tommen parried his sword thrust, cut across and slammed Lawbringer’s pommel into the man’s stomach, then went behind him and shoved the sword through his back. He heard a wet squelching, and hoped it was just the rain. It wasn’t, though. Then he was past the dying man and facing another. He knocked aside a low cut and slashed down, once, twice, then across, forcing his foe back into the press. Someone came at him from behind, but Robert Crakehall knocked their legs out from under them. When they tried to find their feet again, Tommen stabbed them through the throat.

Ser Jasper was beside him, shiny in his enamelled plate. Tommen blocked a high two-handed cut at his face, then rolled to his left, bringing the sword across in his right. The man’s guts spilled out and he died gargling on his own blood. Next a squire tried to attack him from behind with only his dirk, but the king whirled and punched him in the nose, blood spurting everywhere. “I yield!” shouted.

No, Tommen thought. The gauntleted fist smashed into his face again, crunching in the wet misty air.

When it was over, the Stackspears and the Serretts had thrown down their swords and surrendered. His heart was hammering in his chest. Did you see me, Father? he almost wanted to shout. Did you see me, your son! King Robert would have been proud of him, he knew.

He was walking among the dead when he happened on Strongboar. “Your Grace, I… it’s Ty, he was killed. Someone stabbed him. He’s gone.”

When your friend died you were supposed to feel anger or rage or sorrow, but Tommen felt nothing save for emptiness. “How many more did we lose?” he asked.

“Nine dead, twelve wounded,” Strongboar said. “Were you hurt?”

“No. My armour… oh.” There was a crack in his left gauntlet, an inch or so across, where the steel had broken apart, and blood was trickling out slowly. “No. I’m not.” The gauntlet… when I hit him…

“We’ve captured Ser Alyn Stackspear, Your Grace,” said Ser Jasper Peckledon. “What should we do with him?”

“Cut off his head,” Strongboar said. “That’s what I would do.”

It was only then that Tommen noticed that the sounds of fighting had died down all around. “Is it over?” he asked. For tonight, I mean.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Would you like to see Ser Alyn?”

“No.” His left hand was stinging. “Do what you will with Ser Alyn,” he said, “I’m going to bed.”

Bells were pealing in the night air by the time he made it back to the castle. The Lannisters of Lannisport had their seat here in the middle of the city, and it was here that the noble ladies of the Westerlands went to shelter from the fighting.
His mother came in as Lewys Piper was helping him out of his armour. The queen had bound her hair up in a braid, and wore bronze plate over her gown and a dagger in her belt, as though she were going to war herself. She hugged Tommen and kissed his forehead. “You’re safe. You’re alright.”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You worry me with all these sorties, my love. One day you might… well, let us hope that day never comes.”

“A king should fight alongside his men, else they’ll never fight for him,” he told her. That was obvious; his mother should have known that. “I’m not a coward.”

Not now, a voice inside him said, but you were. “I killed four men tonight.” He could not help the note of pride in his voice, and at the same time it sickened him.

Mother frowned. “How… how did it make you feel?”

“It felt… it felt…” He remembered the blood rushing through his veins, his heart hammering out of control. The battle fever. “It made me feel like I was a king.”

Mother looked at him sadly. “So you are.”

Lew brought him a bowl of beef-and-bacon stew, thick with carrots and parsnips, with buttered greens on the side and a flagon of mulled wine to drink. His father would have drank with his men after every battle, Tommen knew, but sometimes a king needed to time to sit back and reflect instead.

He had Lew bring him a map, a paper and quill, and an oil lantern. If Stannis has lost five hundred men every night, then he has lost two-and-a-half thousand already. A few more nights, and we will have enough to take him in the field. Outside his window, thunder boomed loud enough to shake the window-panes. And if the rain gets worse, or if it starts snowing, their morale may start to break, and they will come to our side. Tommen dipped his quill in the ink and started to draw up plans.

Lew came back unbidden a few minutes later, bearing a letter with the Lannister sigil pressed into the wax. “What’s this?” Tommen asked.

“From your sister. At Harrenhal.”

Tommen cracked the seal and read:

Tommen,

I hope this finds you well,

I have reached Harrenhal, though troubles on my journey find me a prisoner of Aegon Targaryen. Not to worry, though. Lord Baelish and I have formulated plans to negotiate a marriage between myself and Lord Arryn, which should deliver me from Aegon’s captivity.

Tell Mother that uncle Jaime is here as well, alive and (mostly) unharmed. Negotiating his release may be difficult, but I will try and work something out.
Lord Baelish has allowed me to send this message in secret, but soon you will receive another, one which Aegon has forced me to send, offering terms should you surrender your throne and bend the knee to him. Ignore them. They mean nothing.

Love,

Myrcella

Tommen lit a candle on his desk, took the paper and passed it through the flame. Mixed news, he thought, and decided to sleep on it. He washed at the basin and dressed for bed. The storm threatened to keep him awake, but he was so exhausted from the fighting that he had little trouble settling himself down among the pillows to rest his tired limbs.

But sleep refused to come.

The night grew colder and colder still. The hour of the wolf became the hour of the nightingale and then the hour of whispers. Mother have mercy, Tommen found himself thinking, let me sleep.

You’ll have no mercy from us, replied another voice, not after all you’ve done. Don’t you remember?

He did. He remembered the screams of men dying in the Sarsfield battle, the crunch of his gauntlet as he slammed it into that squire’s face. His hand still throbbed, and there was swelling under the knuckle.

I led those men to their deaths. Ser Addam said to retreat back to the Rock, he warned me, but I didn’t listen, and now they’re all dead. All those sons of someone else. He thought of widows weeping, mothers grieving for their children. He remembered Myles, who’d died before the real battle even started. How many of the King’s Companions have joined you tonight? How many eyeless corpses, how many rotting bodies, how many graveworms, how many, how many, how many?

Dreams brought him no respite. The rain was blood, the ground cold black ash. The drops beat down percussively. And now the rains weep o’er his halls, with not a soul to hear.

A dream. The only way Tommen knew that it was a dream was because he had been here every night since the battle at Sarsfield had taken place. Yes, now the rains weep o’er his halls, with not a soul to hear.

He saw the squire coming up the hill, rushing him with sword drawn. He saw the black onion blazoned on his tabard. Tommen swallowed. He’d killed this squire a thousand times already. What harm will a thousand and one do?

Their blades checked twice as always, once low and once high. Then Lawbringer was in front of his foe and slashing upwards, and it would not stop or go elsewhere no matter how hard Tommen tried otherwise.

“Oh,” the squire said, as blood bubbled over his lips and ran down his chin. The light went from his brown eyes and he fell back. Crimson blood stained the sword halfway to the hilt, glimmering in the
rain. *Onions. Who has onions on their shield?*

When he looked up again, Ser Robert Strong was there, only he had another Robert’s face. His hands were tight around Tommen’s throat. “You are no son of mine,” King Robert said, and drove his son’s head into the ground.

Blood was everywhere, slipping through his fingers, wet in his hair, disappearing into the torrent of black rain. “F-Father,” he managed to say, “I—”

King Robert put gauntleted fingers into his eyes and began to squeeze. The screams started, and went howling through the night like a banshee’s wail, louder than anything, until he was awake in his bed gasping, tears in his eyes.

Every new breath made him shiver. Fingers of dread crept up to his throat, long and ghostly and veiled in night. When he ran a trembling hand through his hair it came away cold and sticky with sweat. His left hand *burned*, worse than ever.

Tommen rose to his feet, staggered out of his soaked sheets, and fell to his knees before the mirror. The reflection was something distorted, haggard, a boy-king with lank blond hair and madness in his green eyes. *Murderer*, said his reflection. *Monster. Coward.*

It smiled at him.

“You’re wrong.”

*It was you who ran away from the battle, not me.*

“You ran away on the Blackwater.”

*We won on the Blackwater, you little shit. Perhaps you were too stupid to realise it, but that’s why Stannis didn’t sack the city. But now he’s coming, oh, he’s coming for you.*

“Y-you’re not real. You died at your wedding. I *saw* you die.”

*Oh, yes. I’m dead. But I’ll always be with you.*

“No. You’re not here. You’re mad.”

*I’m not the one talking to a mirror, you stupid cunt. Did Mother ever tell you that your birth was never supposed to happen? She sent for some moon tea from Grand Maester Pyelle, but he got it wrong and gave her sweetsleep instead. Left her shitting for near two moons, and by then it was too late to stop you. When you were born, you almost tore her in half, you know. Yet now you’re too frightened to go anywhere near a woman’s cunt.*

“Shut up, shut up, Joff, shut up, shut up, *shut up.*” He closed his eyes tight, but the voice fought through the darkness, ripe with malice. *Tell me, dear brother, is it because they didn’t know where to find your cock? Shall we play that game again? Would you like that? A different game.*

*A new game.*

“That… it never happened, it never happened.” The tears came streaming down his cheeks.

*Oh, but it did. You fought, I’ll give you that, you fought like a little lion, arms and legs kicking, but eventually you did what you were supposed to. How did it feel, I wonder?*
“SHUT UP! Shut up, get out of my head!”

Always screaming. You screamed too much for me to enjoy it, truth be told. Your mouth should have been busy enough to stop you from screaming for the guards. Well, little brother, we’re all alone now.

Tommen whirled and ran. He rushed to his desk, pulled Lawbringer out of its scabbard, fingers shaking, then threw the sword at the mirror as hard as he could, even as Joffrey was climbing through it. The grass cracked and slid down in the frame. Then a voice was at the door. “Your Grace?”

“It’s… it’s nothing,” Tommen said in a small strangled voice, and collapsed into a chair. Eleyna Westerling stood in the doorway, carrying a candle in one hand, her face bathed in the yellowish light. Her eyes were bleary from sleep.

She advanced two steps, soundless against the rushes. She has come to kill me, Tommen thought as she came closer, she has come to kill me for what I did to Rollam. Her brother was among those captured at Sarsfield. “Make it quick,” he murmured. For a moment, as her hands went round his neck, he feared that she was going to strangle him… but then he realised that her touch was light, not forceful.

Perhaps it was the unexpected softness of her words, perhaps it was something else; but either way he found himself hugging her back, holding tightly to her as though for dear life, clinging like a limpet to a rock. “I’m not a king,” he kept saying, over and over, “I’m not a king, I’m weak, I’m afraid, I don’t want to die, I… I… I…”

She brushed back his tangled hair and kissed the top of his forehead, as Mother had. “Come on,” she said, “I’ll take you back to bed.” She sat down by his side and brought him a cup of water and another blanket. “You look cold.”

“I… I am.”

“You’re sweating, though. Did… did you have a nightmare, my lord?”

For a moment he thought about lying. A king must be brave. But then she might leave him, and he did not want to be alone…

He nodded.

“So did I,” Eleyna said. She bit her lip. “Would… would you like to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Me neither. My lord, I hate to presume, but… but you have a big bed. Bigger than mine.”

The words stuck in Tommen’s throat. “Are… are you frightened… as well?”

“I-I am.”

Slowly, he slid his fingers through hers. “If you want to… not this side, though. I like to be near the window.”

Eleyna climbed up and covered her knees with the furs. “You… you can lie down over there,” Tommen said, “if you want. There’s enough room for both of us.”
She seemed unsure whether to move away or towards him. “What was your nightmare about?”

“The battle,” Tommen lied. “It was the battle.”

“Was it frightening, my lord?” Eleyna had been with the baggage train on the far side of the hill when the fighting started. “We heard the sounds and we saw the smoke, but… I’ve never actually seen a battle. Except when King Robb came to the Crag. Lord Robb, I mean.”

“Robb was a king. He fought his battles, won his wars, kept control of his bannermen. Not like Joffrey. Not like me. I’m not a king. Just a scared little boy.” He had to tell someone.

The ensuing pause lasted an age. “I shouldn’t be here,” she said eventually. “I’ll go back to my chambers now.”

“No.” The word came out of his mouth thick and fast. “You can stay. I want you to stay.” Tommen swallowed. “Please. We could tell each other stories. Or something. You… if you want.”

“As… as it please you, my lord.”

He found himself shifting a little closer to her. It seemed the right thing to do. Slowly, he reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. “My lady, I…”

She leaned over, just a little, so that they were barely touching. “You’re not a coward,” Eleyna said. “Not really. Most people wouldn’t have been able to do what you did. Daeron the Good never sat in a war council until he was two-and-twenty, you know.”

“Daeron the Young Dragon conquered all of Dorne at fourteen… and died at eighteen, I suppose. That didn’t go too well for him.”

She laughed. “The words of a wise man. A king must be wise, surely.”

“Lord Tywin said the same thing. He said that a king must be brave too, though, and strong. I… I’m not that.”

Eleyna’s hand rose slowly to Tommen’s face, and brushed his hair back behind his ear. “There are many different types of strength, you know. King Robert was strong.” Her hand moved down his cheek. “But so was Jaehaerys the Old, and Aegon the Unlikely. Some men are strong of body, and others strong of mind. But all the best kings… the best men…” Eleyna’s hand went to his chest, rubbing small circles there. Her skin felt hot, almost feverish. “…are strong of heart.”

Her fingers were as hot and light as a summer wind. “Yes,” Tommen said, “yes, they are.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the darkest chapter in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. And if you don't understand why, I'm sorry to say that you've missed something. Admittedly, I was in two minds over whether or not to put it in, but I think it would be an injustice to Tommen's character development to do anything otherwise.
“Randyll Tarly slew one of the Conklyn twins during the battle,” Garlan told him, “and Lord Costayne will lose his arm, most like. He challenged Lord Randyll to single combat.”

Willas sighed. “Then Lord Costayne was a fool. We all knew that Tarly would not surrender easily —”

“Do you mean to send me after him again? My lord?”

My father is Lord Tyrell, he almost said. The courtesy would still take some getting used to, as would everything else. “Not for now.”

Garlan’s frown did not go away. I must remedy that, and soon. He would need the loyalty of both of his brothers in the wars to come. “I will be hosting Margaery, Loras and Grandmother for supper tonight. I can have them draw a place up for you—”

“No. I… I…” Garlan reddened. “I’ll be spending the night with Leonette.”

“I wish you a… fruitful evening. I’ll expect news of a new niece or nephew soon.” But sons of my own may be a far-fetched dream. He decided not to think on that.

Once Garlan had gone, Willas picked up his cane (his leg was paining him again) and went down the back steps from his chambers, down the main steps to the Great Hall, and down the outside steps to the castle’s undercroft. Somewhere down here was the secret gate where the Dornishmen had poured into the castle before the battle – a secret no longer, he supposed – the vaults where they had hidden, lying in wait… and supposedly the secret rooms where King Mern the Bountiful had brought highborn maidens from all around the Reach for safekeeping, and there spread them with his bountiful seed.

Nowadays, Highgarden’s vaults were populated by highborn prisoners rather than fertile virgins. Young Lord Beesbury had spent a brief spell in their before pledging his allegiance to House Tyrell, as had Lord Alekyne Florent, late of Brightwater Keep. Willas’s uncle Ser Garth Hightower had died during the battle, but Garth’s bastard son Garse was still down in a cell, refusing to bend the knee. Others who had chosen pride over humility included Lord Russell Ashford, who nursed a broken arm, Lord Norcross, and Ser Larence Cuy, the Knight of Sunhouse.

When the guards drew open the door of the cell at the end of the tunnel, he found Lord Titus Peake pacing to and fro. The lord of Starpike had a comfortable prison, as far as prisons went. There was a bed with a straw mattress, and a pitcher of water on the side table. A narrow window close to the stone roof let in a finger of light.
“My lord,” Willas said. “I hope I find you well.”

“Fuck you.”

“I think, my lord, it is you who has been well and truly fucked. Perhaps you are wondering after your friend Lord Randyll?”

Lord Peake did not say a word.

“He is dead,” Willas told him. “My brother Garlan came across his men as they were crossing the river near Manderford. Lord Randyll tried to flee, but he was caught in the ford and Garlan slew him in single combat from his horse.” It was a good story, and Willas was proud of it. Like Robert and Rhaegar on the Trident. “Your liege lord is dead. Bend the knee to me and I will let you leave this castle alive.”

Lord Peake spat. “Never.”

“Fine. Then in three days you’ll be executed. But on the second day I’ll take you up to the walls to look at your son’s head. Addam, is it? Your bastard son. A good lad, and a promising fighter, or so Willas tells me. He would do much better as a knight than as a head adorning a pike.”

Lord Peake sneered at him. “You don’t have the stomach to kill children.”

Willas considered that a moment. “You may be right, my lord. I’m not going to execute your son, actually. I’m going to throw him into this cell with you. At the moment you have food and water, but I may just forget about that. At which point there are two outcomes: either you watch your son waste away and slowly starve to death, hear his last ragged breaths, see the light fade from his eyes, or you die first instead and I am left with a starved child as lord of Starpike. If I’m feeling cruel, I may let him die as well. So what do you say to that?”

Lord Peake’s eyes did not leave his, but his face had turned a considerably paler colour. “Nothing, then?” Willas asked. “I see no need in delaying. I’ll go and fetch the boy right away.”

“Wait!” called Lord Peake, as Willas had known he would. “Wait a moment, now!”

“You know what you need to do.”

The lord of Starpike glared at him angrily. “Fine, I—”

“On your knees.”

He did as he was told. “Fine. I hereby swear my fealty to you, and to House Tyrell of Highgarden, to pay my fair share of gold and grain, to pledge allegiance to my lord in land and title, to answer his call to arms when the hour arises.”

The time is now. “And I promise that you shall always have a place at my hearth and meat and mead at my table, and that I shall ask no service of you that may cause you dishonour. Arise.”

Lord Peake rose.

“My father may have been a fool, but he taught me that it was always better to have friends as your bannermen than foes,” Willas continued, “I will keep your son Addam as a squire for these next few years—”

“You said—”
I said nothing about letting you out of this cell. But I will. You will go back to Starpike and call your men up to march on Storm’s End in a fortnight. You will pay your share of the reparations in gold and grain, as you pledged. That may be rather more difficult than you thought, as I’ve granted half of your land to Lord Beesbury.” He shrugged. “You killed his father.”

“I will not stand for this—”

“Be silent. You will, else I’ll send your son’s head in a box. But... if you stay loyal to me, I will do a service for you as well. I know that you have little love for your brother’s son, Ser Willem, but as it stands he is your heir, by all the laws of the Reach. But if you practise loyalty to me, I will apply to the king, requesting that he have Addam legitimised as your trueborn son and heir.”

“And which king would that be?” Lord Peake asked.

Willas only smiled at him. “Take him up to the Candle Tower,” he told the guards, “and bring his son Addam too. I want his lordship to remember what he has to lose...”

Ascending the back stairs from the cell brought him out near to Lady Olenna’s garden. He found her upstairs, sitting on her terrace overlooking the rose bushes with a cup of wine in hand. The sun was setting beneath the rolling hills. The drapes were drawn across the window-arches in a feeble attempt to keep out the chill.

“It is done,” he told her, sitting opposite. “Are you sure I don’t need to speak to any of the others?”

“No. Lord Peake was the only one who followed Lord Randyll by choice. Most of the others were dragged along unwilling. Once you put the word out that Lord Titus has bent the knee, the others will follow swiftly. Did you question him softly or sharply?”

“Sharply.”

“Good. We can’t afford to prance around the matter like lost lambs. Your army is leaving soon.”

“My army?” He supposed it was. “Aye, my army.”

“That’s what I just said, Willas. It seems we’re both going off on our grand adventures.” Her smile was sad.

“What do you mean?”

“Prince Doran has invited me to Dorne, to sup with him in the Water Gardens. I expect it’s the last time I’ll leave Highgarden before... well, some things are inevitable, aren’t they?”

“Grandmother?”

“Willas, I’m seventy-three years old. People don’t live forever, you know. Oh, when the Stranger comes to take me I’ll be stubborn as anything, but I know now that he can’t be stopped. Your father... he was a great oaf, yes, but he was my little boy once. A mother should not outlive her children. Strange that I should be quoting Cersei Lannister in my old age, but here we are. From Sunspear I will go to Oldtown, and then to the Arbor, to look upon the place of my birth for the last time. I should prefer not to die at sea, though. Can you imagine the smell if I died off the coast of Dorne and they had to bring my rotting corpse all the way back to Highgarden?” She laughed. “Go to supper, Willas. I wish to sit here awhile longer, and watch the stars.”

He turned to go, but she caught his arm. “Willas... don’t send Margaery to Casterly Rock. We don’t need the Lannisters. Dorne and the Reach will serve.”
“I have to do my duty, Grandmother. The king has asked it of me.”

She gripped his sleeve a little tighter, sighed, and let go. “As you will.” The flicker of sadness did not leave her eyes even as Willas went away and up the stairs back to his chambers.

The sun was setting over the towers and ramparts, slowly sinking behind a bank of distant cloud. On the main stair Willas stopped and looked out over the merlon, gazing off into the west. Scant twenty leagues from here was Manderford, where Garlan and Lord Randyll had fought their battle, and beyond that the place where the Mander widened out into the Sunset Sea. *We will need to restore our fleet,* thought Willas, *we will need to rebuild the castles of the Shield Islands and bring new life where Euron Crow’s Eye and Randyll Tarly tried to bring death…*

*But we will succeed. As we already have. For here we stand. Unbowed, unbent, unbroken.*

His cousin Erron brought him fresh garb for dinner. “Send for Maester Lomys,” Willas instructed the squire.

“Is your leg paining you, my lord?”

“No.” *I have worse pains than the one in my leg.* “But it is doing me no favours either. Go.”

When the maester arrived, he gave Willas’s leg a light prod with his fingers and pinched around the bone. “It has set cleaner than it did the first time, my lord. Nonetheless, there may still be some buildup of… hmm… yes, around the ankle. Does that hurt, my lord?” He poked his finger down.

It did. “Yes.”

“Ah.” The maester frowned. “I may need to drain some of the pus out. And more than that. That will be painful.”

“Better than having my leg chopped off.”

“It may be… very… painful, my lord.”

*No more painful than usual.* “Give me something to chew. I don’t want to bite my tongue off as well.” *And it is better that the whole castle does not hear me screaming, too.*

Maester Lomys bit his lip fretfully. “Yes, my lord.”

A painful half-hour later, Willas found himself lying back on his bed, staring up at the ceiling as the maester wound strips of vinegar-soaked cloth around his ankle. They stung when he laid them down, but less than the draining had.

Maester Lomys’s hands began to shiver. “My lord—,” he began.

“No doubt you are going to give me the same complaint you gave me yesterday, so I shall save you the time. You may be more right than I admit, but that does not mean I have a choice in the matter. I must go to Storm’s End.”

“My lord, with your leg—”

“My leg is not a part of it. The future of Highgarden is. The matter is settled.” Willas sat up straight, resting his back on the pillows. “That will do for now,” he said. “You may go.”

The maester went without another word. It pained Willas to see the old man looking so beaten-down, but he had no choice. *I am the lord of Highgarden now. I can listen to every whim and whisper my*
subjects have, but I cannot act on all of them.

Night had fallen by the time Erron returned, bringing Loras, followed by their uncle Garth and their lady mother; Ser Hobber Redwyne, Lord Merryweather and his wife, Lord Rowan’s son Ser Oswald; and lastly Margaery with Prince Quentyn at her side. “My uncle is not coming, I fear,” said the Dornish prince, “He says that he wishes to savour the Reach while he can. He and Nym rode out two hours ago, down the roseroad towards Brightwater.”

“I expected no less.” Willas was half-glad that the Red Viper was not here to share the meal with them. Oberyn was a nightmare at the best of times.

The first course was onion soup with chunks of bread in the broth, followed by venison sauced with cranberries. His father had always been fond of those dishes, Willas recalled, though he did not think the choice was deliberate. The conversation was sparse and bland, at a contrast with the table. Garth the Gross talked mostly about farming and fishery, while Prince Quentyn nodded mildly in answer. Margaery and Loras spoke quietly with Lady Alerie, but Willas was at the head of the table and too far away to hear them, surrounded by bannermen and sycophants.

Their lady mother left halfway through the sweet. “She was feeling a little tired, that’s all,” said Margaery.

“Lady Alerie is a strong woman,” agreed their uncle Garth. “Whatever challenges face her, she will get through it.”

As must we all, Willas thought.

Over cheese, biscuits and strong port wine they turned their attention to matters of counsel that might have been better left for another day. “The Peakes will not thank you for selling their lands off,” said Lady Taena Merryweather, “but that Beesbury boy will have little way of thanking you for it either. You need a strong lord to hold those lands for you, and the lord of Honeyholt is anything but.”

“It will not be you,” said Garth the Gross. “Perhaps my lord might do well to carve out a new fief from the forfeited lands, for one of his more loyal councillors.”

And why not? Garth is slavishly loyal, if only because he is too narrow-minded to look elsewhere. “I will consider that,” Willas said vaguely when his uncle suggested himself as a potential ruler of the fiefdom.

“What do you mean to do with the Tarly girls and Lady Melessa?” Ser Oswald asked. “The eldest, Talla, is heir to Horn Hill now. When she weds, House Tarly’s lands will be passed on to her husband…” Doubtless you would like to marry her yourself and secure those lands for Goldengrove, Willas thought. Or Lord Merryweather will suggest her as a bride for his son Russell. “I do not know,” he said. “One of the girls will wed my cousin Erron, but it will not be the eldest of them.”

Loras agreed. “It is not right for Oldtown and Horn Hill to be ruled by the same lord.”

None of this is right. Father should be here, making his way through all of this. Mace Tyrell might have been a fool, yes, but his bannermen had more respect for him than Willas had known. Ofttimes the greatest fools are cleverer than those who laugh at them, his grandmother had said once. Only now did he understand.

By the hour of the bat only four of them remained; Willas himself, Loras and Margaery, and Prince Quentyn. The silence grew more and more awkward as the night crept on and on and on, like a
weight pressing down on all of them.

Prince Quentyn broke the strained silence. “My sister Arianne is at Storm’s End now.”

“I know.” He had known for days, likely longer than Quentyn had himself. “She wrote to your uncle.”

“Yes. She would have.” The Dornish prince sounded oddly resentful.

Willas did not fail to notice as his sister placed her hand on Prince Quentyn’s. He felt an odd pang of sorrow. *What might have been*… “How is this working out for both of you… the… the marriage, I mean.”

“Very…” Margaery frowned into her wine cup. “Very… rather… ah, well, I suppose.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes, it is. It’s… better than most marriages, I think.”

How right you are. “…I suppose you’ll be wanting to know about your… the Casterly Rock plan.”

Loras nodded. “Yes.”

“It’s nothing more than you’d expect, really. And nothing less. King Aegon wants…” Willas went to his desk and rummaged through the pile of papers. “He wants…”

“I know what he wants,” Margaery said. “I should have no problem in convincing Tommen. But Cersei is a different matter entirely.”

“And Ser Kevan Lannister may present his own problems,” said Loras. “Are you certain this will work?” The question was directed to both Willas and Margaery, and yet to neither of them.

No. “Yes. Margaery’s letter is proof of that. And once we deliver the loyalty of the Lannisters, we can…” That went unsaid.

“They said this war was over.” Prince Quentyn frowned, and gave a funny little smile. “How wrong they were.”

“No, my lord,” said Loras. “How right they were. The War of Five Kings is other. But a new war is beginning. We don’t know what they’ll call it, or what battles we’ll fight, or who the heroes will be, but it’s coming. A war like none we’ve ever seen. We should all get some rest. If we are to be leaving on the morrow…” He lingered a moment in the doorway as the others were leaving. “You should get some sleep, brother.”

*I should,* Willas thought when he was gone. But he did not. Instead he picked up his cane and brought his cloak down from the peg, tucking his letters inside it. *But the lord of Highgarden has terrors to face day and night, and too many bad dreams to count. The things I have done… and the things I must do…*

The castle was sleeping, so Willas had to creep down to the kitchens quiet as a cat and filch a couple of tarts and a bottle of strong Dornish wine before heading back up to the library. His father’s solar only served to remind him of what he had had and what he had lost. The library had always been there for him. It was almost enough to convince him that things were normal again.

*But they never will be. I am half a ghost, a lost soul wandering through my own castle.*
“I didn’t think you’d be here, m’lord.” She spoke so quietly that he might have mistaken her for a mouse. It was a moment before he remembered her name. “Gilly, is it?”

“Yes. M’lord. Gilly, for the gillyflower, the old maester said.”

“The old maester?”

“Maester Aemon,” she explained, “from up on the Wall.”

“Oh.” Samwell had spoken about this, come to think of it. Willas inched his way down the table. “What are you reading, my lady?”

“I’m not a lady.” The sharpness of her voice cut the air. “I’m not.”

“Then… then what are you?” The question was begging to be asked.

“I’m Gilly,” she replied. “That’s my name, not Lady Gilly. I was a wife and a daughter. Now I’m a mother, but never a lady.”

Willas nodded. “I beg your pardon, Gilly.”

She wrinkled up her nose. “Why do all you southron folk talk so funny? Even the crows talk strange. Maester this, Lord that, Warden of somewhere or other.”

“Well… what do you call each other north of the Wall?”

“By our names. We tell the truth. One man isn’t better than another because his father was a king. My father was a…” She trailed off. “I’m not like him. We’re not.”

_Wouldn’t the world be so much easier if that were true?_ thought Willas. “You’ll have to be careful saying things like that, Gilly. Many of us Southerners are very proud people.”

“That won’t matter. Winter is coming.”

That sent a chill through him, though it was not from the coldness of his words. _Sansa_. His cloak weighed heavily on his shoulders. “Forgive me, Gilly. I didn’t think you were familiar with the Stark words.”

“They aren’t just some words to put on a silly shield,” said Gilly. “They’re important; they’re the truth.”

“So you say.” He frowned.

“You have to listen to me!” The exclamation was sudden, and it set the library to echoing, memememememe… “When the white walkers come, your pride won’t save you.” Gilly glared at him.

“The white walkers… so… so…” Willas did not know what to say to that. _Is she mad, or brilliant, or are we all too blind to see the obvious?_ She sighed. “You don’t believe me. No one ever does. But you will. We have to go north, to the Wall.”

“The Wall is a thousand leagues away,” he told her gently. “Our battle is here; I have to protect my people from their foes in the south.”

“And what about their foes in the north? Your wars won’t matter then.”
Willas let out a long, great sigh. “I will speak to the king,” he said. “When I see him…”

Whether Gilly was satisfied with that or not, he could not say. She picked up her book at once and left the library, taking her lantern with her. At once the room darkened, and the shadows dwindled to small mockeries of themselves. For the longest time Willas sat, eyes fixed on the place where she had been, watching, waiting…

_The white walkers._ It had been a long time since he had heard those stories. _They are as old as the Gardener kings that came in the Age of Heroes, and older still…_

_But the Gardener kings were real, sure as sunrise. And Gilly plainly believes in them, and so did Samwell Tarly, and so does the Night’s Watch; they must do. The swords in the darkness. The watchers on the walls._

Willas went to one of the shelves, but he did not bring down a book. Instead he took out paper and ink, and started to write:

_Dear Lady Sansa, he scrawled, I hope this letter finds you well… I was sorry to hear what has happened… I thought we might have found a way to work this all out… I am willing to see the High Septon and ask his counsel…_

_It was no good. This attempt will be no more successful than the twenty that came before it._ Willas unrolled the paper in his hand and blew the ink dry, spotting the page with black-and-blue dots. Then he tossed it into the hearth, and let the words smoke out into nothingness.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, we saw:

... 
...
...

Oh, Willas talked to Gilly (again). And Olenna was sad.

This was a dull filler chapter and I don't particularly like it. So in my view, it's stolen the 'Most Boring Chapter of 2016' award away from chapter 40. I hope I don't sound too pitiful or self-depreciating, because I won't be offended if you tell me that it's boring.

I can't even say that it was entirely necessary, either. But I've written it now so I'll upload, though this is the sort of thing that would end up being cut if there were word count restrictions.

...the vaults where they had hidden, lying in wait… and supposedly the secret rooms where King Mern the Bountiful had brought highborn maidens from all around the Reach for safekeeping, and there spread them with his bountiful seed.

Nowadays, Highgarden’s vaults were populated by highborn prisoners rather than fertile virgins.

Well, that's sort of interesting, at least. The concept is mostly courtesy of Tommyginger.

^^Well, that was depressing.
Chapter 63 takes us back to Samwell Tarly, somewhere around Valyria...
The Grey King

Chapter Summary

Kill the boy, he said.

Chapter Notes

A RECAP (since it's been a while):
Sam is with Sarella Sand and the red priestess Kinvara, headed for Asshai to solve the mystery of vulture, phoenix and nightingale, which has some linked to the mythic song of ice and fire.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SAMWELL

Every evening, as the sun dipped below the western horizon, the red priests came up onto the deck of the Melevol and joined their voices in song. “Lord,” they called, as the stars floated across the darkening sky, “cast your light upon us, for the night is dark and full of terrors!”

The Melevol’s sailors were all Volantenes, and a good three-quarters of them worshipped the Lord of Light, so they were thankful for the red priests’ words. Kinvara stood at the prow of the ship, her arms raised to the wind. Braziers burned around her, the hot coals glowing. Sam thought it a bad idea to have so many flames aboard a wooden ship, but Kinvara had told him that fire would not sink the Melevol, and it seemed she was right, for now.

After the ceremony was over, everyone aboard the ship, from the captain to the scullery boys, sat down in the galley to take the evening meal. Three-Finger Hobb had always cooked for them on the Wall, and Sam’s father maintained a host of cooks at Horn Hill, but he found himself curiously at home in the rear-galley, where a fat matron called Amma and a sinewy fellow named Grout prepared the food. Sam had helped fill the stewpot today, stirring in juniper spice and lemongrass and thyme with all manner of queer fish that Tam the fisherman had caught in the shallows. They had a salad of cold greens too, and bread as hard as rock. Kinvara and Kassaro said a prayer over the food, and then they ate.

After, the ship’s boy played a tune on skirling pipes, so badly that Sam’s ears started to ring, and the captain brought out his far-eye to look at the stars while his crewmen played at dice and cards.
“Come the morrow we will be in Valyria,” said Captain Toro Myratis, “and after that, on to Slaver’s
Bay, Qarth and lastly faraway Asshai.” He rubbed his jaw. “We had best hope that we come across the
dragon’s sailors as we cross the Gulf of Grief, and not the harpy’s.”

“Fear not,” said Kassaro, “Yunkish slavers will not sink the Melevol.”

Sam had thought that Daenerys Targaryen had brought an end to slavery in the East, but the captain
only laughed in the face of his foolishness. “New Ghis still stirs, and its legions march on Meereen
even as we speak, battered and decimated by the last war, aye, but still numbering in the tens of
thousands. The dragon girl brought fire and blood to Astapor and Yunkai and threw their Masters
down from their lofty palaces, but now the Shavepate is looking to start the trade up again to save
bankrupted Meereen, while the Sons of the Harpy stir in the pyramids of Pahl and Loraq and Galare.
A plot for every man in the city.” He frowned. “Once Meereen was thriving, a rich trade in slaves
and luxuries for the pampered highborn folk of Volantis and the Seven Kingdoms; now it is destitute
and broken and ruined. The city smells of shit and sewage, and refugees crowd the Skahazadhan
under constant threat of the Dothraki horde that the Targaryen girl has unleashed.”

Conquering is not easy work, Sam thought, for the conqueror or for the conquered. He had read that
in a book somewhere.

The Melevol had books too, and scriptures and writings aplenty. Once every few years, word would
come from the Red Temple of Braavos or Lorath or faraway Yi Ti, claiming that a saviour had been
found, Azor Ahai reborn, but those claims were always proven to be false, and the red priests who
had ‘found’ these saviours were marked for fools and cast aside by their own order. “Why?” Sam
had asked Kinvara, not quite understanding.

“There can only be one saviour, Samwell Tarly. Anything else would only muddy the waters, and
we would be lost in our own foolish beliefs. We serve the Lord of Light, whereas these so-called
‘searchers’ serve themselves. As maesters of the Citadel search for their rare tomes, so too do we
servants of the Lord search for Azor Ahai. With fervour, aye.. and perhaps a little selfishness too.
Valar dohaeris. All men must serve, Samwell, but most men do not know.” She stared at him a
moment longer, her green cat’s eyes blinking. “I think you are different, though. A Sworn Brother of
the Night’s Watch must know the meaning of service… and of sacrifice. What have you given up,
Samwell?”

“I-I… I was heir to my father’s castle. H-Horn Hill.” It was the only thing he could think of.

“Did you ever want your father’s castle?”

It was strange, but Sam hadn’t really thought about that. I hoped I could do something new with it,
instead of just making it a hunting ground… but deep down, I think I knew. That it was my father’s
place, and Dickon’s, but never mine. My place is… my place is on the Wall. Or in the Citadel. Or on
this boat, even. But not at Horn Hill. “No,” he said.

“It is a sacrifice all the same,” said Kinvara. “You have family there, don’t you?”

“Y-yes. M-my mother. And my sisters. Oh, and Gilly. And little Aemon.” The babe would be
drawing closer and closer to his naming day. Mance and Dalla’s son had been born in the first month
of the year 300 since Aegon’s Landing, and by his reckoning they were now in the fourth or fifth
month of the year 301. I wonder what I would have been like, to live back then before Aegon’s
Landing, when the years went backwards instead of forwards. Well, they didn’t go backwards really,
but the maesters always date them as 10BAL and then 11BAL and then 12BAL…

“Do you love your mother?” Kinvara asked.

The red priestess smiled at him. “Then you have given something up. We all make sacrifices, Samwell.”

She was leading him on, Sam realised. “I was reading about Nissa Nissa the other day.” That was Azor Ahai’s wife, whom the fabled hero had sacrificed by plunging Lightbringer into her heart. “Even… even if we did find Azor Ahai reborn, where would we find Nissa Nissa?”

“In the same place that we’ll find the knights of the nightingale, I hope.” Then she was climbing the stairs up to the deck, and Sam was left alone with his book and his lantern. Valar dohaeris, he thought, and then, I do not envy this Azor Ahai, whoever he is. The things he has to give up… and for what…?

That night as he blew out his candle for bed, he thought of Gilly and his mother and his sisters. Would I give them up for a magic sword, if it meant saving the world? No. Never. I never would.

The next morning he awoke to the awful noise of the ship’s boy blowing a trumpet. In the galley, they dined on oaten porridge and fried fish, with frothy ale to wash it down. The Melevol’s larders was filled with salt pork and mutton, peaches and plums and marrow squash, garlic bulbs and stalks of lemongrass, and a dozen casks of Dornish red and Pentoshi amber, but not nearly enough to see them across the sea. They had fish in abundance, though, and oats too. After this voyage, I may never eat fish again in my life, Sam thought.

Sarella Sand was of the same mind. “I’ve tasted worse, I suppose,” she said, as she chewed on her mackerel.

“I’ve tasted much worse,” Sam replied. “At Craster’s Keep,” he explained. “North of the Wall. All we had there was the salt beef we’d brought up from Castle Black. And some bread. And hard cheese. And a rabbit. Ghost caught a rabbit, I remember.”

“Ghost?”

“Jon Snow’s direwolf.”

“I’d like to see a direwolf.”

Sam laughed. “Not when he’s angry. Anyway, Jon’s all the way up at the Wall, and we’re out here. I doubt we’ll be back for years.” Castle Black was thousands of miles away, as were Oldtown and Horn Hill, Craster’s Keep and the Fist of the First Men, even Volantis, everywhere he had ever known.

I never wanted this, though. I never wanted an adventure; I just wanted to see the library at Oldtown and read books, to sit and listen to my mother singing songs while she sewed.

But I am a man now. He had been with Maester Aemon that day, so long ago, when Jon had come up the steps asking the maester’s council. “There’s something I need to do,” he’d said, “something difficult, and the Watch won’t like it.”

Likely Jon was about to explain, but the old maester cut in with, “Do it.”

“But I haven’t told you what it is yet,” Jon had said.
“That doesn’t matter.” Sam and Jon both watched the old man’s milky eyes as he brought his fist down on the table. Eyes that had seen so much. “You will find little joy in your command, but with luck, you will find the strength to do what needs to be done,” he told Jon. “I will say to you, Lord Snow, what I once said to my brother Aegon, when the time came for him to take the Iron Throne. *The realm needs an Aegon, not an Egg,* I said. *Kill the boy.*

“And now I will say the same to you. Kill the boy. *Kill the boy,* Jon Snow, and let the man be born.”

*He killed the boy,* Sam thought. *He did, as Maester Aemon said he should. The boy was dead when he took Gilly’s babe from her and sent us away to Eastwatch. The boy was dead when he told me to go to Oldtown and cut up bodies, even as I quaked and quailed in my boots.* And then he thought, *the boy was dead long before that. The boy was dead when I met him, even if he did not know it yet.*

At his table, Captain Myratis stood up and banged two pots together loudly. “We are sailing through the Smoking Sea!” he declared when the room was silent.

Kassaro stood. “Some of you will apprehensive, I know,” he said in Valyrian, “but the fate that awaits us if we sail south of the Accursed Isles is far worse than if we sail through it. Slavers range to the south of Old Valyria, hunting through forgotten lands.”

Sam felt a queasy knot in his belly. “Valyria is cursed,” he said to Sarella, as the tumult grew around them.

“Better that than slavery.” It was Kinvara who had spoken, hovering at Sam’s elbow. “Our way is long and dark.”

“They say there are volcanoes in the Smoking Sea,” said Sam, “and the waters are infested with krakens.” He did not really believe that krakens were real, though.

“And worse things,” added Sarella.

“They will not sink the *Melevol,*” said the red priestess.

“You keep saying that.” The Sand Snake frowned. “But how can you know?”

“I cannot. But the Lord has shown me visions in the flames, and Kassaro has told the truth of them. He has seen the way forward, aboard this ship, sailing on the easterly tide.”

“I do not like her,” Sarella said once the red priests were gone and the sailors were going to their duties. “Nor do I trust her.”

Sam frowned. “I don’t either, not really. But she’s been more help than anyone else. Her and Benerro.” *The prince of the vulture, the lady of the phoenix and the knights of the nightingale.* He was still no closer to knowing who any of them were, but the books the Red Temple had lent him gave some sort of insight. The knights of the nightingale were an ancient order that had formed against the forces of darkness when the Long Night descended upon the world. *If I can find them in Asshai, perhaps I can convince them to come back to Westeros with us, to fight the Others.*

There was no time to think about that now, though. Sam was a guest on the *Melevol,* yes, but he and Sarella were honorary crewmen also, with all of a crewman’s responsibilities. For three hours after breakfast he fetched rope and threw lines, patched sails with strips of cloth and hammered nails into wooden planks. It was half-dark by the time he started, but by the time the three hours had passed the sun was bearing down hotly and Sam was sweating beneath his silks, quite red in the face. He had an hour’s respite after that, when he went into the galley to help chop vegetables and peel cloves of garlic for the stewpot, but then he was back on deck for another hour before the midday meal. By the
time they were done there were blisters and sawdust all over his hands. His back hurt, his legs hurt, his arms hurt, everything hurt, but it was good work.

*Good work.* A year ago Sam would have said that such a thing did not exist, but he was starting to grow tougher, and the work was getting easier, truth be told. He was no longer the twenty-stone hulking leviathan he had been at Castle Black, nor the contented acolyte he had been at the Citadel. As Grenn had at Castle Black, he was starting to fill out, and there was some muscle on him as well as fat now. *Some.* He was still mostly a great wobbling sack of suet, even if his three quivering chins were less noticeable now.

After the meal (bean stew with chunks of spicy sausage, a pleasant change) he washed and changed his clothes. His blacks were stored away in his trunk – it would have been stubborn madness to wear them out here under the scorching heat of the Summer Sea – he went up to the captain’s cabin. Sam had taken it upon himself to teach the captain’s son the Common Tongue. Mylo Myratis was three-and-ten, a quick learner, but insolent and wilful. He reminded Sam a bit of Dickon, or at least how Dickon had been before Lord Randyll got to him.

“My father says we are going to see Valyria,” the boy said excitedly, jumping up to the ship’s rail and gazing off as though the Fourteen Flames would suddenly rise before them. “It will be very scared, he says.”

“Scary,” Sam corrected.

“No, scared. It will be scared of us, you’ll see.” The boy grinned.

“Perhaps it will be. They say there’s lots of treasure there.” All his books did, at least. “Fabled swords, old books, magic chalices, things lost during the Doom.”

“We should not take. His Grey Grace is very…” He searched for the word.

“Protective,” Sam suggested, and gulped.

“Yes. Maybe. My father says we shouldn’t, but not that we can’t. Maybe I will. I’ve gone ashore before. On my own.”

Sam glanced up at the sun and the darkening clouds that lay behind that. “Perhaps not,” he murmured. “Perhaps not. I wouldn’t—”

“You are fat and old, Sam. I wouldn’t take you with me.”

Part of Sam wished that he could be a boy again, to dream of such adventures, but he knew that it was a fool’s game. *You must kill the boy too,* he heard old Maester Aemon say. “Your father is a wise man.”

“What about… your father?”

Sam sighed. *Wherever I go, Lord Randyll’s shadow is not far behind.* “He was not fond of me.”

“Your father sounds very… very shit.” The boy grinned. He liked to swear, and more than that he liked to teach Sam how to swear in Valyrian. He remembered the sailor Xhondo on the Cinnamon Wind, whose favourite word was ‘fuck.’ *I wonder if he is back on the Summer Isles now,* he thought, *fucking his wives and any woman who will come near him.* The thought made him smile. *Well, at least someone will be happy come the end of the world. And he may be safe from the Others, over on the Summer Isles.* He did not know if the white walkers and their wights could cross oceans. *It does not matter. So long as the Wall stands, they cannot get through…*
So long as the Wall stands…

That was what plagued his thoughts come night-time. He was certain now that the horn he’d had in the Citadel was the fabled Horn of Joramun, and he’d let it slip from his possession. Euron Greyjoy did not have it, true, but Sam did not know where it was or who had it. He tried to forget the fact altogether, as he’d tried to forget the sailors in Volantis who’d reported that Jon Snow was dead. They probably just heard a rumour. Yes, that was it, they probably knew nothing.

That night he dreamed of being out in the haunted forest, alone beneath the shadow of the Wall. For the longest time there was only quiet, but soon they came for him, cold blue things with cold hands and colder eyes…

For three days they sailed, into the mouth of Valyria. The first day was breezy and cool, and when Sam was up on the deck he saw waterspouts licking at the sky, and when they took a rowboat ashore to search for fish in the shallows he found hundreds of brightly coloured ones he had never seen before, mayhaps even thousands of them. When they’d filled half a crate with salmon and catfish, they bathed in the warm waters of the sea, cleaning dirt and mud from their skin.

On the second day he awoke to the smell of sulphur in the air. “That’s from the Fourteen Flames,” said Yellowheart, one of the crewmen. “That’s what a volcano smells like, young Samwell.” And by afternoon, they had seen the volcano in question, belching plumes of grey and black smoke into the night air. The mountain was faint and far off, yet its black slopes were stark against the purplish-red sky. Sarella Sand sat down on the deck with paper and a stick of charcoal and started to draw it. “This is not a memory I will easily forget,” she said, “but better safe than sorry.”

“I wish I could draw,” Sam replied wistfully. I could show Gilly where I’ve been, and Talla and Bethany and Elinor and Mother too. I could even show Father, not that he’d care. And if Maester Aemon is in the seven heavens maybe he can see this too. He sat down beside Sarella and tried his best to draw something resembling the mountains, but it was hard, and all he had in the end were some vague craggy shapes.

Come evenfall Tam the first mate and Kassaro reported that they had sighted a glimmer of treasure on the black rocks. They went ashore in a rowboat, along with eleven others. The ship’s boy asked Sam if he would like to come, but he remembered Mylo Myratis’s warning. Instead he stayed behind and drank too much rum with Sarella. When the rowboat returned with a chest of treasure and reports of too much to carry – even a Valyrian steel sword with rubies in its hilt, Tam reported – they drank another few toasts, till Sam’s head was ringing.

Captain Myratis confronted Tam in the galley as the night grew old and weary. “You should take it back,” the captain said, “His Grey Grace won’t be pleased—”

“His Grey Grace can go bugger himself,” said the ship’s boy. “He’s just a story, anyway.”

“More fool you, then,” said the captain, and stormed out. They drank some more, and Sam went to bed with his head ringing.

By the third day, everything had changed. The morning was too foggy to see anything, much less hidden treasure. “Can’t the gods make up their minds?” Sarella Sand asked over breakfast. “Yesterday everything was sunny and fine; now it’s anything but. It’ll be raining soon, mark my words.”

On the morning of the fourth day it did rain, lashings and lashings of it, such that Sam had never seen before. When he woke, the ship was churning, a slave to the throes of the fierce black wind. Sam met Kinvara on the deck, behind the main mast, as rain sprayed his face, as the air grew heavy with
the wet smells of must and damp mould. “You look ill at ease this morning, Master Tarly,” she said.

Sam glanced up at the darkening sky. “The day is ill at ease.”

“This storm will not sink the Melevol.”

“You keep saying that. Will… will the ship sink?”

She frowned at him. “This ship will not carry us to Asshai, Kassaro says. Not all of the way.”

“But… we already knew that. Captain Myratis… he is headed for Slaver’s Bay… isn’t he?...”

She made no reply other than to smile, as was her wont. The deck churned beneath his feet. Sam stumbled and went to one knee, but Kinvara caught his arm and stopped him from falling. Her hand was hot to the touch.

They broke their fast on fried mackerel, oaten porridge, and hard dry biscuits. The mood in the galley was somber, and even Sarella Sand had nothing to say. Overhead the lanterns swung to and fro with every rocking movement of the ship. It was fortunate that Sam’s time at sea had made him less and less greensick, else he would have spent the whole of breakfast retching over the rail. Even so, it was no small task to keep everything down.

He scrubbed the tilting decks fruitlessly and saw that the barrels of tar and fish were secure in the hold below, but left the ropes and rigging to Captain Myratis’s real sailors. Most of the day he spent below deck, reading by candlelight with a cup of ale on his side table. When Sarella Sand came down to join him, Sam glanced out of the porthole and saw that it was already dark. “Is it night already?” Surely he had not been reading for that long.

“No. It’s only just passing midday… but… it’s just dark, that’s all.” The ship rocked suddenly and she had to steady herself on his table. “What are you reading?”

“A book. Oh, about Azor Ahai, I mean. Or so Gyleno writes, but I think he was lying, one of those ‘false searchers’ Kinvara talked about.”

Sarella nodded. “You should come up on deck.”

“Well, if I’m sick I’ll be in the right place for it,” muttered Sam.

“Yes. And… it’s less lonely, too. We’re heading into Valyria now. If you stand at the prow, you can see all the black cliffs and mountains.”

“The Fourteen Flames?” Sam felt oddly eager.

“Perhaps. Among other things. I don’t know. It’s quite misty, too.” She peered out of the porthole. “We’re low over the water here, but up on deck we’re not quite sure where the coastline is?”

Sam frowned. “You’re… but the Smoking Sea… it’s so big… how could they…?”

“The Smoking Sea is bloody freezing now,” Sarella said. “Weird… yesterday it was fine, but… anyhow, it’s not the Wall, I’m sure, but it’s hardly warm.”

Sam wondered if she was jesting with him, and by then his curiosity had gotten the better of him. “All right,” he said, setting down his book. “We’ll go and look.”

The sea was churning and there was a violent wind off to starboard. “We shouldn’t be up here,” Sam said, even as they climbed up onto the deck. “It’s not safe.” An angry black wind was bearing down
from above, and his cloak flapped harder than the boat’s sails. Crewmen were calling out to one
another, but Sam could not hear their words. He held tight to the rail, slippery between his cold
fingers. When he looked out, he was gazing right into the wind, and it stung at his eyes. For a
moment he saw great black fingers of stone pointing upwards into the grey clouds, and then they
were gone into the mists once more.

Sam slipped, fingers scrabbling at the rail, and went down arse-first on the wet boards. He nearly
bowed into a crewman as he went, the ship bucking him back towards the port side. His fat fingers
clutched at a spool of rope and he held tight as the ship spun itself violently to port, as rain lashed at
his face and the momentum threatened to spill him overboard. He heard waves and screaming and
splashing, and then Captain Myratis and the red priests were rushing up onto the deck. The captain
shouted something, but Sam did not hear it. The very air seemed to be screaming at him.

“SAM!” Then Sarella Sand barreled into him, knocking him back against the rail. Torchlight
swathed through the black air. Sam went back, falling against an upturned crate, tripped, fell. The
ship bucked and he went sideways again, away from the rail this time, sliding. Rain pelted off the
boards. Thunder struck somewhere off to starboard. When he found his feet again, Kinvara was
pulling him backwards, waving her torch away to ward off the stone man that had appeared from
nowhere.

His face was all cracked and greyish-black with the signs of his affliction, his black-lipped mouth
frozen forever. Each lumbering step seemed to rend the boards. “A torch, a torch!” Sam felt a
burning brand pressed into his hand. *Mother have mercy.* Wildly, he waved it towards the stone man.
Kinvara, where was Kinvara? “Away!” he called, trying to sound brave. “Go away, away with you,
now, go!” It was like trying to call off one of his father’s hunting hounds. The stone man kept
coming.

There were others too, Sam saw as he looked around him. The ship’s boy was wrestling with one,
and Tam the first mate had found a sword and was striking at two that followed him.

“Away!” Sam moved the torch into his left hand and fumbled at his scabbard with his right. His
fingers were cold and wet and shivering. When he looked down to free the clasp, the stone man
hissed at him and lurched forwards. Sam swung torch and sword through the air. The stone man
wailed at him, but then his legs caught in one of the loops of rope. Quickly, Sam yanked on the other
end of the spool. The stone man lost his footing and went down hard on his back. *Kill it,* he told
himself, *kill it now.* He rushed forward, raised his sword…

…and lost his own feet when the *Melevol* careened back to starboard. Out of the corner of his eye he
saw Kassaro crunching into the rail and falling overboard, followed down by three of the stone men.
The world darkened. Somehow, the deck was on fire. *Flames,* Sam thought, trying to find his torch,*they hate the flames.* He rolled onto his side—

—and came face-to-face with the stone man, reaching out towards him. Sam screamed and kicked
out with both feet. The greyscaled thing fell away, snarling in some tongue he did not know. Sam
scrambled back to his feet. His torch had guttered in a puddle of rain.

At the prow he could see Kinvara, spinning, dancing through a ring of flaming torches. The stone
men cringed when they came close, and went away whimpering. Down on the lower deck, Captain
Myratis and five crewmen were fighting their way towards the stairs. *I have to get to them—*

Something caught him hard in the stomach and slammed him back against the rail. When his head hit
woozy darkness overcame him and all he could see was the greyscaled thing clawing at his eyes.
“Noooo,” Sam tried to say, “getoff, you, no, getoffofme…”
Then he was over the rail and falling, falling, falling… and when the black waters filled everything he could see he knew that he was gone for good. The thing tried to grab at his face, at his arms, at everything…

No. His courage came from nowhere, no, fuck you, you’re not taking me down with you, no, no. “FUCK YOU!” he shouted, even as the water filled his lungs. He had a knife in his belt, a small thing, useful only for cutting rope. He would have to pray that it would be useful now. Forcing the stone man off with one hand, Sam drew out his dagger and plunged into the cracked grey flesh, over and over and over and over and over…

till grey water left his lungs and grey air filled them instead. Someone took his arm, but he did not know whom...

Then he was warm and dry, lying in a bunk with the blankets pulled up to his chin. A candle flame was When he blinked the darkness away, he saw Kinvara sitting at the foot of his bed, swathed in her red robe. “Samwell,” she said quietly.

“Where are we?”

She frowned. “On the Melevol. You were asleep for a day. Valyria is nearly behind us.”

“The Stone Men…”

“…took thirteen of ours, including Kassaro, then retreated.”

They nearly took me too, Sam thought. “And Sarella?”

“Not her. She is fine. She was with you, but she has gone up to rest. Captain Myratis pulled you out of the water when you nearly went under, and the Sand girl helped you up onto the deck. And rest assured, you do not have greyscaled. We have checked that thoroughly.”

Sam sniffed. “And now… where are we headed?”

“The Isle of Cedars,” she told him. “To meet Quaithe, a shadowbinder from Qarth.”

“Why?”

Kinvara glanced down at the rings on her fingers, set with glowing fire rubies. “That does not matter. Samwell… a question, if you would… when you went under the water… did you see anything? Anything… peculiar…?”

I saw His Grey Grace on his throne of cold black stone. I saw a sword of fire in his scabbard and a horn of ice at his lips. I saw seaweed and salt clinging in his hair, and golden lions on his belt, washed out by rust. I saw his blue eye and his black eye, and ancient evils waking from the deep dark night. “No,” he said quietly, “I saw nothing.”

Chapter End Notes

The Sam story is a bit disjointed from everything that's going on in Westeros, but the various revelations we see will come into play soon. This chapter was mostly a catch-up session, but who doesn't love stone men?
Answer: Jon Connington (in the books), Jorah Mormont (in the show).
Close readers may note one very interesting passage that hints at the fate of a particular character with links to Tyrion and Jaime.

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GENERAL NOTE:
I've considered doing some sort of re-upload for A COAT OF GOLD, to solve the general messes of the Daenerys, Theon and Jon storylines, among other things. Some of these chapters may need only a bit of minor tweaking and editing, whereas others will require full-blown narrative overhaul (which will take a while). Hopefully we'll finish up with a much more polished product, though **the story will remain (fundamentally) unchanged.**

If you have any suggestions for how A COAT OF GOLD could be improved beyond minor story tweaks, leave them in the comments. I'm open to adapting (some of) the Barristan POV chapters to Dany POV, as well as giving some backstory on how Dany obtained a Dothraki army, which was sort of glossed over. I might also add a couple of Bran and Asha Greyjoy chapters here and there, and possibly a Myrcella chapter taking place in Dorne.

Additionally, I've made re-draft edits to some chapters of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS; chapters that have been revised (with no overall story change) are:
Chapters 3, 5, 10, 12, 19, 25, 29, 36 and 50. These are mostly Casterly Rock and Riverrun chapters, as I prefer to edit one arc at a time to help prevent inconsistencies.

Next general note will follow with chapter 69, which I consider a arc-ending chapter, and I'll probably write some bonus meta-commentary. If you've got any big essay-sized reviews planned, that's the time to post them.

Thanks,
SGH
“Oftentimes the greatest fools are smarter than those who laugh at them.”

A RECAP:

Tyrion Lannister is in Braavos to negotiate a deal with the Iron Bank regarding the debts of the Iron Throne.

Meanwhile, Arya Stark seeks to seduce a young bravo in order to gain access to the Sealord of Braavos's party, where she intends to carry out the old Sealord's assassination...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fog shrouded the city of Braavos and its Hundred Isles like a great grey cloak.

Tyrion Lannister stood at the prow of the Nomad as they drew closer and closer, watching as the Titan of Braavos grew with every gust of the wind. Lomas Longstrider’s Wonders of the World had not done it justice, he thought. For how could any book recapture the shine of dim sunlight off the Titan’s hauberk of green copper scales, or the hint of eerie watchfulness in those cold stone eyes, as though some long-forgotten secret were about to reveal itself…

“I pity whoever had to chisel out that thing’s cock and balls,” Bronn said.

“Could you not just stand and admire the craftsmanship?” Tyrion asked. “This is not just a statue of some dead soldier. There are murder holes high up in the Titan’s crown so that defenders of the city can throw down rocks and loose arrows down at their foes, and the Titan’s great horn blast—”

Fate must have heard his words, for she sought to receive him with irony. The Titan boomed out a low long dirge from high up in his helm, and the waves surged forwards, racing up to the side of the boat and drenching them with spray. The water blasted Tyrion’s face and ran down into his beard, flecking it with salt.
“That horn?” Bronn asked.

“Aye,” said Tyrion, “that horn alerts the Arsenal and the harbour folk of our coming. And now it seems I must change my clothes before our arrival.” His tunic was sodden, and his breeches dripped with saltwater. Bronn followed him part of the way, then left to flirt with the captain’s daughter.

As Queen Daenerys’s honoured envoy Tyrion had the captain’s cabin. It was more than large enough for him to share with Numbers and Bronn. He washed his face and under his arms before the basin, and rubbed sweet-smelling oil into his hair to hide the smell of salt and sweat. Then he stripped down to his smallclothes and rummaged through his clothes-basket. He found two linen undershirts – the wind up on deck had been blowing fierce – and woollen breeches. Next came a third shirt of padded red wool, a tunic of chequy red-and-gold squares, and lastly a half-cape of tapered red silk that came to his ankles.

Then it was time to wake Numbers.

The boy was fond of sleeping late, a luxury he had never experienced in King’s Landing. Tyrion woke him by banging two boots together over his bed. “You drool in your sleep,” he commented as the boy sat up.

“Are we here?” Numbers twisted round to glance out of the porthole. “Braavos.” His shoulders sagged.

“Are you glad to be back?” Tyrion asked.

Numbers shrugged. All the while he was frowning, though. I will have to ask him more when I have the time, Tyrion thought.

Back on deck, they were passing between the Titan’s great stone legs. For a moment they drowned in his shadow… then the statue was behind them, and the city stood before them. The horizon was choked with buildings and thick grey fog. Ships cluttered the harbour front. At the customs-house the captain went to share some words with one of the officers. After that the ship made a turn to port, drifting due north. “We’re heading into the Purple Harbor,” Numbers said, appearing beside Tyrion at the rail.

Tyrion nodded. “They must think we’re important.”

“They must have made a terrible mistake,” replied Bronn.

Tyrion did not fail to notice that the Nomad was gliding past all the other ships still stuck in the customs lanes, prompting rude signals and swearing from their crewmen. “They must think we’re very important,” he said.

They were drawing close to the harbour wall now. “The ones with purple sails are Braavosi,” said Numbers, “you can get a berth in the Purple Harbor if you’re from Braavos.”

“And rich,” added the captain. “Donesto Tromel owns a goodly number of those berths now, and is charging stupid prices for them. Seems to think he can become Sealord too, but my money’s on Tormo Fregar, along with anyone with half a mind.”

“You might be surprised,” said Numbers. “Tromel’s half-mad, but so are the magisters and keyholders who choose the Sealord.”

“Not that mad. Anyhow, they’re favouring Tormo Fregar, I tell you, boy. And that’s who they’ll choose. Anything else, I’ll eat my hat.”
“I’ve learned to be careful saying things like that,” Tyrion said, as the captain went back to the mainsail. “I had a bet with Littlefinger once. It cost me a very nice dagger. A fine piece of Valyrian steel.” And it nearly cost me my life, too. Catelyn Stark had accused him of using that dagger to murder her son, years and years time ago.

Bronn pointed to the harbour. “Where are all the brothels?” he asked. “Braavosi girls are—”

“Wonderful, I’m sure.” Tyrion studied Numbers’s face, watching for any signs of discomfort. The boy’s mother had been a Braavosi whore, like as not, till some sailor had come along and squirted seed in her belly. But if Bronn’s words bothered him he did not show it. Instead he turned his head and glanced down over the rail, watching the waves pass them by.

Tyrion looked back to the port. Most of the ships bore the purple sails that Numbers had mentioned, but they came in every shape and size: smaller pleasure craft in their own individual berths, fat whalers and cogs with familial emblems on their sails, double-tiered warships with tens and hundreds of oars, scorpions and spitfires at their rails. “They remind you of the Blackwater, dwarf?” Bronn asked.

“Their ships are somewhat better manned than ours were. Braavos has depended on naval defence for centuries; there’s the boats, but there’s the Arsenal too, where they can build a war galley in a day. And the Titan, as I was saying—”

“Fascinating,” Bronn said. “But if you feel a sudden urge to tell me more, don’t. Just forget about—” He stopped midsentence, frowning, and Tyrion followed his gaze. “Are those Stannis’s sails?” the sellsword asked.

“Ah, yes. They are.” Tyrion counted five warships, including an enormous galley that dwarfed the Nomad several times over. “Well, it stands to reason that Stannis would have men in Braavos too. You can’t be a king if you don’t have the gold to back up your claim.”

Bronn scowled. “Did your father tell you that?”

But before Tyrion could answer the boat was slowing as it came between a pair of trade galleons. Then rocking to a halt. Numbers came back to Tyrion. “Should I fetch your things from below deck, my lord?”

“Leave it for now. I want to see this city.” And, tightening the clasp of his cloak, he strode along the deck, down the gangway, and onto the pier. Bronn followed, sniffing the air as a hound might. “Smells less sour than King’s Landing, I suppose.”

“That’s because we’re in the Purple Harbor,” Numbers told him, “if you were over in Ragman’s, it’d like being in Flea Bottom.”

As they conversed Tyrion cast his eyes around. Peddlers pushed trundle-wagons up and down the cobbled pier, their shouts of “Oysters, clams and cockles” mingling with the sound of gulls. Shops and stalls lined the waterfront. Winesellers, insurance salesmen and candlemakers, taverns, fisheries and cloth merchants. He spied a brothel in a corner of the square, all soft silken ladies and blood-coloured candles. A dark-skinned girl watched from a balcony. Her face reminded Tyrion of Alayaya, from King’s Landing. Perchance you knew a girl named Tysha? he thought. But before he could make a fool of himself by waddling over and asking, a tall, sallow man strode over and doffed his hat to them. “My lord of Lannister,” he said, “the Sealord regrets that he could not deliver you his regards in person, but he bids you join him in his palace later. You and your entourage will have accommodations there for the duration of your visit.”
Tyrion cleared his throat. “Thank you. I am looking forward to giving the Sealord my gratitude in person.”

“You will. But first, we will escort you to the Iron Bank. The Sealord thinks that you ought to meet with them first.”

You mean the Iron Bank has told the Sealord that they want to meet with me first. Tyrion knew full well how much power the Iron Bank had over the politics of the city… and beyond. The Iron Bank will have its due, they said, from Ib to Asshai, and he knew that it was true.

The sallow man gestured to a litter, surrounded by a complement of guards cloaked in purple-and-yellow livery. “If it please my lord…”

Tyrion would sooner have headed to the Sealord’s Palace for a hot meal and his first good bath in weeks. But he was the guest of the Braavosi and this was expected of him. So he climbed up into the litter, and watched the people and the streets as they drifted past.

The Iron Bank’s reputation was such that it gave its name to an entire district, which seemed to consist of countless offices and was home to far too many bankers for his liking. In the end, they set the litter down before a huge guildhall. The sallow man led Tyrion up the steps alone, leaving Bronn, Numbers and the others in the plaza. They went along a dark hallway, and into a huge chamber with marble tiles on every wall and nowhere to sit. “The bankers will be here shortly,” the sallow man told Tyrion, and left him there.

‘Shortly’ seemed to mean nearly an hour, but finally the bankers did arrive. They came in two by two at first, in felted purple robes that swept along the polished floor, trimmed with ermine and lace. The last man entered alone; he had his robes edged in golden thread, and took his seat at the middle of the table. One of the other bankers unfolded a stack of papers and opened books on the marble bench before him. A second unscrewed bottles of maester’s black ink and cherry-red ink and jade-green ink and dipped feathered quills in each.

Only once he had written half a page worth of notes in each of three books in three different colours did the lead banker glance up. “My lord of Lannister.” His voice carried no emotion whatsoever. “I am Noho Dimittis, a servant of the Iron Bank of Braavos. We are so pleased to see you. Tell me, what service do you seek from the Iron Bank?” Two scribes at the far end of the bench furiously scrawled down his every word onto fresh sheets of parchment.

“I have come on the behalf of Queen Daenerys Targaryen,” Tyrion told them. “As you no doubt already know.”

“Indeed we do,” Noho Dimittis said. “But any fool could have said that. Tell me, what exactly do you wish to have from us?”

Tyrion now realised why they had called him to the Iron Bank so suddenly. He had left his notes and ledgers in the hold of the Nomad, and he would not be able to have them again until he got back to the Sealord’s Palace. So he would have to rely upon his memory to serve him well. “Some weeks ago, Her Grace the queen received a missive from the Iron Bank during a council meeting in King’s Landing—”

“The Iron Throne owes the Iron Bank…” He consulted his papers. “More than six million, six hundred and thirty-eight thousand golden dragons.”

Tyrion appraised that with a nod. “We are aware of this.”
“And yet, in fifteen years of debt, the Iron Throne has done nothing to repay us.” He arched his eyebrows, inquisitive.

“Those were Robert Baratheon’s debts. That is how the people I represent understand the situation.”

“The people you represent have sense enough to know that we cannot accept that as an excuse. And they would not send you all the way to Braavos to refuse us. We might even construe that as an insult. I assure you, insulting the Iron Bank will not bode well for the Seven Kingdoms.”

“The people I represent understand this—”

“Who do you represent, Lord Tyrion? You have come from King’s Landing on the orders of the Targaryens, but here you stand before us in your red-and-gold, looking every part a Lannister.” Noho Dimittis frowned. “A suspicious man might say that you have a motive to ensure that the Targaryens do not repay their debt.”

“It was my father who taught me that I must always repay my debts, in gold or otherwise,” Tyrion said. Since the Targaryens spared me after the Siege of King’s Landing, I owe them my life. Thus I serve at their pleasure, and I will fulfil Queen Daenerys’s command.”

“And King Aegon’s? Is your presence here by his consent as well?”

“I am instructed to use His Grace’s seal alongside the queen’s. I represent House Targaryen.” For now. “Since you no longer have any illusions about my purpose here, might we get down to business?”

“We could,” Noho Dimittis said, “but I fear you will be ill-armed to answer our questions.” He took a box of ledgers from the banker beside him.

“I never back down from a challenge,” Tyrion said.

“You will rue that someday, my lord.” Dimittis sat with his neck craned over the books like some great bald bird. “Those are the words of a fool.”

“My father once told me that oftentimes the greatest fools are—”

“—smarter than those who laugh at them, yes. We have our own sayings in Braavos.” But Tyrion never knew what they were, for Dimittis was not the sort of man to waste time on idle talk. “Will you repay us?”

“That is the matter I have come to discuss—”

“It is a simple question, my lord. It is a matter of yes or no. And thus I ask you.”

“No question is simple where money is involved,” replied Tyrion.

“I am a banker, Lord Tyrion. I understand that better than anyone.”

“And I am a Lannister, Noho Dimittis. You might have a rival.”

“I am not here to play games with you. Will you repay the debt?”

Tyrion fiddled with his sleeve. “Not at the moment, I fear. The queen and the king have certain misgivings about the nature of this debt. Their argument is that since it was mostly incurred during Robert’s reign and the War of the Five Kings, the debt is the responsibility of the five kings who fought, not theirs.”
“The debt belongs to the Iron Throne,” Noho Dimittis insisted.

“Which Stannis Baratheon has claimed. Thus he has claimed the debt as well, as I see it. Perchance the Iron Bank has had dealings with him?”

Noho Dimittis picked up one of the pens, dipped, and drew thin red lines through some of the words. “We are in no position to comment on the bank’s other dealings,” he intoned.

“I’d have thought you would have been a better liar, my lord Dimittis. You work for the Iron Bank, after all.”

No sooner had he said the words than he instantly regretted them. *It is as they all say. My mouth will get me killed someday.*

“Careful, my lord.”

Tyrion spread his hands wide. “Sorry. Did I offend you? The truth can be offensive, can’t it? I know very well that Stannis has men in the city, even now. Looking for sellswords, I don’t doubt. Did you give him the money to do that?”

“We are in no position to comment on the bank’s other dealings,” Noho Dimittis replied, in the same deadpan tone as before.

“Oh, spare me. It’s not hard to work out what you’re up to. Why bet on one horse to win when you can bet on them all and win no matter what happens?”

Noho Dimittis did not reply.

He continued, “Our queen is gracious, and in the spirit of that goodwill she would like to extend an offer to you. House Targaryen will repay one half of the Crown’s debt, over a period of seven years. By then the Iron Throne will have crushed all rebellions and will have consolidated itself as the sole power in the Seven Kingdoms.”

Dimittis smiled. *Seven hells, he actually enjoys this,* Tyrion thought. “Do you perchance have three million, three hundred and nineteen thousand golden dragons with you, Lord Tyrion?” the banker asked.

“We will. In seven years.”

“Do you have it now?” When Tyrion said nothing, Dimititis shook his head and chewed his lip, as though it pained him. “Then the Iron Bank cannot accept this offer, I fear.”

“I see.” Tyrion was no fool. He knew what Noho Dimittis wanted: for him to make an offer that he had neither the authority to make, nor the ability to rescind if he changed his mind. He would not oblige him. “Well, then, it seems our negotiations are over.” A pause lingered over the hall. Noho Dimittis said nothing, but instead settled back in his chair and sighed.

As Tyrion was leaving the hall, the banker called out to him: “You spoke of Lannisters paying their debts, my lord. But remember this: the Iron Bank will always have its due. One way or another.”

“The Iron Bank answers to the Sealord of Braavos,” he replied. “And I will see the Sealord, before returning here.”

“And whoever said that we will allow you to return?” Dimittis asked.
“You did. The Iron Bank will have its due, you said, and like it or not, allying with the Targaryens is the only way you will be able to get your money back. You might have had made deals with Stannis, but you will never get your money back, not from him. And my sister is a lost cause if you want to be reimbursed. Too prideful, and too stupid.

“But if you present yourself at the Sealord’s Palace, I will be only too happy to show you ledgers detailing both the Crown’s wealth in King’s Landing and the assets the queen retains elsewhere. Otherwise, you may sit here as my ship departs, and wonder what might have been. And when the day comes that the keyholders of the Iron Bank decide that they will raise their sellsword armies and come attacking across the Narrow Sea to raid the Crown’s coffers, they had best prepare themselves to fight against dragons.”

Noho Dimitis did not flinch. “We will,” he promised. “Oh, we will.”

In the plaza outside the bank, a squadron of Braavosi guards had replaced the sallow man’s escort. After a few words with their captain, Tyrion clambered back into the litter.

“Did you make a deal with them, my lord?” Numbers asked as he was shutting the door.

“They did not love our numbers, Numbers,” Tyrion replied. “I suppose all that remains is to try again on the morrow, and the morrow after that.” Queen Daenerys had given him as much time as he required to complete this assignment. “And now, to the Sealord’s Palace. I am looking forward to a good meal, I confess.”

He did not close the curtains of the litter. New cities always made him curious, and Braavos was no different. Tyrion Lannister was afflicted by adventure, despite his better sense. His dreams were a child’s fantasies; he’d always known that. No dwarf boy would ever be a great seafarer or sellsword or travelling mercenary, but a little imagination never hurt anyone. Many times over the years his father had tried to turn him away from that path. But some stubborn spirit had lingered within him, some yearning, some excitement.

But he was free of Lord Tywin’s shadow now. He was his own man.

Wasn’t he?

Tyrion sat up from the cushions and peeked out between the drapes. The sounds of the harbour were fading behind them. Now they passed between tall townhouses and terraced gardens, then up a broad thoroughfare and around a fountain in the shape of a pair of prancing seahorses. Inside the courtyard the litter was lowered to the ground and Bronn drew open the door to let Tyrion out. He barely had time to take in his surroundings—tall angular towers, walkways paved in pink stone, gardens dotted with olive trees—before a balding seneschal who reminded him eerily of Varys came hurrying down a flight of steps.

“This is Malo Malentis,” the commander of the Braavosi guards explained. “The Sealord’s seneschal. I pity you, my lord of Lannister.”

“Why, surely he cannot be that bad,” Tyrion said.

He was wrong. The brusqueness of the seneschal’s voice as he greeted Tyrion revealed that much. “This way, please,” he said, ushering his guest up the steps without any courtesies whatsoever. “The Iron Bank was not supposed to keep you.”

“I dispensed with them as quickly as I could,” said Tyrion.

“You should not have dispensed with them at all. Come, quickly now. No, your men will stay here.”
Bronn moved to intervene, but Tyrion ordered him away. It would not do to start a brawl outside the Sealord of Braavos’s solar, nor did he see any need to heighten his escalate his quarrel with Malo Malentis. Further down the hall, he turned to make his apologies to the man, but when he looked he found himself alone. Malentis had slunk off into some secret alcove he could not find. As though he were a ghost… as though he were Varys. He was not sure which thought he found more disconcerting.

Tyrion turned, and entered the next room. Stone pillars stretched from the polished marble floor to the high ceilings. Shadows from a brazier fire flickered across the walls. One stood and two sat upon a pair of cushioned couches, one fat and the other thin.

The standing man saw him first. Tyrion noted the thin stiletto-like blade at his hip and the hawkishness of his gaze. *The First Sword of Braavos*, he surmised, and a name came to him a moment later: *Qarro Volentin.*

“You are Tyrion Lannister?” Volentin asked.

“I am.” A jape was on his lips, but it seemed wiser not to say it. He did not want to challenge Braavos’s finest fighter. Tyrion took a step forwards. “May I?”

“Please, come.” Volentin beckoned him.

The two men sitting on the couches were as different as night and day. One was thin and greyish, with not enough skin stretched taut over aging bones. But had not been so ancient and frail, Ferrego Antaryon, Sealord of Braavos, might have borne some resemblance to Tywin Lannister. The other man had the yellow hair of a Lannister, but that was where any resemblance ended. He was the fattest man Tyrion had ever seen, with an oiled beard stretching to his waist. In his bright yellow garb he looked like a small tent. Half a dozen rings circled each of his fat black-pudding fingers, and his piggy eyes gleamed like starving stars. Both men smelled strongly of perfume, but Ferrego Antaryon had sickness under that scent, while his companion was all sweat and oil.

Lord Ferrego raised a papery hand in greeting. “It is my pleasure to meet you, Lord Tyrion.” He chewed his words with much deliberation.

“And mine,” said his fat friend. “You do not know me yet, but you will, my lord. I am Illyrio Mopatis, Magister of Pentos, and I think we will make fine friends.”

Tyrion took the fat man’s hand and shook it (or rather, the fat man enclosed his massive paw around Tyrion’s entire arm and squeezed). “We have a mutual acquaintance, as I understand it,” the dwarf said as they shook. “Lord Varys.”

The magister curled his lip. “The Spider,” he said. “He might call it an acquaintance, even a friendship, but I doubt Varys knows what those words mean. We have had dealings in the past, but the days of our friendship are far behind us.”

Tyrion did not believe that for one second, but once again he did not want to make a scene. “We are both guests of the good Sealord’s hospitality, then,” he said.

“Oh, we are. And Ferrego is very generous to those he likes. Aren’t you, my lord?”

The Sealord nodded. “How about some wine? You will need to pour, Lord Tyrion. I am too old, Illyrio is too fat, and Qarro is too proud.”

“Whereas I am the spirit of humility and youth,” Tyrion japed, reaching for the flagon of mulled wine. He poured a cup for the Sealord first, Illyrio second, and himself last. Only Qarro Volentin did
not partake.

“We have matters of business to discuss,” said Ferrego Antaryon. “Illyrio and I have come together to create a proposition for you.” He broke off and coughed copiously into a square of silk. “But business is tedious, and some small talk would not go amiss. How are you finding Braavos?”

“Why, I have hardly seen any of it,” Tyrion replied. “But that which I have is pleasing to the eye, if nothing else.”

“Beauty oft hides a turbulent heart,” the Sealord said, “or so Archmaester Kallor writes. It is certainly true for Braavos, as you will soon see. When you attend my festival, you will hear them whispering behind my back, vying for each other’s support. All waiting for me to die so that they can take my place.” He let out a rasping laugh. “The only reason I keep living is to spite them. Tormo Fregar most of all.”

“I haven’t met the man,” Tyrion said.

“Oh, I envy your naivety. The man is entirely…” He coughed, and coughed again. “…entirely odious.”

“I know the sort.”

Illyrio Mopatis cackled. “I’m sure you do. Men like us always have their positions sought after. Yes, Lord Tyrion, even you. I wanted to be master of coin, for a time. I enjoy collecting titles almost as much as your Queen Daenerys.”

The Sealord looked downcast. “And now we are back to business, hmm… Qarro tells me that you met with the Iron Bank. I trust you refused their offer. Many do, at first. But the Iron Bank comes crawling to them day after day after day, to beg for its repayments, and in the end they all give in. We had a Lysene envoy who stayed in the palace for three years once…”

“Just as you have one of Stannis Baratheon’s men here now,” Tyrion said. “How long has he been here, might I ask?”

The Sealord glanced at Qarro Volentin. “Six months,” the First Sword of Braavos said. “Looking for sellswords to fight for his king. He will not find any. The Bank has bought them all already.”

“I almost pity him,” said the Sealord. “Ser Justin is a good man, but an utter fool.” He smiled. “Anyhow, all these visitors leave as slaves of the Bank, bound to pay interest to it until the end of time.”

“The Iron Bank will have its due,” Tyrion muttered.

“That they will,” the old man agreed. “They’ve already taken their due from me. Long ago, when I was a young fool of two-and-fifty—” He smiled, showing his uneven teeth. “—I took a loan to get the support of some of their bankers in my campaign to become the Sealord. Needless to say, I was in their debt for years after that. Do not do as I did.”

Tyrion frowned. “The debt must be repaid, all the same. I think the queen would sooner repay the Bank without having an invasion on her shores.”

“And she will. But we both know that she cannot afford to repay them, and will not be able to for many years.” The Sealord grinned. “Which is where Illyrio and I come into this. We are prepared to bankroll you. Six million, six hundred and thirty-eight thousand golden dragons.”
He had not been expecting *that*. Perhaps the Sealord and the Iron Bank were not as close as he’d thought. But any fool could see that he was merely exchanging a debt to the Iron Bank for a debt to a Braavosi sealord and a Pentoshi magister. “How generous,” Tyrion said. “And what will be the… conditions of this agreement?”

“How generous,” Tyrion said. “And what will be the… conditions of this agreement?”

“None,” the Sealord and the magister said at the same time.

“I don’t believe you—”

“Your mind is too skeptical for my liking, my lord,” said Illyrio Mopatis. “I have too much money, and not enough to do with it. Denying the Iron Bank the opportunity to stretch its influence from Dorne to the Wall seems a noble aim.”

“I will be dead soon,” said Ferrego Antaryon. “I would sooner die a free man than a slave. That is what the Free City of Braavos was founded on, after all.”

Tyrion mulled that over for a long moment. “This seems far too good to be true,” he surmised at last. But perhaps he was owed some luck, every once in a while. Perhaps the gods paid their debts too.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the wait, everyone.

I haven't fully edited this one since I wanted to get it up as soon as I finished it, so feel free to nitpick on any awkward expressions or things that read poorly.

It's a very important chapter, as it sets up Tyrion's major arc for the second part of *The Sunset Kingdoms* as well as the wider Braavos story.

Bear in mind that Ferrego and Illyrio are probably lying about everything they say, and things might make more sense. Or not.
Harrenhal’s library smelled of woodsmoke, old paper and softly-scented candles. Embers crackled in the evening air, rising from a dozen hearths. Sansa sat on the windowseat, resting her head against the window-pane, listening as the raindrops puddled in the yard below.

“They’ll be here soon,” said a voice from the benches. “If you want, we could go up to the top of the Kingspyre Tower and watch them arrive—”

“No.” The Kingspyre Tower was so tall that it would take the better part of an hour to climb to the top and walk back down. Here, in the library tower, she was only a couple of minutes’ walk from the main gate.

“I know what it’s like, you know,” Princess Myrcella said. “The waiting. Thinking that you’ll die at any moment, and never see him again.”

“How can you understand? I haven’t seen Rickon in years, I haven’t seen any of my family in years.” The words came out in a rush.

“You forget, Sansa. I have a little brother too.”

*You forget, Myrcella. You had a big brother as well.* The bruises had faded now, but the memory never would. *“The king can do as he likes,” he shouted at me, when the Imp challenged him in the yard. “Boros, hit her. Leave her face, though; I like her pretty.”*

“What are you sewing?” Myrcella nodded to the needles in Sansa’s hands.

“A hat. With floppy ears. I thought Rickon might like it.”

The princess frowned. “When I saw your brother he was wearing a helmet, not a floppy- eared hat.”

“He’ll like it. I know he will.”

Myrcella went back to her book, turning the page with a gloved hand. Sansa wore gloves too;
despite the abundance of hearths, the castle was always cold, especially now that it had started to snow. The wind came wailing through gaps in the mortar and crumbling stone, and snowflakes drifted down through the broken windows, melting on the flagstones. Both Littlefinger and King Aegon had set their men to work repairing the ruined towers, but the renovations could not come quickly enough.

“You were always better at sewing than me,” the princess said, “when we were at Winterfell. I was nearly as bad as Arya.”

Sansa put down her needles. “You were nowhere near as bad as Arya. Septa Mordane used to say she had a blacksmith’s hands.” The thought of her sister made her sad all over again. *If no one knows where she is by now, she must have forgotten us. Or she is dead.* Winterfell was still half a ruin, true, but the survival of House Stark was no secret now. Littlefinger had told her that Roose Bolton had disguised some common serving girl as her sister so that the fake Arya could marry his bastard son and lend legitimacy to his claim. That girl was likely dead now, he said, and the Boltons along with her… though Littlefinger was probably lying…

Myrcella was still going on about Septa Mordane. “…she was always kinder than Septa Eglantine, though. Eglantine used to say that she would hit me with a wooden spoon, but she never dared, though.” *She never hit you because you were a princess. And if you loved Septa Mordane so much, then why didn’t you do anything when your mother had her head cut off?*

A door banged open loudly across the library. Moments later, Edric Dayne came running in, his hair and cloak drenched from the rain. “My lady,” he called, gasping heavily, “my lady, they’re here, the other yard, my lady.”

Sansa gathered up her skirts and hurried after him. She pulled the hood of her cloak up as they hurried along the ramparts. Lightning split the eastern sky, striking some distant hill. Through the dim night, she was certain she heard a wolf howling. *Could that be Shaggydog?*

Ned led her into the godswood, where the leaves whipped at her face and whispered, *pack, pack, pack.*

She was running full out by the time they reached the eastern bailey, not caring what men thought when they saw some tall auburn-haired girl splashing through muddy puddles with her cloak blowing all about her heels. There could have been a dragon in the yard and Sansa would not have noticed, or Tywin Lannister and the Mad King singing arm in arm. She did not care about anything else.

She was halfway across when he saw her too. For the briefest of moments, they both stopped, their gaze meeting, she blinking back tears as she took in his blue eyes, his auburn hair, and how tall he had grown.

*The pack survives.* Sansa ran.

And then Rickon’s arms were around hers and his head was cradled in her hands and she was tangling his hair and they were hugging and kissing and she was *crying*, as the rain hurtled down all around them. She kissed his brow and said, “I’m here, you’re here, we’re here, it’s all right, you’re safe, you’re safe, we’re *safe.*”

It was some time before they were able to draw apart. Sansa went to Brienne of Tarth and Podrick Payne and the tall greying knight with the black fish on his breastplate who must be Ser Brynden Tully and hugged them and kissed their cheeks, as the tears streamed down hers.
“My lady.” Brienne drew Oathkeeper and knelt in the muddy yard with the sword across her knees. “If... if I may, the oath I swore to your mother Lady Catelyn is fulfilled. And now this sword is yours.”

Sansa reached down and put her hand on the sword’s hilt, curling fingers around the leather crossguard. For a moment she lingered... then uncurled her hand, letting the blade slip back into the lady knight’s grasp. “It’s yours... it’ll always be yours.”

“My lady,” Brienne said, “I cannot—”

“You are owed it, that much is certain. Wear it with pride.”

Amid the rain Brienne’s blue eyes filled with tears. “My lady,” she said again, dipping her head as she backed away.

Ser Brynden Tully approached her. “You have your mother’s look, child.” His voice was rife with sadness. “And her heart, I devoutly hope.”

“Thank you, ser. I am honoured to—”

“The honour is mine.” The old knight looked like he might cry.

“No. Thank you for bringing my brother back to me.”

Aegon Targaryen had dismounted now and came striding her way with his red cloak streaming from his shoulders. Littlefinger was beside him in a foxfur-trimmed cape and doublet of purple velvet. Conscious of them, she brushed the tears away from her cheeks and straightened her back. Rickon gripped her hand in a fierce grip.

“Your Grace.” Sansa said the words but did not curtsey; neither did her brother.

“Lady Sansa.” King Aegon nodded back. “I am glad to see you so happy. I hope you see now that I was sincere about... well, about everything.” The raindrops trickled slowly down his silvered breastplate. “It is appropriate that we call a council as soon as possible, with all the lords of the Riverlands present, but...” He glanced up at the fat white moon, then down to Sansa and the Blackfish and Littlefinger and all the others in the courtyard. “The hour grows late,” he said. “Let us go to bed, and think these things over on the morrow.”

“A fine idea,” said Lord Baelish. “Your Grace, if Lady Myrcella and I might share a few words with you, before we forget our purpose...”

Sansa scarce heard them. She took Rickon by the hand and led him across the bailey, sheltering them in the shadow of a tall arch. “Sansa—” he had time to say, before she smothered him again, “Oh, Sansa, ow, that hurts, getoff—” His face was red with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I-I love you. I love you. I’m sorry I left you.”

“You... you too.” He said the words hurriedly, and threw his skinny arms back around her, burying his face in the crook of her neck. He was tall now, passing five-and-a-half feet, she reckoned, but Sansa was taller still. He has grown so much. She remembered the little brother who’d tugged at her ankles when they played in the godswood, who’d called his wolf Shaggydog because he thought it sounded funny, who’d—

“Is Shaggydog here?” she asked.
“I call him Shaggy now,” Rickon told her. “Shaggydog’s a stupid name, from when I was a little boy.” He stood up on tiptoes. “I’m not a little boy anymore.”

*I know, sweet brother. I can see that. You are to me. You’ll always be my little brother—*

He chewed his lip. “I have to protect you—”

“No, I have to protect you—” She went to embrace him again, but he stepped back. “I know how to protect myself. I… ever since Mother went away… and Father, and Bran, you all went away…” He shook his head. Somewhere out in the rain a wolf growled. She smelled wet fur and saw the faintest glimmer of amber eyes, burning through the blackness. “Shaggy protected me,” said Rickon. “I-I don’t need you to do that too.” He sounded impossibly sad. Sansa could only watch as boy and wolf ducked into the shadow, and climbed the stone stair.

“The little lord will come back to you, m’lady,” said a voice behind her.

She had thought the figure was a maid, or a washerwoman, mayhaps, but surely no maid would ever look so ragged. Someone had clad her in a man’s brown tunic and bound a belt of hempen rope around her waist, but she looked… wild. “Who are you?” Sansa asked.

“Osha,” the woman replied.

“Are… are you from the north?”

Osha licked her lips. “North. Aye. The real north. I’m the little lord’s protector. Less shiny than your southern knights, I know, but still his protector.”

“Were you…?” She was hesitant. “Were you with him at Winterfell?”

“Aye. That I was. Me and Hodor helped him escape, and your brother Bran too, and the Reed boy with the strange sight. He dreamed that the sea came to Winterfell, and it did.” Her eyes were sorrowful. “Krakens. I never loved your folk, but I loved those boys dearly, and them wolves, and Hodor too.” Her gaze softened. “And the little lord loves you, even if he don’t entirely realise it. I’ll go find him, an’ bring him up to bed. We could all do with a good night’s sleep.” Without another word, she melted back into the shadows, and was gone.

“Will you be heading up to bed, my lady?” asked Brienne of Tarth.

No, Sansa thought. Some part of her wanted to chase after Rickon, to make him know that everything would be all right; some strange part wanted to seek out Littlefinger and Aegon and Myrcella and see what they were talking about. But she knew that neither would do.

“Yes,” she said, pulling the hood of her cloak back up. All the way across the courtyard and up the stairs of the Kingspyre Tower the raindrops followed her, echoing, echoing, echoing…

She was walking along the upper landing when the sound of footsteps on flagstones started to replace the old echoes. Sansa stopped a moment, searching for the sound… then she turned and saw Ser Harrold Hardyng, jogging down the corridor. He sketched a bow. “Beg pardon, my lady,” the young knight said. “Have you seen the young Lord Robert anywhere—?”

Sansa frowned. “No, ser. Is-is he in trouble…?”

“Of a sort.” Ser Harrold grinned. “Maddy and Gretchel were looking for him. He has his baths without complaint now, but he doesn’t like them brushing his hair.”
“He wouldn’t. Ever since Lady Lysa died, he hasn’t been fond of that.”

“Lord Petyr must have managed it some way or another.”

“Then you will have to ask Lord Petyr.” Sansa swept past him. “Have no fear, ser. If I see my cousin, I will inform you right away.”

Further down the corridor, Sansa found her own room. She slipped inside the door and was about to turn the lock when something barrelled into her legs and almost sent her sprawling. “Robert!” she hissed, “why are you in here?”

“You used to say that I could come in your room,” the boy-lord said. He was dressed only in his nightshirt, smallclothes and woollen dressing-gown. “Back when you were Alayne.”

A chill went through her. “You are my daughter, sweetling, and you must never forget that,” Littlefinger told me, “There are so many eyes all around the Vale, and staying close to me is the only way to keep you safe.”

But he lied then, as he always does. I was a stupid girl, to trust every word from the mockingbird’s mouth. I saw what he did to Aunt Lysa, how he blamed it all on the singer Marillion, how he never batted an eyelid or said a word, as if he had planned it all along. I remember what Aunt Lysa said before he pushed her.

“I am not Alayne anymore,” she told her cousin, “no more than you are Sweetrobin.”

He looked up at her with his guileless blue eyes like eggs. “Then what am I?”

“You are Lord Robert of the Eyrie. Your father’s son. And your mother’s. My strong lord, aren’t you?”

Robert took a step back. “I am. Ser Harry has been teaching me how to fight with sword and shield. And hold a bow. You should come and watch me sometime.”

“Perhaps I will.” It was interesting that Harrold Hardyng was taking such an interest in his cousin’s livelihood, truth be told – though Harry bore Robert no ill will, she thought.

“Maddy wanted to brush my hair—,” Robert complained. “I didn’t want that. If I go back there, she’ll force me to do that.” He was on the verge of whining, though this was no true tantrum of the sort she’d seen back in the Eyrie.

“Well, we wouldn’t want you looking all scruffy for the council tomorrow,” said Sansa. “Perhaps she has the right of it. The lord of the Vale and Warden of the East must look the part.”

Robert frowned. “Couldn’t I stay here with you? Just for a while? I don’t need stories any more, but we could talk about things, and play games, and…”

“I’m very tired, Sweetrobin.” When he objected, she held up a hand and said, “you can see me for breakfast come the morrow, maybe. Rickon will be there too.” I hope. “You can talk to him then. Mayhaps later… you talked about learning to fight, maybe you could learn together? Yes, that would be good.” She ruffled his hair.

“Hmm.” Robert smiled broadly, and Sansa almost felt tears in her eyes. For all the things Lord Petyr has done, he has made my Sweetrobin better. And I will always have him, even when Rickon…

“Aye,” she said, bending to kiss his forehead. “That’s so. Now to bed, my lord.”
When Robert was gone, she sat down at the foot of her bed, resting against the pillows. *I will not sleep tonight*, she knew, *not until I am certain that Rickon is safe.* She wondered after the wildling woman Osha. *Does he see her as his mother now?* she wondered briefly. Lady Catelyn had left Winterfell to follow her brother Robb to war, and Rickon could not have been more than eight or nine at the time. “Shaggy protected me,” he’d said, “I don’t need you to do that.” *We left him, all of us. He was only a little boy then, but he is so different now. Does he even love me anymore, truly?*  

Still lost in thought, she sent for Brienne and Podrick Payne. “A kettle of mulled wine, if you would,” she said to Pod. “Lady Brienne, if I might share a word with you?”  

Sansa offered the lady knight a seat beside the fire, but Brienne chose to stand instead. “What would you have of me, my lady?”  

“I want to talk about my brother.”  

Brienne of Tarth chewed her lip. “Lord Rickon… I-I fear I do not know him well.”  

You may know him better than I do. “When you were at Ser Brynden’s camp, how did you find him?”  

“Well,” said Brienne. “Healthy, I mean. He seemed… happy… with his wolf… I… pray excuse me, my lady, I was never very good with children.”  

Sansa felt a stab of pity. “You were always different to the rest of them, weren’t you?”  

Brienne’s blue eyes glimmered. “Yes,” she said quietly.  

“I… I know. Not in the same way… you have more courage than I ever could have, and you are better at some things, but… my siblings and I… well, I was only ever some stupid southron girl. My wolf, Lady, she…” A sob half-caught in her throat. “She died. You must think me a fool, Brienne, but what if I’m not one of them? Not a Stark, not truly… the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. I tried to come back to Rickon, but he… I’m far away…”  

“I think…” Brienne hesitated. “I think he will come back to you, in time. You… you… King’s Landing made you hide your identity, my lady, and Highgarden did too, but there is always truth in your heart. There is always truth somewhere, but sometimes you have to let it blossom and flower. To let it fly free, like… like a butterfly… or… or something like that.” Brienne’s cheeks coloured.  

Perhaps she is right, thought Sansa. The truth is powerful, especially when wielded properly. “You have a way with words, Brienne. You will have to sing to me, sometime.” It was no mockery; in spite of her dull, solemn features, the tall lady knight had a sweet voice that reminded Sansa of some of the bards that had come to Winterfell.  

“I… I cannot, my lady. I would make such a butchery of the words. I was not made to be a singer.”  

Are we ever truly made for anything?  

When Podrick came back with their mulled wine, he was not entirely alone. “M-my l-lady,” he stammered, “the k-king is here.”  

So he was. Aegon’s hair was wet from the rain, and his cloak dripped rainwater as he hung it up on a peg. “I hope I do not intrude,” he said. “Truth be told, I did not know whether to find you awake or asleep, my lady.” He shuffled his feet a little.  

“Well, here I am,” Sansa said in a small voice.
“Here you are,” he echoed.

It was a moment before she realised that he wanted to speak with her alone. “Bring us cups, Podrick,” she said, “we can pour our own wine. Give us a moment, if it please you.”

Aegon poured. “I am no stranger to serving,” he said, though the way his hands shivered worse than Podrick’s spoke to the contrary. “Lord Jon oft made me wait upon him in my youth, to learn humility. But never did I wait upon a lady as beautiful as you, Lady Sansa.” Then his cheeks flooded as red as the rubies on the pommel of his sword. He settled himself down into one of the chairs. The flickering golden firelight gave his hair an iridescent glimmer, and softened his face. He was certainly handsome, Sansa thought, far more so than Joffrey had been, with the mysteriousness in his purple eyes.

“You honour me with your words, Your Grace,” she said.

He shook his head and took a long deep sip of wine, his eyes never leaving hers. “You… you honour me with your presence, Sansa. May I call you that?”

“Yes.” She brought the cup to her lips. The warmed wine left a funny feeling in her tummy; the butterflies were stirring their wings again.

“Then… you may call me Aegon.” He leaned forwards suddenly and put his hands in hers. They were warm, and smelled of roses. “My father loved Lyanna Stark so much that he started a war for her. I know that now. Jon always said that it was for prophecy, but it was for love, I know, even if he cast my mother aside and thousands died for it... Is that not proof that love can be so powerful?”

And so deadly. A stupid girl had loved Prince Joffrey once, the golden prince with sunrise in his hair and sparkling emeralds for eyes. “What do you mean?” she asked, playing the fool.

“What I mean is… perhaps… Stark and Targaryen, that was meant to be. Perhaps…” He gazed down at their linked hands. “I love you,” he blurted suddenly, “I love you, Lady Sansa, and I want you by my side, from this day until my last day. I have made one marriage pact already tonight; why not another?”

The strangest thing was that his words hardly shocked her. “Your Grace,” she said. “Aegon… you are already promised…”

“To some Martell girl I’ve never met… but you… a maid as fair as autumn, with sunset in her hair. And your eyes… would that I could fight a tourney in your honour and lay a crown of blue roses on your head as my father did for Lady Lyanna, but... I can promise you this.” He took a breath. “Come and say your vows alongside me in Baelor’s Sept, my lady, and I will allow your brother to rule as Rickon Stark, King in the North.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally...

This was a super-chapter that I split in half; ‘part two’ (which is still incomplete) will follow in chapter 66 or 67. The tone for the second half is very different for that of the first, as it focuses on the council meeting between Aegon, Sansa, Blackfish, Littlefinger, Myrcella and everyone currently at Harrenhal, as well as additional scenes that feature
Rickon, Brienne and Jaime.

Does anyone want an update on Barristan? It will be a very short chapter (<3200 words) that I've got the groundwork for in my notes, and I'm very tempted to write it purely for the sake of his character development, but I don't know if it will actually add much to the momentum of the story.

If anyone's wondering, that's why I haven't written any Tyrion or Jon chapters for quite a while. They've got very little to do at the moment, so any of their chapters (particularly Jon) would simply be 4000 words of worthless exposition and plot-irrelevant conversations building up to no narrative climax whatsoever.
DAVOS

The sept was bathed in brilliant golden light. “What shall this child be named, good lady?” the septon asked Roslin Tully.

“He shall be named Hoster, after his grandfather.” The new mother passed the swaddled babe gently into the septon’s arms.

“So he shall,” the septon replied. He walked once around altar, holding the child close to each of the seven tallow candles. “O Father Above, bless him with just happiness; Mother grant mercy and compassion and give him cherished love…”

Davos had heard this ceremony before, most recently at Princess Shireen’s birth, when Selyse Florent had been a devotee of the Faith of the Seven. Now the queen seemed disgusted by the ceremony, whispering in Ser Axell Florent’s ear and regarding the septon with utter contempt. But Melisandre seemed strangely entranced by everything. What does she see in this, other than an affront to her god? Davos wondered.

“Let us sing the Song of the Seven,” the septon said, when the blessings were done. A musician plucked a couple of strings on his lute and a high harp started to play. Meanwhile the onlookers started up an awkward, out-of-time chorus:

The Father’s face is stern and strong,
he sits and judges right from wrong,
He weighs our lives, the short and long,
and loves the little children
The Mother gives the gift of life,
and watches over every wife,
Her gentle smile ends all strife,
and she loves her little children,

Thus it continued. Marya was one of the loudest singers, and her voice was fair enough. Davos smiled as he watched her. The last time he’d heard her singing was long ago, back on Cape Wrath. And long before that she’d sung at his wedding, though those were ruder, bawdier tunes.

After that was done, those attending dispersed themselves into the late afternoon, in preparation for the evening’s feast. Davos saw Lady Blackwood across the hall, and for a moment their eyes met in the shared gaze of conspirators. Then he was past her, watching as Utherydes Wayn and Ser Robin Ryger left the hall, then his squire Tywin Frey and the boy’s betrothed Alyssanne Bracken, Lord Jonos’s youngest daughter. Blind old Lord Vance, propped up by his son; Lord Erenford, who had been vassal to Walder Frey; Ser Alyn Mooton, cousin to the lord of Maidenpool who was with Petyr Baelish at Harrenhal. Perhaps it is for the best that I am leaving, Davos thought half-jokingly, there are far too many supplicants here for me to contend with.

His sons went with Princess Shireen, but he found Marya by the statue of the Mother, her eyes on the floor. In her hands she held a single white candle, pale and tall, licking at her hand. “You should light one too,” she said, when she saw him.

“For… for Devan?” Marya was down here morning and night, praying for their son’s soul.

“Aye. For all our sons, the living and the dead.”

“I… I suppose I should. But… I fear I do not remember the words.” Davos could not recall the last time he had said prayers in earnest. He was dutiful to his gods, but never fanatical.

“You don’t have to know the words,” his wife told him. “You just have to pray, and think… and believe that they’re listening.”

And so he did. Father Above, watch over my departed sons. Warrior, give me the courage to do what I must; Crone, show me the way forward. And Mother have mercy on my soul. He lit the candles, and murmured the words, then took Marya by the arm and led her out from the sept, across the courtyard, and into the dusky dark.

In his chambers, Ser Davos dressed in darkness. A doublet of quilted grey wool, lambswool breeches belted with brown leather, a hooded grey cloak lined with sable. These are not the clothes of Davos Seaworth, but of Davos Shorthand, the smuggler. It was a dark night, and Davos wanted to blend with the night, to use it as his shield. Though not devoid of the finery that would be expected at the feast – there was some silver stitching on his doublet, for example, he was garbed for the sake of practicality, not finery. And if they did capture him and leave him to languish in a cell, at least his clothes were warm.

His sons were dressed likewise, though not quite so finely. Marya had donned a long-sleeved dress of dark grey wool with a hooded half-cape, and she was away helping Princess Shireen to dress similarly. “Come,” Davos beckoned to his sons, leading his way down the stairs. The queen’s men were out in force tonight, all along the gallery that led from the Blue Tower to the Great Hall, warming their hands over brazier fires as they leaned on their pikes. The Blackwoods had brought
one hundred men, but Davos knew that they would be of little use if it came to a fight. *It will not come to that. It must not come to that.* All he would need were their men at the Water Gate, a distraction in the Great Hall, and for everything to go as planned.

And he could barely rely on any of those things. *You are no seasoned plotter, Onion Knight,* he thought, *best you stick to smuggling and sailing.* The Red Fork was a little icy tonight, but they would find little trouble on the river with Davos himself navigating… or so he hoped.

The red wanderer hung over Riverrun tonight, which some folk called the Thief. If he were a superstitious man, he might take that as a sign from the gods… but the star was red; red for R’hllor’s light, red for the red woman.

He must needs hope that his faith was stronger than hers.

Night was drawing in by the time the feast began.

Davos Seaworth met his wife in the archway outside Riverrun’s hall, while his boys went looking for Princess Shireen. Marya’s hands were pale. “You’re shivering,” he said.

“No, I am fine.” She was right, though. Most guardsmen would be anxious to find a warm fire on a night like this, and not concerned with much else.

The hall was vast and brightly lit, with long trestle tables set up on the dais and below it; those of low birth sat on long benches, while the highborn had their own chairs. There were flagons of wine and ale on all the tables.

Davos’s place was not as far from the dais as he would have liked; he could still hear Selyse and Ser Axell muttering to each other, which meant that they could hear him. But he could see all of the entrances to the hall from here, and which were unguarded.

“You’re the Onion Knight,” said the gangly youth in the seat beside him. “Ser Davos Seaworth.” He looked about eighteen or nineteen, with pimples on his nose, too tall for his seat.

“That I am. And who might you be?”

“Hoster. They call me Hos. Lord Blackwood’s son. You might know my brothers, Brynden and Edmund. We call him Ben. Ser Brynden and Ser Edmund, sorry. Ben’s only a new knight; Father gave him his spurs for killing some Lydden knight in the Tumblestone battle. He’s with the king now. King Stannis, that is.”

“Oh.” Davos did not have any siblings, nevermind lordly ones. “Both are your older brothers?”

“Brynden is.” Hoster picked a roll from the basket and chewed it. “Ben’s a couple of years younger, but he’s ten times better at fighting than I am. So I stayed to help Mother look after Raventree Hall while they went to war. They call me bookish.” He shrugged. “I suppose I am.”

“I’m not a warring man either,” said Davos, “though I am certainly not bookish. A year ago I could barely read.”

The lad nodded. “Then what are you?”

“I was a smuggler. A rogue, a blackhearted pirate, call it whatever you like—”
“—and now you are Hand of the King,” Hoster finished. “You must have been a very good smuggler… or a very bad one, I suppose.”

“If I was a good smuggler, I’d still be out there smuggling, don’t you think?”

“Would you?”

That was a question that Davos hadn’t expected, and one that he didn’t know how to answer. “I don’t know. All I know is that Davos of Flea Bottom would never have gotten himself snarled up in a mess this bad.”

“Well said.” Hoster finished pouring two tankards of ale. “Well, here’s to baby Hoster. May he rule wisely and justly in the years to come.” Davos toasted that. The ale tickled in the back of his throat as it went down.

The serving women ladled venison stew into their trenchers, rich with baby onions, carrots and spicy black sausage. There was bread fried in meat dripping to mop up the gravy. As they ate Hoster told Davos about the ancient quarrel between the Blackwoods and the Brackens, going back thousands of years. “…there might have been peace for a time then, but the Teats changed that…”

“…oh, many lords of the Riverlands have tried to reconcile us, but all in vain. A lasting peace is impossible with a history like ours, as they’ll soon realise…”

“…that’s strange, I guess. We normally fight on the same side, but there’s still a lot of arguments. In Robert’s Rebellion, my grandfather wanted to take Rhaegar at the Trident, but old Lord Bracken favoured a southerly march to strike at King’s Landing. Of course, my grandfather was right…”

Davos was half-listening to him, but more than that he was watching the dais, for a moment meeting Selyse’s terse expression before her eyes moved on and she began to mutter in Ser Axell Florent’s ear. Beside them Princess Shireen sat as still as a statue. She had dressed warmly, he was pleased to see, her slight shoulders under a mantle of grey foxfur and sable.

“Under the sea,” the fool Patchface sang, “wolves and dragons coil by night, on a seabed black and blue, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.” But the princess did not smile; her eyes were near as cold as her mother’s. They were the eyes of someone who had seen far too much, of someone who hurt.

Besides Patchface there was a singer called Rymund the Rhymer, who made pretty verse about the birth of a new Tully heir, and some harpists who played a haunting battle song called ‘The Night of the Wolf’, that had been written to commemorate Robb Stark’s victories in the west. They played the Lannister song too, ‘The Rain of Castamere’, though the words were changed in mockery of Lord Tywin’s end at the Tumblestone. Merrier tunes included ‘Fifty-Four Tuns’, ‘Six Maids In A Pool’ and ‘Meggett Was A Merry Maid’. By the time ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ started to play, Ser Axell was drunk, dancing with three of Lord Bracken’s daughters, though his eyes never strayed from their bosoms. Davos and his wife danced to ‘The False and the Fair’; a slow, sombre song to match their slow, sombre moods.

Around two hours before midnight, it started to rain. By then Lady Roslin and her infant son had gone up to bed, and many of the revellers were streaming out of the doors at the back of the hall. There were so many of them leaving at one time that Davos almost missed Princess Shireen among their number. He jumped to his feet, but Hoster Blackwood caught his arm. “Ser,” he said quietly, “I do not know if my mother will be ready to receive you.”

“All we can do is hope,” Davos said, and shrugged him off. Else this will end in disaster. At the big doors of the hall Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain turned into his path, holding up a hand. “Ser
Davos.” His voice was a little slurred. “The queen has asked me to take the princess up to bed—”

Davos was considerably less drunk. “You sound a little tired, ser.”

“I’m fine.”

“At least allow me to take the burden of escorting the princess up to her chambers. You should get some rest, Ser Patrek.”

The queen’s knight peered at him strangely, but whatever wits he might have had once seemed to have been lost to the evening’s merriment. He only shrugged… and without a look back he turned away, and left Davos there, holding the princess’s hand. The onion knight cast a quick look in Selyse’s direction; the queen was elsewhere, staring into nothingness. They had been unfathomably lucky…

It was time.

The rain would keep the guards from seeing them, he hoped; their desire to get inside and close to a fire would be greater than ever. It might cause them some trouble if the river burst its banks while they were sailing down the Red Fork, but that was nothing Davos could not cope with. But first they had to get to the boat.

It was halfway across the castle to the River Gate, and Selyse had her queen’s men patrolling every rampart, wall and tower in this part of the castle where her garrison was thickest. At first there was nothing to suspect, but when Davos turned right into a dark alley and Shireen said, “This isn’t the way back to my chambers, ser,” he knew that there was no turning back.

“I know.” His reply was barely a whisper. “Begging your pardons, princess, but you’re not going back there. I’m getting you out of here, someplace safe. There have been…” He trailed off, thinking, how do I tell her that her mother means to burn her alive?

“…rumours,” finished Shireen. “About Mother, and her wanting king’s blood. You did the same with Edric, didn’t you?”

Wordlessly, Davos nodded. I have come full circles. Stannis promised that he would have my head for my treachery in saving the boy, and it was only the letter from Castle Black that saved me. Lord Wyman said that he would have my head too, and only Rickon Stark saved me. And the Blackwater would have drowned me as well, and only blind luck spewed me out alive.

A man could only have so many lives.

Black rain lashed the earth, harder and harder. They passed behind the kennels, so close that Davos smelled the stink of wet dog in the air. They set the hounds to barking, but one of the guards by the kennel simply said, “That black bitch’s past her feeding time,” and banged his spear on the ground. And thus the smuggler and his charge went past them unnoticed.

“There’s a boat,” Davos told the princess as they descended through a dark cellar. “Over by the Water Gate. I’ll row you down, my princess, then you’ll be safely in Lady Blackwood’s company. And Marya will be with you too.” He would take Shireen beyond the castle walls first, then go back for his wife and sons.

All things considered, Shireen seemed to take that surprisingly well. It was almost as though she had been expecting this. Perhaps she had. “And what about you, ser Onion Knight?”

“What about me?”
“Aren’t you coming with us?”

“Soon.” Davos flashed her a small smile and squeezed her hand; Shireen squeezed his back. “Not far now,” he promised. “Only…”

Then they heard the ringing of bells, and the low haunting wail of a familiar song.

“It’s always summer under the sea,” it sang, “I know, I know, oh, oh, oh…”

“Patches?” Shireen whispered.

*The creature,* Melisandre called it, loath to say the name. *The fool,* Davos thought. Yet as that eerie voice echoed disembodied through the long echoing darkness, something cold stirred inside him.

“*Under the sea, the night is bright,*

*And the devils dance in icy light*…”

The voice echoed louder and louder still. Then they heard footsteps, far off, and a child’s laughter…

“*Under the sea, fire and blood,*

*become snow and water, ice and mud*…”

The laughter was closer now. Shireen gripped Davos’s arm all the more. “I can hear…”

A whispering filled the tunnel. “*Cold,*” it hissed, “*colddddd…..*” Davos turned, to put himself between whatever was coming and the princess—

And light drowned out the darkness.

It was a mere speck at first, hope at the end of the tunnel, but it grew… and grew… and grew… and all around them came men with torches and swords, with flaming hearts on their shields and their breastplates. Davos had never been so glad to see them.

Until Melisandre of Asshai stepped out from their midst and said, “Oh, Ser Davos. You never did learn, did you?” To Ser Malegorn she said, “Seize him, and take him to a cell, as your queen has commanded. The princess comes with me.”

**Chapter End Notes**

Short… and not entirely sweet. Poor Shireen.

Hopefully this felt clumsy and somewhat jumbled, a lot like Davos’s plan. Or, at least, that’s my excuse if this is poorly written.

Next: a chapter I’ve been hyping for not only weeks, but MONTHS.
**The Red Woman**

Chapter Summary

*Death and darkness, but no saviour to be seen.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**MELISANDRE**

Firelight and shadows mingled in the closeness of the chamber. *Fire.* She remembered fire. Fire was always in her dreams, fire and blood. *The words of the Targaryens, memories of sorcerous dragonflame, secrets writ in dust and ash.* She’d seen Dragonstone too, its high peaks belching flame into the darkening sky.

*Evil dreams.* Melisandre frowned as she rose from her bed and lit the row of candles along the windowsill. It was snowing outside. Was R’hilor telling her something else? *I ask for glimpses of Azor Ahai, and he shows me only snow, as ever…*

Beren brought her broth and brown bread, and a flagon of mulled wine spiced with cloves. Melisandre did not have any particular fondness for the food, nor did she need it, but one must needs keep up appearances.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Near midnight, m’lady.”

“Good,” Melisandre replied. “It will be soon.” Selyse had no patience to wait; the girl must burn tonight.

Beren lingered awhile by the fireside, drinking in the sight of her. When she turned and met his eyes, he blushed as red as his hair.

Truth be told, she would rather have had Devan Seaworth with her again, but the boy had been insistent on leaving for his doom in the West. “You should stay,” she told him on the day before his departure, cornering him in the shadow of the king’s tower. She’d lifted her hand to his cheek so that he could feel the warmth of her skin. “You should stay here, with me, and fire and light.” Boys of a certain age could be easily coerced, as could most men, but they had their foolish tendencies too. *As Devan learned to his sorrow.* “I am not going to hide any longer,” he said, “I will face the war in the west, like a man.”
And never return from it.

She should have told Davos what she knew, in hindsight. It would have spared the boy his death, and his father the pain of his grief. *The Onion Knight might have been more amenable to my plan, even.*

*Or not. Seaworth does not have it in him to burn children.*

Melisandre glanced up and found Beren still watching her. “Do you have anything to say?” she asked her sort-of-page. The boy was a Northerner plucked out of Galbart Glover’s baggage train; hand-picked by Melisandre. A red priestess could see such talents in a youth; Beren was diligent, careful, and above all, secretive. Half the castle did not even know of his existence.

“You’ve been gazing into the fire again, m’lady,” Beren said.

“Well observed.” It was only half-sarcastic.

The firelight caught in his reddish hair. *Kissed by fire,* Melisandre thought idly. Some said that it was a sign of the Lord’s blessing, but she doubted that. Besides, any priest or priestess of her level could easily cast a glamour to make them appear as something they were not. “I suppose you’d like to know what I’ve seen?”

Beren nodded with all the enthusiasm a ten-year old could muster. “Was it fighting, m’lady? Was it King Stannis?”

“It was nothing of much promise,” she lied.

“I could try and have a look myself, m’lady.”

She swathed a hand through the embers, tickling her skin. “I think not.” It took many years of devotion to see anything other than half-formed shadows in the flames, and much longer to understand them.

Visions were always cryptic things, something that Melisandre knew only too well. The red woman was not so prideful as to never admit to being wrong; she was only mortal, after all.

Sometimes she wished she *was* wrong, though. “He shows me the night,” she said aloud when Beren was gone, “and the dark terrors that come howling from darker abysses, the shadows come to dance by day. But no way to turn back the tide, to bring fire down upon ice, to melt darkness into light.”

*He does,* the embers whispered as she knelt before them, *oh, he does. Look again, and see.*

Melisandre turned back to her hearthfire and said a word. At once the flames roared, like some great ash-and-dust beast answering her call, then dissolved into themselves, and left visions before her eyes, like serpents writhing in coats of scarlet and gold. The serpents became stags, their hooves beating a great black drumbeat as they cantered as one, echoing through all the world. Around them pale flakes skirled and boiling blood spilled itself across the snow, then turned to a pool of molten gold. *Lannister gold,* Melisandre thought, *Lannister blood.*

*But am I certain of that? Is that what I want to see, or what I am seeing?* She’d seen other visions too, of stags drowned beneath snowbanks, their antlers locked and frozen together, while lions stalked around them, ravenous and hungry.

The stags guttered out and became ash-speckled shadows; the shapes twisted and became tall grey
towers, some tall and thin, others stout and short, against the dusty night. A wave of frost came upon 
them, and battered the towers, slamming them, harder and harder still, finally reducing them to 
rubble. And yet… beneath the hard packed earth, sweet red blood flowed thick and warm.

She saw a twisted black tree atop a twisted black hill, sobbing tears of ice. And corpses crawled from 
the crypts, entwining, dancing, rolling as they rose above the earth, like lovers in their lust. She saw 
black sails on a blacker sea, and cold tentacles twisting as they climbed. They are coming from under 
the earth, the red priestess thought, the dead in their hundreds and thousands, and worse things too.

Death and darkness, but no saviour to be seen. Then snow clouded her visions, and she was back in 
the room, and the fire ceased to show her its secrets. Look and see, the voice had told her, and 
Melisandre had, but none of what she’d seen was new to her. Some things were made to be 
mysteries, and so they must remain.

“My lady,” called a voice from outside the door. “Lady Melisandre, the queen would have words 
with you.” That is Ser Malegorn. She recognised the young knight’s voice.

Usually the queen would come to her, not the other way round. Melisandre lit a torch from the 
brazier and swept out into the corridor. “Lead the way,” she told the knight.

They went along a dimly lit gallery and out onto the wallwalk. “Is Her Grace alone?” Melisandre 
asked.

“No, my lady. She’s with Ser Axell and some of her courtiers.”

The courtiers were sycophants and hens who flocked around Selyse, just as Selyse flocked to 
Melisandre. So long as they keep believing in her, and she in the Lord, there is no harm in their 
foolishness. As they continued along the curving wallwalk, the wind picked up, and the red woman 
noticed the coldness in the night, though she did not feel it. “Best find yourself a new cloak,” she told 
Ser Malegorn. “The nights are drawing in.”

Ser Malegorn was half a boy, and he blushed like one. “The Lord’s fire gives me all the warmth I 
need.”

Melisandre smiled. “You are mistaking piety for folly, ser. Unless you’re planning on carrying a 
flaming torch everywhere you go, sable and fur will suit you more than fire.”

“But… you don’t feel the cold, my lady, do you?”

Oh, I do. Not in my blood, but in my bones. Can’t you feel them, Ser Malegorn, clawing at the black 
earth beneath your feet, the blue-eyed monsters rising from the garden of the dead? “I have studied 
my art for many, many years,” she replied. “Perhaps I did feel the cold once, but I do not remember.”

In the yard below the queen’s tower, a nightfire was burning. Selyse’s men stood around feeding 
green branches to the flames. The swirling embers dissolved into the night sky as they rose. The 
night was moonless and without stars, so the blazing pyre was the only light.

The night is dark and full of terrors.

Melisandre counted no less than twelve hearths burning in the queen’s tower. Eleven too many. 
Some religions had their sacred numbers; seven for the blind Andal gods of Westeros, three-and-
thirty for the gods of Ghis, but the Lord of Light was the one god, and the only god. One god, one 
realm, one king. When she was Melony, not Melisandre, a red priest had told her that ‘a thousand 
nightfires burning brightly will not match one flame burning eternally.’
Fire was only fleeting, not eternal. That was a hard truth, but many of her order refused to accept it. Some red priests had spent their lives trying to find the secret to lighting an eternal flame, but none had yet succeeded.

And there was another thing that must remain a mystery.

Selyse’s solar had three hearths alone, and a dozen men-at-arms carrying torches cast their shadows here as well. “Your Grace,” said Melisandre, approaching.

The queen rose to her feet in a single sudden movement. “Lady Melisandre. Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“I serve at Your Grace’s pleasure.”

Selyse almost smiled. “And I serve at the Lord of Light’s.”

“The queen has seen something,” Ser Axell Florent said, crossing the room to stand beside his niece. “Something curious.”

“A vision in the flames!” Selyse announced, all pomp and spectacle. “A vision proclaiming our king’s victory!”

She sounds like some mad prophet. Melisandre doubted that this would bode well for any of them. “Oh?” She raised an eyebrow.

“I saw red hearts aflame, with fire streaming from their antlers, cheering in their king’s advance,” the queen said, “a sure sign that my husband is to prevail.”

Melisandre gave her a suitably mystical glance. Let the fool see what she likes. The stags were screaming, not cheering. “I have seen the same,” she replied smoothly.

“You have?” Selyse gave a nervous half-giggle. “Pray forgive me, but for a time, I feared that I was going mad.”

“Many of us look that way to unbelievers. How many of these visions have you had?” The queen had no aptitude for discerning the flames, Melisandre knew, but it was better to know than to wonder fruitlessly.

“More, my lady. Many more.”

“And what have you managed to discern from this?” So saying, Melisandre reached into the pocket of her robe and extracted a jar of fine gold powder, twisted the lid open, and scattered a pinch into the air. Selyse was a shallow creature, easily consumed by mysticism; the powder would do the rest.

“It means victory… for Stannis,” the queen observed, “his flaming stag sigil… the lord is with him.”

“Perchance you saw arrows as well? Tipped with fire, trailing tendrils of black smoke?”

“Yes,” Selyse lied. “I did… Stannis’s archers, they will be important to his great victory.”

You did not see the huntsmen who loosed those arrows, then. Melisandre was hardly surprised. Fools see what they want to see, not what is. Stannis’s war was pointless and would prove fruitless; soon he would find himself back in the North, she knew, fighting the battle that the Night’s Watch were fighting up on the Wall. She had tried to dissuade her king from heading north, but he would have none of it. “If the war is in the North, I will need all of the Seven Kingdoms behind me when I
go to fight it,” he had told her, not knowing that he would never and could never rule Seven Kingdoms. *A glamoured sword and a righteous wrath will not make you Azor Ahai reborn, my king.*

*But giving up your Nissa Nissa might.* For Stannis Baratheon was a hard, cold man, but he loved his daughter.

Selyse was coming onto that now. “That is the Lord’s deliverance, then, his truth, his power, his resolution. Does he know of my sacrifice aforehand. *Our* sacrifice. The girl must die.” She was talking to no-one in particular.

“Yes,” Melisandre said, “the girl must die.” *For Stannis to become Azor Ahai reborn, she must.*

Even so, she had her doubts. The ancient hero had forged his flaming sword by plunging it deep into the heart of his wife, but Stannis was thousands of miles from Shireen…

*There is nothing Stannis loves more than his daughter,* Melisandre told herself, and hoped that it was true. “We should prepare a pyre,” Selyse said.

*And you should pray that the Lord has mercy on you for murdering your daughter. And on me.*

“Pray excuse me awhile,” Melisandre said. “Send one of your men down to fetch me when the time comes.” Then she strode from the chamber without a word, and her shadow trailed her into the night.

Her chambers were somewhere in the castle above her, but instead, she descended. The castle dungeons were under the godswood, a block of dark, damp cells lit by a single red brazier at one end of the corridor. Melisandre lit every one of the sconces as she walked down between the cells; upon lighting the last, she turned, withdrew a shiny black key from her robe, and forced it into the lock, even though it seemed it would not fit.

She waved the torch through the darkness, and found herself face to face with Ser Davos Seaworth.

“You,” said the Onion Knight.

“Me.” Melisandre pushed the door shut behind her. The ruby at her throat glowed red and warm, and the fire blossomed, spreading its light and warmth to all corners of the cell. “I hope you have not been poorly treated.”

Davos ignored her. “You shouldn’t be here,” he said. His eyes burned with feverish rage. *He would gladly throttle me, if he had the strength in him,* thought Melisandre.

“I shouldn’t, but here I am. What does that tell you, ser.”

His voice was rasping, hoarse. “It tells me that you have a deathwish.”

Melisandre sighed. “Your family—”

“Don’t you dare talk about my family—”

“—are safe and well. Away from Selyse’s wrath.” Marya Seaworth and her boys were confined to their chambers in the queen’s tower, but Melisandre had seen to it that they remained unharmed.

“For now. We both know that you’re not above murdering children.”

“I take no pleasure in it, ser.”

“And yet you do nothing to stop it.”
We have had this argument a thousand times before. We can have a thousand times more, if we must. “I only do as my Lord commands.”

Ser Davos levered himself into a sitting position. “Your Lord is evil,” he said.

“There is only one true evil in this world, Davos.”

Melisandre took a step forward, but he warded her off with one hand. “Go to hell,” he hissed, “go to hell, you just go and burn in hell!” He managed to stagger up to his feet, murder in his eyes.

“Perhaps I will, someday. But for now, I must do what needs to be done.” And as she gazed at this man in the corner of the dark room, all she felt was pity. “I am sorry,” she said. “You will never believe me, but I am.”

For the longest time he stared at her. The light in the room dwindled, and it was then that she saw that he was crying. Tears speckled the Onion Knight’s brown eyes, wet and bright on his cheeks. “Why…” he was saying, “why must you…”

“It will be tonight, Ser Davos,” she told him. “It will not be long.”

Davos Seaworth sagged back into the darkness. What is all of this worth? Melisandre thought, as she watched him. What is the life of one greyscaled girl against a kingdom?

And then she knew.

She found Ser Benethon Scales on the steps outside the gaol, where she’d left him. “The queen has need of all her men in the yard beneath her tower,” she told him.

“All, my lady?”

“All,” she affirmed. But when Ser Benethon and his men headed off in the direction of the queen’s pyre, Melisandre took the stairs to the wallwalk, and then the wallwalk back towards her chambers. The night was colder than it had been mere minutes ago. Dead things in the water. A thousand eyes and one. A raven cawed overhead and alighted on the merlon beside her, staring at her with black eyes as cold as frozen stars. “Corn?” it asked. “Corn, corn, corn.” That was queer. Jon Snow had a talking raven at Castle Black, she remembered.

Dark wings, dark words, the Westerosi said. And darker nights, Melisandre thought. The raven took to the sky, and very soon it was gone into the black void beyond the castle walls.

Back in her chambers the air was still and cold. Her attendants had not yet emptied the bathtub; that was good. Melisandre said a word and steam began to rise off the surface of the water, bubbles bursting when they came to the top. She lit a tallow candle on the side of tub, and watched the flickering flames.

When she closed her eyes, the shadows came to dance again. The flaming stags were first, smoking in the dark. Are they screaming, or cheering, as Selyse said? This time she could not tell. After that the shadows whispered out into dust, and a boy’s face swam before her, three eyes staring. One eye was a crystal of purest amber, glittering; the second a rich red colour, not the red of fire but the red of blood. But it was the third that truly terrified her. It was blue, so, so blue, colder than anything she’d ever seen. The enemy, Melisandre thought, and knew that she was looking into the face of something far greater than she or anything else on this earth.

The Great Other.
“Melony,” it said, “Lot Seven.”

In that moment it was as though her bathwater had turned to ice. Cold coursed through her veins, and all the candles on her tub threatened to gutter into darkness. It took all her strength to keep them alight, and when the dark cloud passed, the room was cold, she naked and shivering. Melisandre wrapped herself in her robe and went to stand beside the hearth, warming her pale hands over the flame.

*The true war lies to the north.* She had always known that. Perhaps staying with Stannis had been an attempt to delude herself, to occupy her thoughts and turn her away from those dreams of cold nights and the eyes of evil. *A evil, twisted thing with a thousand eyes and one, swimming on a sea of blood. He is coming. And only Azor Ahai reborn has the strength to withstand him.*

*But are Stannis and Azor Ahai one and the same?* Melisandre still did not know, and that frightened her more than it should have. *Am I a prophet, or some misguided fool? And if the girl burns but Stannis does not win his battle, then what have I become?*

*But there is no other way.*

Melisandre knelt beside the fire, kindling a new flame in the hearth. “Lord of Light,” she prayed, “show me the way.”

Nothing. No words, no visions, no indication that she had been heard, or noticed, or—

*“North,”* came a hoarse calling from above her head. She turned. The raven had nestled itself somewhere in the rafters. *“North, north, north.”*

Melisandre approached it, cautious, her feet mute against the scratchy rushes. The raven launched itself from its perch and landed on her windowsill. It glared at her, staring from black eyes, dark eyes, eyes that were sightless and yet all-seeing. *“King,”* it began to caw, *“king, king, king.”*

*“King?”* If anyone had come in to see her talking to the bird they might think her mad, but there were priests beyond the Shadow who claimed to be able to speak with common beasts. *“What king?”* she asked. *“Do you mean Stannis?”*

The bird cocked its head, as though surprised by her reply. *“King,”* it cawed again, *“king,”* and then, *“north, north, north.”* With a fluttering of wings it took to the night, and was gone.

Minutes later Beren appeared at her door to inform her that Ser Brus Buckler was without. She knelt beside the boy and whispered a few words in his ear, then stood back and watched as he scurried off into the night. Ser Brus led her down the dark stairs, across the courtyard and out into the bailey. *“The Lord smiles on us tonight,”* he said. *“We are his humble servants, doing his noble bidding,”* Melisandre murmured, as Ser Patrek and Ser Malegorn came over to join them. *“Take the comfort of fire and warmth in your hearts, good sers.”* *“The night is dark and full of terrors,”* agreed Ser Brus, as if he knew what the words meant.

The dark clouds had gone away, and it was starting to snow. The flakes swayed through the pale air as they descended, caking the courtyard in white ashes. *Snow,* Melisandre remembered the raven saying, *snow, snow, snow.* And she remembered the spray of blood-red leaves that had drifted past her open window as the bird departed from the sill, conveyed into the air from the branches of the weirwood.

Ser Benethon Scales wore scaled black plate and a black cloak slashed with blue, with the king’s
flaming stag on his breast. He passed a lit taper to Melisandre, the wooden rod smoking in the black air. Red sparks and vapour trailed in its wake.

The knights turned their heads as one. “The queen,” said young Ser Malegorn as he went to his knees. Selyse drifted down the steps from her tower, clad in a cloak as black as raven’s feather. Somewhere above a bird cawed. The moon glimmered feebly from behind a cloud, and its light fell across the pyre, stacked high with green wood and bracken. The queen’s men all held torches and four great braziers circled the pyre, burning with a ruddy glow.

Melisandre went to stand beside one of them, waving her taper. “This sacrifice must be made to appease the Lord,” she told the onlookers. “None of you should feel shame to be a part of it, but none of you should feel pride in it either. I advise you to think upon your sins as the sacrifice is made, and to be thankful for the Lord’s glory.”

Selyse shuffled closer to her. “That was a very beautiful sermon, my lady.”

“Thank you.” Melisandre took the other woman’s hand in her own. “But my words are incomparable to the flames, Your Grace. That is the most beautiful thing of all.”

“Oh, I agree.”

As I thought you would.

Then came the sound of footsteps, and the men were entering the bailey. Princess Shireen was led along by her great-uncle Ser Axell, as a mother would lead a much smaller child. Lady Selyse kissed her uncle, then knelt and kissed the princess on her cheek. “Be brave,” she said.

Across the courtyard, Melisandre fanned the four braziers, making the flames dance higher, though they did not burn her.

“Why am I here?” Princess Shireen asked.

You already know, child, thought Melisandre, though you do not want to admit it.

“Mother? Mother?”

Melisandre turned away just as the struggling began. The princess was lifted into the air kicking, and Ser Axell and Ser Malegorn tied her to the pyre, then fell back into line. Shireen was calling for her mother, quietly at first, then more loudly. Selyse looked away, and did not say a word.

I will feel no guilt either.

“The hour is now, my Lord,” Melisandre said, waving the torch. The flame changed through a thousand different shades of red, alive in the glow of the moon. “For you we offer up this sacrifice, that the light from its burning may lead our way.” Princess Shireen was kicking against the bindings, screaming now, but none heard her.

“Accept this token of our faith, my lord and lead us from the darkness. O Lord of Light, show us the way!”

“O Lord of Light, show us the way!” chorused the crowd.

“Be brave,” Melisandre of Asshai told the princess, “you do the Lord a great service.” Then she said a last prayer to the Lord, raised the taper, and pressed it to the mass of dry kindling at the base of the pyre.
The flames rose. And the snow kept falling. A raven was screaming, “Fire, fire, fire!”

*Fire and blood,* the red woman thought, closing her eyes.

Fire and blood meant dragons, and Stannis had none.

*The true war lies to the north, my king.*

But Stannis was going south, and he would not stop until it was too late.

*If King Stannis learns of my treason, he will have my head.*

When she opened her eyes Ser Davos Seaworth was running down the steps, with half a hundred men behind him. The queen’s men were drawing their swords all around, to fight them off. “My lady!” Selyse called. “How did he—?”

“Because I let him free,” Melisandre said simply. *Because I never locked the cell door. Because I sent away the guards.* There was no going back now. “Because while burning Shireen will save Stannis… Stannis must not be allowed to win. Because he isn’t Azor Ahai.”

A strange sense of longing overcame her, a longing for the past, and the memory of days gone by. *She would have burned her daughter. Abandoned her, as mine abandoned me.* She thought of a dingy market and auctioneer’s block. “Melony,” an old voice murmured. “Lot Seven.”

Selyse stared at her in horror. And then she began to scream.

The flames rose from the pyre and became great licking tongues, shooting out towards the queen, consuming her, turning her into a pyre of her very own. She had time to give Melisandre a last horrified look and make a final hurried shriek before the fire swallowed her completely.

*The night is dark and full of terrors, Your Grace.*

The queen’s knights turned to face the screaming, and then they saw her. Melisandre of Asshai, in all her glory, the flames from the four braziers and the princess’s pyre collecting around her. As one, as a great swirling inferno, gathering like a tide, every flame desperate to escape her grasp.

“My lady?” Ser Axell Florent asked.

Melisandre raised her arms, gathering the fire, watching it spit at the knights and crackle, burning pink and orange and umber. Ser Axell took a step forwards, then another backwards, wary. The flames surged, and his hands went to the hilt of his sword. “Selyse… you…”

He drew his sword and ran at her.

The flames roared into the air, reaching out monstrous red and black tentacles, and caught the hem of Ser Axell’s cloak, then his doublet, and then his beard. Then he, too, started screaming, while the queen’s knights threw down their swords and ran for their lives.

By now, Beren would have fetched her horse from the stables and would be bringing it to the main gate. The Tully men would have heard the commotion in the yard and would be heading down to confront them. But Melisandre intended to be away long before them. She turned and found the princess, still bound to the pyre, covered in soot, but unburned. *The wards held,* Melisandre thought, and—

A sword came slashing out of nowhere. She whirled about, raised her hand, and turned the blade to
molten steel. Ser Davos Seaworth glanced down at the broken sword, then back at her, then at Princess Shireen. He grabbed the girl and pulled her back, away from Melisandre.

Ser Axell was burning behind him, still shrieking in his death throes. *None of you should feel shame to be a part of it, but none of you should feel pride in it either. I advise you to think upon your sins as the sacrifice is made, and to be thankful for the Lord’s glory.*

The Onion Knight did not dare to look away from her. “W-what…?” he stammered, pushing Shireen behind him. “W-who are you?”

*Melisandre of Asshai,* she might have said, *the Shadowbinder, the King’s Red Shadow.* But the name he’d given her suited her best of all. “I’m the red woman,” she told him, and went.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, you guys have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to pull this one out of the bag. Days, weeks, months.

I love Melisandre. More than Davos, to be honest. So getting to write her POV was fantastic. Sorry for the whole fake-out business in chapter 65, but it was necessary to (hopefully) pull this off correctly.

I hope you liked it too.
King of the North

Chapter Summary

We are little more than puppets. Puppets dancing to the tune of kings and queens, and they, in turn, dance to the tune of their gods. We are nothing more than pawns in the great game, as were our mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers before them, and so too our children will dance, playing their parts in the song without end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SANSA

Pod brought her gown of pale grey velvet, trimmed with dark blue lace and trappings of fur, and her cloak with the Stark direwolf running across the back. Underneath she wore two layers of undergarments, a silk shift and a cotton one; on top a necklace of silver beads alternated by moonstones, and the amber brooch Olenna Tyrell had given her. Then Maddy (who was one of Robert’s maids) helped her to dress, while Gretchen shaped her hair with wrinkled hands and tied it into auburn knots.

Brienne of Tarth and Podrick escorted her through the halls. “I spoke to Ser Brynden,” the tall lady knight said, “your brother is with Lord Edmure still, and Lord Robert.” Sansa’s uncle Edmure had arrived over breakfast in the Great Hall, bringing a train of three hundred men from his sieges in the Vale.

“He is quite like your mother,” Littlefinger had confided to her, “but like Lysa too. Headstrong, brash… but he loves his family, yes. It will be good to see him again.”

Sansa wondered if her uncle would believe her if she told him that Littlefinger had pushed Lysa Arryn out of the Moon Door. It seemed best not to mention it; Littlefinger had the loyalty of half of the Vale lords, and more mercenaries than Sansa had ever seen. “Will Lord Royce and Lord Redfort be joining us?” she asked Baelish.

“I hope not,” he replied, “but if they do, it matters little. We will deal with them if we must, today or tomorrow or another time.”

“You said you’d attain them.”

“I said no such thing,” he said with a smirk. “Lord Robert will attain him, and his loyal councillors will agree to their young lord’s request, lest they end up displeasing him. We live in a strange world, don’t you think, where great men scrape and bow and kneel before boy-lords and boy-kings?”
But Sansa had never known any other world. As she followed Brienne down the stairs from the Kingspyre Tower and looked down over the yard she saw hundreds of tents, thousands, even, men who all followed a king who was half a boy. *We are little more than puppets,* she thought, remembering something Tyrion had once told her. *Puppets dancing to the tune of kings and queens, and they, in turn, dance to the tune of their gods. We are nothing more than pawns in the great game, as were our mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers before them, and so too our children will dance, playing their parts in the song without end.*

*I never asked to play,* Sansa thought. *But none of us do.*

The players assembled themselves in the Small Hall, which, naturally, was the largest hall Sansa had ever seen in her life. Six hearths ranged along its length, all burning. There were braziers too, and the windows went floor-to-ceiling, but the room was still mostly dark. Harren the Black had sculpted the hall’s pillars to look like the bones of a great kraken, shrouded in tentacles, but dragonfire had at them, and the blistering and scarred grey columns instead reminded her of a lizard’s scales. *I am in the belly of the beast now,* Sansa thought. But though the room was a dragon’s room, the dragon king was not to be seen.

All the others were there, though. Sansa took a seat between Ser Brynden Tully and Princess Myrcella, who had come out in full support of House Lannister, gowned in crimson with gold-and-garnet rings on her fingers and rubies around her throat. She looked unnervingly like Queen Cersei. And with Littlefinger smiling at her from across the table, half-hidden by the brazier shadow, Sansa felt very unsettled indeed.

“How they love to make us wait,” commented Ser Brynden Tully. “Kings have no sense of timekeeping, I’ve found.”

“Deliberately, I think,” replied Lord Edmure. “He wants to make us anxious. Well, if he wants to play a game with us, I will not play it willingly.”

“Well said, Edmure,” Littlefinger murmured smoothly. “But do you not think that we might all gain something from peaceful co-operation, hmm?”

Edmure glared back. “We have fought for two years to free the Riverlands from the rule of the Iron Throne. That fight will not end today.”

“That fight has ended. Your armies are inside the castle walls. Call it a victory or call it defeat, it makes no matter. House Arryn has bent the knee. House Tully will be expected to follow suit.”

“And who are you to command the authority of House Arryn?”

“Lord Robert’s most loyal supporter. And the king’s vassal,” Littlefinger said, oozing courtesy. “While you are still in cahoots with Stannis, the last I heard.”

“And you have spent the last ten years in bed with House Lannister,” said Edmure. “Call me what you like, Petyr, but don’t deny your own—”

The Blackfish slammed down his hand down on the table. “Will both of you stop arguing like children? I quite enjoyed your little quarrels when you were children, I admit it, but now… it is too much.”

“My apologies,” Littlefinger said contritely, just as the flagstones began to the echo to the sound of new footsteps entering the hall. Lord Baelish rose on ceremony; none of the others did, and Sansa did not either.
Aegon drew up at the table’s head. His eyes were on Sansa all the time, glowing even more purple than usual. He was wearing his crown today, a circlet of reddish gold ornamented with amethyst-eyed dragons. “My lords,” he said, relaxing into his seat. “My ladies. I am glad you consented to this meeting.”

Edric Dayne brought round a flagon of wine and cups to pour into. All of them accepted save for Brynden Blackfish. “Maester Colemon will be on hand to record the proceedings,” the king said, waving for the Eyrie’s chicken-necked maester to enter the room. He serves Littlefinger, not only Lord Robert, Sansa remembered. She might do well to talk to the maester, to find out how Robert’s disposition had improved so suddenly over the past months.

“What is this wine?” Lord Edmure asked suddenly. “It’s not Arbor gold, I can tell, but…”

“A vintage from Selhorys,” King Aegon told him. “Rather sweeter than you might be used to.” Sansa tasted and found that it was true, but she remembered something that Littlefinger had said, back during the parley in Aegon’s tent. I have a friend from Selhorys who owns an acre of vineyards. The maester was his man, and it seemed he’d chosen the wine too. Sansa was starting to wonder whether this council had been the king’s idea after all.

“Well,” said Aegon, “now that we are all here, I see no reason to waste any more time. We’ll start with you, Lord Edmure—”

“A moment, Your Grace,” Littlefinger interjected. “Might we lay down the agreement that we made last night first, for all the table to hear. So that there is no confusion?”

Aegon shrugged. “As you will, my lord.”

Lord Baelish straightened up in his seat. “King Aegon and I have consented to a wedding between Lord Robert and Princess Myrcella, in the interest of creating peace between House Lannister and the lords of the Riverlands.”

“I’m sure it will,” the princess in question said, in an acidic tone that suggested anything but.

For her own part, Sansa was not sure what to say. She had harboured her own suspicions as to Myrcella’s intentions, yes, but she had not been expecting such a bold move to come so soon. “Surely Lord Robert is too young—,” she began.

“Oh, indeed,” said the king. “But we must take all the opportunities we can get these days. Marriages are a certain way of forging an alliance, that cannot be denied.” And his eyes burned into Sansa’s once again, daring her to look away first.

“Even so, the boy is twelve,” said Brynden Blackfish. “A lad of his age should concern himself with running round with his friends, not preparing for a lifetime of marriage.”

“We are at war,” Littlefinger said boredly. “Children must grow up quickly in war, Ser Brynden. How old were you when you squired for your brother Hoster in the War of the Ninepenny Kings? Fourteen? Fifteen?”

“Thirteen,” the Blackfish said, “as you well know, Petyr. All very well, but as your king keeps telling us, this council is here to discuss the end of the war, and the beginning of peace.”

“Peace requires sacrifices, Ser Brynden. And as Lord of the Vale, Robert will be required to set an example—”

“—by marrying a Lannister?” That was Lord Edmure.” You expect that Bronze Yohn Royce and
Lord Redfort will reconcile with their lord of the Eyrie if he weds a Lannister?"

Littlefinger smirked that smirk of his. “Bronze Yohn is welcome to rebel against his liege lord, and against his king. If he does, we will be ready for them.”

Edmure stood. “You do not have the right to marry off my nephew, Baelish!”

“No. But I have the right to marry off my stepson as I see fit. I am Lord Protector of the Vale, and I will protect the Vale.”

“Sers.” Sansa heard her voice cutting through the argument. When they all turned and looked her she was lost for words. “I… I…” she began. “King Aegon is right, nuncle. It is peace we need, and this… diplomatic union will be a step towards that. A wedding between Arryn and Lannister will go a long way towards repairing the rift between the Westerlands and the North.”

Edmure frowned. “Lady Sansa, forgive me. But you were not there when the Boltons and the Freys turned their cloaks at the Red Wedding, and slaughtered your mother and brother! And thousands of other good men too, cut down by traitors!”

Princess Myrcella said, “And what of the time when the Tully men swept down upon Ser Daven Lannister’s wedding, and murdered thousands of men, women and children? Will you ignore the atrocities of one bloody slaughter because you felt you were owed vengeance? Believe me, I never wanted the War of the Five Kings—”

“Robb Stark is dead, my lords.” Littlefinger was standing now. “He died because he broke the marriage pact that would have safeguarded his kingdom. They killed Catelyn because of that broken pact, whom I loved so dearly—”

“Spare me your lies,” said Edmure. “You loved Cat once, anyone could see that, but you have been a Lannister man for twenty years now, and—”

“This isn’t about Tully and Lannister,” said King Aegon. “It’s about Seven Kingdoms, it’s about our children, and our children’s children. Lord Tully, would you want your son to grow up never knowing peace, because his father was too stubborn to come to a compromise. And Ser Brynden, would you want—?”

“Spare me your pleasantries and noble speeches, boy,” the Blackfish barked. “I’m too old for lies, or for this game you play. We are here as your guests, not at your command. In an instant, we can pack up, turn round, and go home.”

“You can’t,” Sansa said quietly, and then more loudly. “You can’t. Because then we’ll have to fight another war, and we’ll all die. King Aegon has a bigger army than you, uncle. We’d fight, but we’d lose, and whatever chance we have for peace… now… well, it would be gone.” It occurred to her that Littlefinger did not need the permission of the Tullys to marry Robert to Myrcella, and if that went through at the king’s behest then he would have both the Vale and the Westerlands on his side. There is another way, she considered, a third way. ‘Say your vows alongside me in Baelor’s sept, my lady, and I will allow your brother to reign as Rickon Stark, King in the North.’ And it seemed Aegon was thinking the same thing. He was opening his mouth to speak, but Sansa got there first. “Shall… shall we talk about something less contentious, mayhaps? The king has a generous offer for you, nuncle.” And an even more generous one for me. All I have to do is become his, and leave what little family I have behind all over again.

“Go on.” Edmure’s voice was terse, hot with resentment at the niece who had taken the side of their
Robb would not keel over so meekly, Sansa thought. Mother would not give up on what she believed in, not like this. And Father would never abandon the North, nor his honour, not for anything.

But he had. When he’d stood on that platform outside Baelor’s Sept and proclaimed King Joffrey as the one true heir to the Iron Throne, he’d done just that. He turned away from what he was, and he lost his head for it.

Ned Dayne came to the table and unrolled one of the great maps of the Riverlands, bringing candles too so that they could make out the lines. Aegon weighed the corner down with his cup.

Lord Baelish leaned over the table and drew a line with his finger. “There is Harrenhal,” he said, “and east of it lie the towns of—”

“You dare invite me to parley, and seek to carve up and steal my lands?” Edmure gulped down his wine and rose to his feet. “Why, Petyr, you—”

“I said no such thing,” Littlefinger said. “Under the king’s decree, you would be Lord Paramount of the Trident… and Warden of the North, since Lord Rickon is too young to hold the position.”

“The Starks have been Wardens of the North for thousands of years,” Sansa said, uncalled. “A Stark must be Warden of the North, regardless of his age.” Like Father, and his father before him. She was oddly determined to ensure that.

“Lord Rickon is twelve,” said Aegon. “The Warden of the North must have reached the age of majority, at least.”

“And she has,” Princess Myrcella said.

The king frowned. “What?”

The Lannister girl shrugged. “Lady Sansa is seventeen, as far as I remember. Whoever said a woman could not be Warden of the North?”

Aegon thought about that for a very long moment. “I will consider it,” he said at last. No doubt that would have something to do with his marriage proposal as well. There is always a price to pay. “As for your demesne, Lord Edmure,” he continued, “it would be as it was at the start of the War of Five Kings, though Harrenhal will be ceded to control of the Vale, along with the lands due north and east of it.” He drew more imaginary lines on his map.

Edmure frowned. “Maidenpool and Saltpans? No. I must have a port on the Trident. I insist upon it. And he would take Harroway too? That is unacceptable.” He crossed his arms, as a small child might.

“We can leave out Harroway,” Littlefinger drawled, “and… hmm, Darry too, I suppose. Its lord is a Frey boy, and we should probably leave that to—”

“Tywin Frey,” Myrcella said. “He was friends with my brother during their campaign in the Riverlands. If it please Your Grace, I would feel much more comfortable having someone familiar close by me.”

She was playing the meek frightened fool, Sansa knew. But the king decided to side with Edmure this time, and gave the castle over to Riverrun’s control. As for Maidenpool, that went to Littlefinger. “When Lord Randyll Tarly rode north at Tywin Lannister’s behest, Lord Mooton married his daughter to Tarly’s heir,” he explained, “thereafter they became Lannister men, and fought at the
battle in Duskendale. That could be a source of some contention.”

Then Saltpans was argued over, and eventually went to Edmure, though Littlefinger and the Arryns retained free passage of the kingsroad and the high road from the Inn at the Crossroads up to the Bloody Gate. Then the lords spent two hours arguing over who would get which towns and mills and septs along their common border. By the time Lord Edmure and Littlefinger were both satisfied, noon had come and gone, and they had moved on to oaths and the like.

“Will you require me to kneel?” asked Lord Edmure, when the terms were explained. There was spite in his voice.

“Only if you want to.” The king shrugged. “Of course, you will need to confirm your fealty in King’s Landing, but that need not happen for some time. Until then you will swear the same oath to me as you swore to Robb Stark, and to Robert Baratheon before him.”

Littlefinger knelt and said the words. Edmure stood and mumbled them. Sansa and Myrcella could have said the words on their brothers’ behalfs had they chosen to do so, but there had been no word from Casterly Rock as yet, and Rickon was out in the yard, and Sansa needed to convince him to believe in her before convincing him to believe in Aegon.

And then it was done.

Princess Myrcella and King Aegon left in some great haste, while Littlefinger invited Edmure and the Blackfish up to his chambers to take a cup of hippocras. But the old knight refused, and made his way over to Sansa’s side instead. “I left your brother and Robert with that knight Ser Harrold,” he told her, “I don’t trust the man one bit, but that’s more than I trust Lyn Corbray. Shall we go and see them?”

Ser Brynden waited until they were crossing the courtyard behind the kitchens before striking up a conversation again. “Edmure will not take kindly to that, you know. My nephew lacks your patience, I fear.”

Sansa nodded. She understood. “Littlefinger should not have provoked him so.”

“Petyr always has been petty like that,” the Blackfish said. “Ever since he was a small child. They grew up together, you know. Petyr was a year older than Edmure, and until a certain age they played together and japed together, before Petyr’s interest moved onto my nieces. Edmure was a little lazy, but he never missed his practise in the tourney yard, while Petyr preferred to watch my brother at his duties and to spend his hours with his nose in a book, or talking with the guardsmen and castle folk. I never knew what they talked about, but they seemed to like him.

“By sixteen the differences between the boys had become apparent; Edmure was loud, rash and lusty, Petyr slight, shrewd and clever. They had grown apart, but kept some sort of friendly rivalry between the pair. That changed when my brother sent Petyr away.”

He might have told Sansa more of the story, but by then they were in the yard. “And there is your brother,” Ser Brynden said, pointing. She did not recognise Rickon at first, trussed up in wool and boiled leather, with plate over the top. As she watched, Rickon ducked and brought his shield up sharply into his foe’s chest, knocking him back. “He fights like that wolf of his,” the old knight said. “But his offense betrays his lack of defense. Get inside that sword, and the boy is vulnerable. He’s a stubborn lad. He’ll break before he bends.”

_He’s a Stark of Winterfell. More than I am. “He can protect himself, he says.” He doesn’t need me. He probably doesn’t even want me._
“Shall we go closer?” asked Ser Brynden.

“No,” Sansa said. “I... I’m fine here. If... if he wants to me, he will come to me.” And she hoped beyond hope that he would. She might have said more, had Ser Lothor Brune not appeared from nowhere, telling her that Littlefinger wanted to sup with her that evening.

She and Ser Brynden decided to part ways then, by some mutual consent; him to the yard proper, she back up the stairs of the tower, to the library that overlooked the training square. From below came the sound of steel slapping against steel and wood. Sansa found a book and a windowseat plumped with pillows, settled down and started to read.

And her thoughts drifted far away...

Her lord husband Willas would have had a fondness for Harrenhal’s dingy library, no doubt. And Tyrion too. It had been a long time since she’d last thought properly of her first husband. She remembered the night when they’d come so close to consummating their marriage, when he’d been down to his smallclothes and she to her shift. She remembered resting her head on his shoulder, and feeling his breath on her neck, and knowing that he lusted after her, even if she felt nothing like that for him. She thought of his stubby hands turning the pages of the book, creasing the corners of the yellowed paper, those mismatched eyes scrutinising the words beneath the jutting shelf of his brow. Then she thought of Willas’s hands, long-fingered and slender as they roamed up her back and down her thighs, brushing back her hair. I had feelings for him, even if I never showed them. Was I afraid of him, or was I afraid of what I had become? Her skin had turned from porcelain to ivory to steel.

The book itself was an insipid tone about maidens and heroes with bold beasts on their shields, the sort that the old Sansa would have loved. But there are no real heroes, and if there are, they never wear shining armour. And that was how she knew that the Hound, Sandor Clegane, had been right all along.

She barely remembered reading the book, but before she knew it night had fallen, and it was time for her to respond to Littlefinger’s summons.

He welcomed her in his solar, up in the Kingspyre Tower. The supper table was set for two, she saw. “Won’t Robert be joining us?” she asked, as the feeling of unease washed over her again.

Lord Petyr said, “Robert is a growing boy, and can be quite voracious when it comes to his food. Impolite, even, and hardly lordlike. Besides, he wanted to stay with your brother.”

Sansa nodded. “They have taken to each other well.”

“I have my doubts. They had a bout; Rickon bruised all of Robert’s ribs and nearly gave him a nosebleed.” She must have blushed with shame, for he said, “Oh, no need to be worried about that, sweetling. The world is a hard place, and it is better that Robert learns that from his friends than from his foes.”

And which are you? she thought.

Lord Baelish’s manservant brought them a platter piled with chunks of white and smoked fish, fat pink prawns, oysters, clams and cockles. “Are you still fond of fish, sweetling? When we were over on the Fingers, you had a hungering for it. Though I daresay it was the only thing over there that you liked.”

“No, I liked... I liked Kella.” She wondered whether Littlefinger’s homely serving wench knew how devious her master really was.
He laughed and reached for the platter. “Remind me, sweetling, what was the first lesson I ever taught you?”

“We’re all liars here,” he said, “and every one of us is better than you.”

“The castle’s repairs are coming along smoothly,” Sansa said. “You’ve put some new stained glass in, haven’t you? Downstairs, in your banqueting hall.”

“I felt it needed a bit of personality. I had some old tapestries brought down from the Eyrie, too.”

“Will you be going back to the Gates of the Moon?”

“I’m not overly disposed to trust the other Lords Declarant. Better that we are out here, than surrounded by sycophants in the heart of the Vale.”

“The lord of the Vale should rule from the Vale,” said Sansa.

“And Harrenhal is part of the Vale, once King Aegon confirms his agreements. Speaking of which, has he asked you to marry him yet?”

“No,” she blurted. “No, he hasn’t.”

Littlefinger quirked an eyebrow.

We’re all liars here… Sansa hesitated. “He… he did mention it.”

“I suppose he made you a very generous offer. I can guess what it is. He will not deliver on it, you know. How do you think his aunt Daenerys will react when she hears that her nephew has given away half her kingdom?”

“It is his right. Aegon and Daenerys rule jointly in King’s Landing,” she reminded him.

“Oh? I sent Ser Lothor to King’s Landing shortly after her arrival, to verify that the queen’s dragons were real. And they are. Perchance you’ve heard of the Field of Fire, when Aegon the Conqueror unleashed three dragons on the Lannisters and the Gardener kings of the south? Daenerys will not take kindly to that, I tell you. We cannot fight against dragons, and neither can Aegon Targaryen, though he might try and convince you differently.

“It is only a matter of time before the pair are at each other’s throats. The Iron Throne was not made for two, and doubtless Varys and the Martells are plotting to topple the Targaryen queen at this very moment. When they do, I would sooner that the North was not caught in the crossfire – as would you, I imagine.”

The servants cleared away the plates and brought out the sweets. Littlefinger refilled the wine-cups.

“Now, sweetling,” he said. “I want you to recall something else that I said to you, quite a while ago. ‘What little peace and order the five kings left us will not long survive the three queens.’”

“Daenerys is one.”

“Oh, no doubt. I’ve had whisperers in the East for ages now. Perhaps it was a risk to assume that she’d hasten to Westeros so quickly, but as I’ve told you, life is all about risks. The other queens…”

“Cersei… and Margaery?” She had been King Tommen’s queen, if only for a short while.

“Only one of them. Cersei, it seems, given that Margaery has given up her crown to marry the Martell prince. You may be wondering whether I broke the alliance of the Lannisters and the Tyrells
just as I built it up. I suppose I did, in that I knew that Cersei and Margaery would break it apart on their own. If anything, the Imp only widened that rift.”

Sansa nodded. Her brain was barely able to make sense of all of this. *We never stop playing.* “You said three queens,” she stated.

“I did. And you are the third. Cersei will burn herself out in time, while Daenerys will burn the Seven Kingdoms to ruin. She’ll be hated from sea to sea, despised by all men, and when that happens…”

“…you’ll be there to help her up.”

“We, Sansa. Aegon can make your brother King in the North, but I can make you its queen. And if I counsel Daenerys to work with you instead of against you…”

*She’ll come to rely on your support in the south, and mine in the north.* Likely there were a thousand other things that Littlefinger had neglected to tell her, but she understood the gist of it. *But why?* she wanted to ask. *Why all that trouble? What do you want?*

But she already knew.

Back in her chambers Podrick Payne had set a fire to crackling, and her bed was piled with cushions and blankets. Sansa pulled off her gown and dressed simply, in a shift of warm cotton and woollen stockings. There was much to be considered, Littlefinger’s words chief among them, but she was too tired, so she put her head down among the pillows and let herself drift away…

Sometime later she woke to the sound of wolves howling. When she turned to light her candle too see what was afoot, she caught Rickon instead, creeping up at her bedside. “You shouldn’t—” she began.

“I heard the wolves too.” His mouth was a worried smile. “They didn’t frighten me,” he added quickly. “Nothing does.”

Though still bleary from sleep, Sansa remembered what the Blackfish had told her, earlier in the day. *Get inside that sword, and the lad is vulnerable.* “It’s snowing,” Rickon added. “Shaggy saw it.”

“Would you like to talk?” she asked him.

For a moment he said nothing, as though doubting whether a man grown was still a man if he climbed up into bed with his sister. Then, deciding that it probably didn’t matter, he tucked himself in beside her under the covers, and let Sansa twine her fingers through his hair.

Chapter End Notes

I think you can make a pretty good case for this chapter being a complete and utter mess, mostly because it was cobbled together from several drafts of variously diverging Sansa chapters. In the end I re-wrote the whole thing, which might have been a waste of time, but I’m happy with how it turned out.

Admittedly, there were a lot of cuts to this chapter, including Edmure’s arrival (which may have seemed a little out-of-the-blue, Sansa’s conversation with Myrcella (pushed back to a later chapter) and another conversation she has with a different character). As
such, I ended up with a chapter that was supposed to portray ‘a day in the life of Sansa Stark’, but instead only ended up with half a day’s worth of actual action, requiring me to plug the gaps with filler (Sansa in the library).

There are times when I wish I could just use line-breaks to jump from one part of the chapter to the next, but that’s inconsistent with my writing style, and I prefer to make everything cohesive across the story. I’ll probably rewrite this at some point (though it may be a long way away) and find something to replace the filler, but for now we’ve got Sansa’s introspective dialogue in the library.

As for what actually happened in this chapter, the bulk of the interesting stuff happens during the not-so-Great Council and during Sansa’s conversation with Littlefinger towards the end. But there’s a lot of telling stuff in her observations too. There wasn’t much on Aegon’s marriage proposal, but since he’ll be sticking around at Harrenhal for a while longer, we’ll get to that in the next Sansa chapter.

On a more general note, we’ve passed the halfway mark for THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. It’s going to be longer than A COAT OF GOLD, with 119-123 chapters compared to ACOG’s 91. At one time the chapter count was getting up towards 130, but I managed to cut a lot of the filler chapters back, so a lot of these upcoming chapters are going to be pretty action-packed. The second half of the story is a lot more exciting than the first, IMO, though admittedly we don’t get those long character development chapters like ‘Sons of Someone Else’ and ‘Lion and Lady’ anymore.

Since we’re halfway, I’m interested to know which parts of the story you guys are enjoying the most, and which parts you’re liking the least. And ratings out of 10 would be good if you don’t have time for long reviews.

And finally, thanks to everyone for reading, and especially to my recent reviewers: VVSIGNOFTHECROSS, aeb, DanyelN, yyzEthan, Slicer37, sibel1988, Harambepride, The Starks send their regards (robertwhite93), Iuvenal, 1thy_truth_is_won0, Petsod19, Tommyginger, Guest, Defiant_furball, manywaters and LordVelaryon.
The Graveyard

Chapter Summary

“You may have power now, but there will come a day when you walk through a graveyard, and realise that it was all for naught.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAENERYS

Dany had never known rain like this. Sudden showers were common over the Dothraki Sea, brief though they were, and both Meereen and the Free Cities had experienced their fair share of stormy weather from time to time, but that rain had been sweet and refreshing, while this was angry and unrestrained. Gales of violent thunder gusted and blew beyond the walls of the queen’s litter, and wet black blobs beat against the roof. She could not help but feel sorry for the four eunuchs carrying her litter, though Strong Belwas seemed to take it all in his stride. “Is all right, little queen,” he said, when he picked up the front poles of the litter and hoisted them over his huge shoulders. “Strong Belwas is not scared of little rain. Strong Belwas will punch the rain, and make it scared of him.”

Would that I could rule the winds and the rains, Dany thought. She would make sure the sun was always high in the sky, and that the rains were welcome but never vengeful, so that the fruits would always be ripe, the cornstalks always tall and proud, the harvests ever bountiful. Or I would make it so that the sun rises in the west and sets in the east; I would make the rivers go dry and the mountains blow in the winds like leaves, in the hope that it would bring Drogo back to me.

It would not, she knew, and there was no point in pretending otherwise. Such were the regrets and woes of a queen.

Somewhere up on Visenya’s Hill, a bell was tolling. It might have been the Great Sept, but there were a dozen smaller septs up here in this district of the city, off the Street of Sisters. Inside the litter, Dany shifted on her cushions and drew back the metal grille a little. Raindrops spattered her pale hands as she gazed outside. Ordinarily the streets would have been filled with smallfolk going about their business, but today they had all retreated into their homes, and only ragged children and scrawny cats remained, splashing through the puddles. Them and the gold-cloaked men of the King’s Landing City Watch, smacking their spears against the cobbled wynds like a drumbeat, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

Still they climbed. Ser Jorah Mormont rode at the front, with Marwyn the Mage at his side, and
Moqorro bundled up in his brown cloak. Dany had not wanted to take any of the red priests on her journey to meet this new High Septon, but this one had persisted. She had allowed him on the condition that he did not criticise the Seven or its priests, but she was unsure that he would keep that promise.

It seemed only prudent that she visit the High Septon (or rather, the not-so-High-Septon-chosen-by-the-sparrows), though it had taken Lord Varys to convince her to take up the offer the sparrows had made. “Though you are their rightful ruler, the Faith exerts a great influence over the common people of the city,” the eunuch said. “Even if you are not their friend, it would be wise not to make them your enemy.”

Dany had seen firsthand what traditions and customs were worth. If nothing else, her time as queen of Meereen had taught her that they were a valuable tool. And these Seven gods had been her Father’s gods, even if Dany had hardly ever prayed to them herself. She had read of how Aegon the Conqueror had taken Oldtown bloodlessly with the help of the High Septon, and of how King Daeron the Second had used the Faith’s preachings against his brother Daemon Blackfyre...

…and of how Maegor the Cruel had spent the better part of his reign putting down the rebellions of the Faith Militant. Indeed, Dany would do well not to make them her enemy.

The litter halted suddenly and Dany felt herself being lowered to earth. She closed the curtains, rose from her cushions and stood up as Ser Jorah opened the door. Dany pulled the hood of her cloak over her head and stepped out into the rain. “Your Grace,” Ser Jorah said breathily, “this way, please.”

Raindrops pelted the stone steps as they climbed. Ordinarily, the brown brothers would be here, shouting sermons, Marwyn told her, but today’s weather had been enough to deter any sane man from coming out to preach.

Which, naturally, left only the insane ones. A barefooted brother with a snowy beard was shouting about incest and abominations as Dany mounted the steps; when he caught sight of her he went pale and began to scream, pointing a trembling finger in her direction all the while. “Should Strong Belwas cut out his tongue, little queen?” asked Strong Belwas.

“Let him speak, Belwas,” replied Dany. “Words alone will not hurt me.” But some small corner of her mind was screaming “You do not want to wake the dragon,” in her brother’s voice, over and over and over.

She wondered what Viserys had thought of these seven gods. Certainly he was old enough to have known them from his youth in King’s Landing, and Dany supposed that he must have been blessed in their light, as she never had. Yet he had never spoken about them, and the more she thought about it, the more she wondered when he had lost his faith in them. Was it when they let our mother die birthing me, when they let Robert Baratheon take King’s Landing? Or was it when Ser Willem Darry died, and they abandoned a fourteen-year old boy and his sister to a life scurrying from city to city, barely a step ahead of the Usurper’s knives, a prince humbled, forced to beg for his very life?

No brown brothers met them on the lower steps, but as they ascended to the broad plaza that surrounded the sept proper seven cohorts of seven knights each streamed out of a postern entrance, and marched down towards them. Ser Jorah Mormont moved to block their way, but Dany stepped around him and stood before the knights instead.

“Your Grace.” The leader inclined his head. “I am Ser Theodan the True, as it please you. Commander of the Warrior’s Sons.”
The Warrior’s Sons did not please Dany in the slightest. They had formed without her consent, but she was powerless to reverse the law Cersei Lannister had enacted on her son’s behalf. “Thank you, Ser Theodan,” the queen said courteously. “Might we trouble you to escort us to the High Septon?”

The Most Devout had not confirmed this sparrow’s appointment, but Dany would be courteous, not proud. *I need the Faith as my ally.*

“His High Holiness is praying.” Ser Theodan was stalwart in barring her passage. “He will not be disturbed.”

“I am the queen,” she reminded him. “The High Septon ought—”

“The High Septon waits upon the gods,” he had the gall to say, “as do you, Your Grace. Here in this sept, we are all equals, serving the Seven in the same way.”

*Through goodwill and prayer, I’m sure.* Dany had forgotten how sickeningly sweet faith could be. She summoned her resolve. “My men and I have travelled through the rain to speak with your High Septon.”

“Many have travelled further to find the light of the gods,” said Ser Theodan.

*They were not queens.* Dany had to fight to keep herself from saying something she would later regret. The words ‘upjumped commoner’ came to mind. Instead she said firmly, “I agreed to see your High Septon. I did not have to do that, but I will see him, and I will do so now. Or never.”

Far away, a finger of lightning descended to earth, and the world flashed black and blue and white. Ser Theodan the True frowned. “Your Grace—,” he said.

Dany heard the sound of sandals sliding and scraping over wet stone. When she looked up a septon was coming down the steps; the throng of Warrior’s Sons parted to let him through. “I make no promises for the High Septon,” he said, without introduction, “His High Holiness is most steadfast in his devotion, and it would not do to turn him away from it. But seven septons of the seven hills of this city would share an audience with you, and Your Grace may find that there is much we can do to help you.”

Dany was hesitant, but she knew full well that any further conversation with Ser Theodan would only escalate into further conflict. *I need the Faith,* she thought again, as Lord Varys had reminded her a thousand times, *and they are extending an open hand to me, even if it seems a poor and meagre one.* “Take me to these seven,” the queen said.

“My men will need to forfeit their weapons,” said the septon.

“My men have not forfeited theirs,” said Ser Jorah Mormont, nodding to the Warrior’s Sons. He had come up behind Dany unnoticed.

“Very true.” The septon nodded to Ser Theobald, who called a command. Almost at once seven times seven men knelt and laid their swords down on the pale steps. Raindrops beaded on the silver blades, shining.

“Put down your sword, ser,” said Dany to Ser Jorah, “and you, Belwas.” She sent for Marwyn the Mage too, and told Ser Jorah to retrieve four of his finest knights, so that she might have seven protectors.

And so that she might be the eighth. The dragon in their midst.

“Do you have a name?” Dany asked the septon as they climbed the stairs, leaving the Warrior’s Sons
and the rest of her escort behind them.

“‘I am Septon Paynald,’” he said, as they ducked through the narrow side door. “And I am only one of seven. I represent the denizens of the Mother’s hill, in the south of the city.”

“I thank you for your work,” Dany said, feeling oddly hollow.

“I have all the thanks I need already,” said Septon Paynald, and did not bother to explain.

The chamber he took her to was dim and austere, all grey stone and flickering torches, with a single chair at the middle of the room. The queen did not sit. *I will see them standing, strong and tall and proud,* she thought, *not bent over like some old woman.* From outside the low arched windows came the *pitter-patter* of the rain. Dany looked to Ser Jorah Mormont, her lips pursed, half—wanting to say something but barely daring. For every word was amplified a thousand times, and mutters became shouts.

And so their whispers stopped and they waited in silence until the sound of footsteps started to echo instead. Seven sets of footsteps, as promised. Dany braced herself for the inevitable assault of courtesies... yet that never came. Instead the seven septons stood in silence and without ceremony. All were clean-shaven, washed and hardly looked impoverished, but they were a humble sight in their homely roughspun robes. “It is customary to kneel before your queen,” said Ser Jorah Mormont.

“Not in the house of the gods,” said one of the septons, with the exact tone of one reading from a book of scripture.

*This has not started well.* “Let us not come to conflict,” said Dany, before they went any further down a road she did not desire to take. “I have come with the best of intentions, my lords—”

“We are not lords,” one of the septons said sternly, “servants of the Seven, septons, sparrows, beggars, call us what you will, Your Grace, but we are not lords.”

“My apologies.” Her blood felt like ice. “I fear that you will give me the same answer that Ser Theodan did, but is the High Septon—?”

She was not wrong. “His High Holiness is praying,” a third septon said tiredly. “He will not be disturbed.”

*This is some game,* Dany knew, *he invites me into his house to share an audience, yet he shuns me at the door and again in his sanctum, and leaves me nothing but spite.* This was supposed to provoke a reaction from her, she was certain. She would not give in to what he wanted. “As you will. Then I will talk with you instead.”

“And why should we talk with you?” the second septon asked. “What will Your Grace give us that we do not already have?”

Dany opened her mouth to speak… and found nothing. She had not come expecting such opposition, hoping that the sparrows would hear her out with good intentions, but in hindsight that had been the ultimate naivety. “Security, I hoped. Security and a mutual alliance of Crown and Faith. The Most Devout did not elect your High Septon.”

“The Most Devout are done for. Half of them perished when the Greyjoys burned Oldtown, and the other half are craven fools, hiding behind the walls of the Starry Sept and the privilege of the Hightowers.”
“Have no illusions, Your Grace,” said another septon. “We are not the Most Devout, nor the Faith. You call us septons, but we are sparrows, and we take no shame from that. We serve the common folk, not the lords of Westeros. And not the Crown either.”

Ser Jorah bristled with anger. “You would speak to your queen with such disrespect?”

“It is nothing,” Dany said. “As they said, I am in the house of the Seven now.”

“Yet there are those among us who do not believe that you worship the Seven,” said the first sparrow. “They say that in Meereen you wed a nobleman by the name of Harzoo—”

“Hizdahr,” Dany corrected. “His name was Hizdahr zo Loraq.”

“Be as it may. This Hizdahr was a Meereenese nobleman who worshipped the harpy of Ghis. And when you wed, it was a Ghiscari ceremony, and the Seven were not present.”

“I did what I had to for the good of my people—”

“Perhaps. But before that you wed a man called Drogo, and swore your vows before the horse gods of the Dothraki.”

“I had no choice, I—”

“We always have a choice.” All seven sparrows had their eyes on her, dull and glaring. “So says the Book of the Stranger. When fertile Layla contemplated taking his own life—”

“I wed Hizdahr zo Loraq to prevent a famine in Meereen,” the queen said firmly. “To stop a siege and the spreading of disease. Starving children were dying in the streets, and mothers smothered babes at the breast rather than see them succumb to the pale mare.”

“They had forsaken the Seven,” one sparrow said with righteous boredom.

“The Seven had forsaken them,” said Dany. “As had their own gods, and Red R’hllor, the Lion of the Night, and all the other gods—”

“There is but one god. With seven aspects. Tell me, Your Grace, when have you ever said your prayers to them?”

“And when have they ever answered yours?”

Then there was silence.

Dany should not have said that, but it was true. Quaithe had told her the strange truths of Asshai, the mystic words of the Lord of Light. Three fires, three mounts, three treasons. The Great Stallion and Mirri Maz Duur’s lamb gods had conspired to murder her son before he could be born, and to bring new life from the ashes of Drogo’s pyre. The dragon has three heads. And in the House of the Undying in Qarth, ancient husks of men with blue lips had shown her the path she must take, and Rhaegar’s tale of a song that must be sung. “He has a song,” he said, “he is the prince that was promised, and his is a song of ice and fire.”

“When Ser Willem Darry was dying,” she told them, “I prayed to the Seven. I prayed that they would let him live. I prayed for the Mother’s mercy and the Warrior’s strength, and for the Stranger to go away. But they could not save him. Can you tell me why? Then they took my brother Viserys from me, and Drogo who was my sun-and-stars, and Rhaego, my son who was never born. Why is that there are seven gods, when only one of them seems to have any power?”
The oldest of the seven sparrows spoke in a voice that was rattled and thin. “Have a care, Daenerys Targaryen. Pride comes before the fall. You have risen and risen, from exiled princess to mother of dragons to queen of Seven Kingdoms, but the Stranger does await you, as he awaits us all. You may have power now, but there will come a day when you walk through a graveyard, and realise that it was all for naught. From the Book of the Stranger, verse twenty-five.”

_I am the blood of the dragon, and I will not be lectured to._ “Has His High Holiness finished praying yet?” she asked.

“No,” came the reply.

“Well, he will not be disturbed. Not by me. Tell him that if he wishes to speak with me, I will be at the Red Keep.” And she swept from the room, out of the dimness of the chamber and into the dimness of the afternoon. Lightning flashed over a distant hill.

“Your Grace!” she heard Ser Jorah calling behind her as they came down the steps. “Your Grace.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “That was not wise.”

“I know,” Dany said. “But I will not be plainly insulted, not to my face.”

_They never insulted you, a voice in her head said, but you were prideful, vicious, mad… and the day will come where you walk through a graveyard, and realise that it was all for naught._

“Shall I prepare your litter to go back to the Red Keep?” asked Ser Jorah.

“No. I want to go somewhere else first. The Dragonpit.” She felt compelled, in some strange way, though she could not say how or why. As the litter made its way back down Visenya’s Hill, the rain outside the window leeched her anger away. _Let them keep their gods. I have dragons._

The Street of Sisters went down one hill and climbed another. The rain never stopped; if anything, it got worse. Strong Belwas was complaining about getting wet by the time they got to the top of Rhaenys’s Hill, and as he opened the door of the litter to let Dany out he looked fit to bawl.

“Let us get inside,” she said, “and quickly.”

The echoes of the rain deepened as they ducked beneath the stone roof. The chamber was vast and dark, and dimly lit by only a few torches, held by Unsullied guards. As they processed between the great black columns, one of them passed a torch into Dany’s hand. The flame danced across her face.

“Careful, Your Grace,” Ser Jorah Mormont said, when they reached the top of the steps before the pit.

Dany gripped the torch more tightly, and pressed her lips together tighter still. _They will not hurt me,_ she wanted to say, _as I would never hurt them._ And so with that thought ringing in her mind, down she descended.

The Dragonpit was far bigger than the cellar beneath the Great Pyramid of Meereen, but far less cavernous. It had no real roof to speak of, that having caved in long ago, after the death of dragons for the first time; instead through the gaps above came the light of the sunset sky. “Viserion,” Dany called softly, “Rhaegal.” The whip dragged through the earth at her side, leaving a snakish trail that the rain started to wash away. She could hear Ser Jorah Mormont’s hob-nailed footsteps on the steps, close behind her. “Khaleesi…” he warned, ever so quietly.

Dany turned… and felt a furnace wind passing over her cheeks, and the white dragon’s jaws opened wide, and hissing turned to growling turned to a great black roar. The air swam, and a reddish haze washed over her face. When she blinked the tears from her eyes Rhaegal had uncoiled himself too,
his green scales counterchanged to Viserion’s cream. The green-and-bronze dragon flapped his broad wings, beating a gusty torrent about her. Ser Jorah said something, but his words were lost to the dull hiss of the wind.

Calm, Dany thought, lowering her whip. Calm, now. She felt an ache of uncertainty in her heart, and remembered something Marwyn had read to her. ‘Aegon the Conqueror never tried to ride Vhagar or Meraxes, just as his sister never dared mount Balerion the Black Dread.’ And as she found herself staring into Rhaegal’s eyes, the words she’d heard in the House of the Undying came back to her. The dragon has three heads.

Who, though? Dany dropped the whip in the sand, and took two small steps forwards. The dragon has three heads, she thought again. I am one of them, but where will I find the other two? Sooty sand crunched beneath the soles of her sandals. For a moment, the world darkened…

…then it came alive again as fire burst from her dragons’ jaws. Rhaegal’s was the reddish-purple colour of spilled wine, Viserion’s rich and golden, like the molten gold Khal Drogo had poured over her brother’s head. Their flames mingled in an orange blaze, and looking into their eyes, she knew, she knew that they were not lighting her way, but barring it. The dragon has three heads, thought Daenerys, backing away, and the mother of dragons has three children, but only one she can truly love. The dragons snarled, shrinking back into the shadow, their fiery maws aglow. For the first time, a pang of fear went through her, sudden and stinging.

Then Viserion’s amber gaze went away from her, and Rhaegal folded his wings and settled down again, his emerald scales aglow. And suddenly there was cold black sand beneath her feet and Ser Jorah’s hand was firm upon her shoulder as he bore her away.

Chapter End Notes

In which Dany makes an enemy of the Faith, dragons hiss at her, and it rains a lot.

But seriously, this chapter is about nothing. She meets some people whose names she doesn’t know, doesn’t talk to the High Sparrow, doesn’t make any sort of alliance with the Faith and doesn’t have any massive realisations about her dragons or anything. It’s a complete waste of time for Dany, which is precisely the meaning of the quote the old nameless septon:

You may have power now, but there will come a day when you walk through a graveyard, and realise that it was all for naught.
Craster’s Keep

Chapter Notes

In memory of Peter Vaughan, who played Maester Aemon on Game of Thrones. And now his watch is ended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JON

Long ago, his father had hosted a feast in a hall like this, where men who came from different worlds broke bread together, and for a time it seemed that all was well.

He remembered Robb blushing like a man-maid as he led Princess Myrcella up to the dais, and Arya flicking soup all over Sansa’s gown. He remembered drunk King Robert dancing with a buxom serving wench, while the queen watched him with a glare ever colder than any Lady Catelyn had given Jon. He remembered his uncle Benjen’s warm embrace, and Ghost snatching a mutton leg from his hand, still a pup at the time.

And he remembered the dwarf, Tyrion Lannister, and what he’d said. All dwarves are bastards in their father’s eyes, and, never forget what you are, bastard. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armour, and it can never be used to hurt you.

He remembered their voices, their words, their smells. Only now the drunkard in the hall was not King Robert but Tormund Giantsbane; and wildlings and Northmen and the Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch had replaced Winterfell’s cooks and grooms and servants and the royal guests.

Tormund was telling a gaggle of young lads the old tale about the bear that had bitten off half his member. “Only half, mind!” the big wildling called. “And what’s left is three times as big as any o’ yours!”

Mance saw Jon listening and leaned across. “You and I both know Tormund’s full o’ shit, but I’m sure you had your own heroes once, Lord Snow.”

Jon nodded. “And learned how false they were.” He thought of Daeron the Young Dragon, and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight. Then he thought of real heroes; of the Old Bear and Qhorin Halfhand and Donal Noye the one-armed smith.

“Let them laugh,” Mance said. “They’ll learn the truth soon. No, what interests me are the greybeards hanging ‘round the fire, clinging onto every word like it’s the gods’ own truth.”
The truth is far worse than that, Jon thought, and some stories can make them forget the fact. Not him, though; never him. *I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls.* He flexed the fingers of his sword hand, closing them around his tankard, and took a sip. The mead was so thick he could almost chew it.

Below the dais, the wildlings had gathered around benches and tables and had crammed themselves into the corners of Craster’s hall. There were a few Northmen and black brothers in places, but most had chosen to remain in their tents for tonight; the breeze outside was brisk but not forceful, the air chilly but not bitingly cold.

It had been five days since their arrival at Craster’s Keep. On the first day they’d found the place ransacked and empty save for the corpses of a few men wrapped up in black cloaks. *Mutineers,* Jon recognised. The wolves had been at them, plainly; arms and legs and chunks of flesh were torn away, though the cold had preserved what remained.

Tormund’s men had come in over five days, with the wildling leader himself on the second, with the greatest part of his host. Jon met him at the eastern gate with half a hundred Sworn Brothers, wildlings and Northmen gathered around him. When Tormund saw him he forced Jon into a massive bear-hug that nearly broke all his ribs. “We thought you were dead, Lord Crow,” he said.

“I thought the same of you,” Jon replied.

Tormund smiled. “Those fuckers will have a hard time killing me.” Then they went inside the longhall for warm beer and hot bread, and Tormund told the story of what had happened at Hardhome. “Mother Mole and her people were all tucked down in the caves,” he said, “and there were dead things up on the beach and dead things in the water, so there was no way to get through without passing them.

“I wanted to turn back when I saw, but by then they were all around us. “Your Ser Alliser decided that if we had come that far, we might as well have gone the whole way,” he said to Jon. “The man was a fool, aye, but of the braver sort. He died retreating when they breached the wall on our way back south.”

*And now his watch is ended,* Jon thought solemnly. His dislike for Ser Alliser was no secret, but he did respect and even admire the man. *He would have made a good Lord Commander, if he had not been so hated.*

“The retreat was even worse. Mist all around us, and we couldn’t see where we were going until it was too late. Found ourselves back where we’d started, and so much worse for wear. Hundreds died that day, if not thousands.” Then he spoke of even darker things, of whispers following them through the trees all the way to Craster’s Keep, of sightings of the Others day in, day out.

Jon rose abruptly from his seat. “I’m going for a walk,” he told Mance, draining his tankard. “Don’t bother sending anyone after me. I’ll come back.” Though it did have a certain attraction; walking out into the snow to never be seen again. *But the Night’s Watch needs me, and the wildlings need me to stop this alliance from falling apart.* Their acquaintance was tempered by the hard times they’d faced together, but even so it was an uneasy alliance, and Jon had no illusions about that.

When the Night’s Watch had stayed at Craster’s Keep on their way north to seek out Mance, the three hundred or so men of Mormont’s Great Ranging had barely managed to fit themselves inside Craster’s perimeter fence. But with tens of thousands following their advance south, that was impossible. Instead they had felled trees from all around the keep and used them to build new defenses in front of their lines as they waited for the last of Tormund Giantsbane’s trudging host to catch up with them.
“Lord Snow.” He turned and saw Val, her honey-blond braid aglow in the light of the setting moon. “You look lonely up here.”

“I’ve heard men to call me a lone wolf,” Jon said. He pointed to the lone wolf at his feet. “Ghost is the only one of his litter with white fur.”

“And you were the only one of your litter with a bastard name,” said Val. “Well, you picked the right wolf, at any rate.” She reached down into one of her cloak pockets and brought out a handful of what looked like ice chunks, only darker. “Tormund’s whisky got all frozen,” she explained, “but we’ve got these now, so that’s alright. Strange, though. They’re freezing cold at first, but they warm you right up.”

Jon took the offering and popped it into his mouth. First came the cold, as promised, then a sudden warming sensation, that grew and grew until it felt like his whole mouth was on fire. “That’s definitely strong,” he said.

“You’ll find none of your southern rubbish up here,” Val promised. She reached down to pet Ghost’s muzzle. “He likes me now. A shame I can’t say the same for his master.”

“I like you more than when we met,” said Jon.

Val opened her mouth in mock surprise. “A compliment from the icy Lord Snow? I must be blessed.”

Jon smiled. “I think I had best get back to my men. I’ll take one of Tormund’s ice cubes, though.”

“Have five. Have ten. Since I’m coming with you anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“My lady?”

Val snorted. “Did you just call me a lady?” Then she glanced to the longhall. “There’s nothing in there that I haven’t seen or heard half a hundred times before. Tormund has a lot of stories, but he exhausted most of them on the trek up from Hardhome. So, I’m coming with you. For what it’s worth, you’re my favourite crow. You or Dolorous Edd.”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to hear that.” He started to head off, but Val called him back. “Where are you going? You have to take my arm, like I’m some southern lady, remember?”

He did as he was bid. “Very good,” she said. “Soon we’ll having you dancing and all.”

“I make a poor dancer, my lady.”

“You must be reasonable. You grew up in a castle, after all, all snug and safe and stupid in the south.”

“And you grew up in a village north of the Wall, raised to hate crows with a passion. Yet here we stand, on the same side.”

“Now there’s a wonder,” Val said. “On the same side, but on the wrong side of the Wall, mind. The sooner we put three hundred feet of ice and snow and old spells between us and Them, the better.”

Jon thought the same. “It’ll only be a few more days,” he said, hoping that it was true. “Then we’ll have all the hassle of getting everyone to their garrisons along the Wall, from Westwatch and the Shadow Tower to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.” Therein lay another problem. With First Builder Othell Yarwyck in an ice cell at Castle Black by Satin’s account, Jon did not know who was overseeing the
maintenance of the Watch’s previously abandoned castles. And feeding them all… For that job he would need someone sufficiently skilled in the duties of stewardship, and at the moment Bowen Marsh’s name was the only one that came to mind.

It was strange to think that he might face fiercer foes at Castle Black than he would out here.

By a campfire just outside the palisade wall, he found his brothers Dolorous Edd, Satin and Black Jack Bulwer playing dice. “Ones again,” Edd complained. “All I ever get is ones. I’ll bet that I get a trio of ones on my next turn.”

“And knowing your luck, they’ll turn out all sixes,” commented Black Jack. “Anyhow, fair’s fair. You have to drink now.”

Edd took the wineskin and took a swig. “If I drink much more my belly’s going to burst and all my guts will come out. Imagine that. Surviving the Fist of the First Men and Hardhome only to drink myself to death. Just my—”

“Just your luck, yes,” said Jon, coming up behind him. The three of them drew up to their feet in an instant, brushing snow from their cloaks and muttering “Lord Commander,” under their breaths.

“I’m sorry, m’lord,” Satin said. “It was my fault, I got us all like this.” His face was flushed ruddy, but not from the cold. “Would you like me to bring you anything? A hot meal, some mulled wine—”

“I wouldn’t distract you from your evening,” said Jon. “But see to it that you are ready to leave at first light. It would not do to delay our departure needlessly.”

“Yes, my lord. Of course, my lord.”

Jon turned to Black Jack Bulwer. “Tell your rangers to keep their wits about them.” In the wake of Ser Alliser’s death he was yet to name a First Ranger, but he trusted Jack. “And to make sure that they have dragonglass on them at all times, swords and arrowheads both, preferably. We’ll speak more in the morning.” Hopefully they would both be more refreshed by then.

“Is that a fair lady I spy beside you, Lord Snow?” When he turned, there was Tall Toregg Giantsbane, Tormund’s son. “Not planning on breaking your vows, are we?”

Val smiled. “You think the crow would turn away from his bloody honour so easily?”

“The crow has blood in his veins, not ice-water.” Toregg laughed in a companionable fashion. “Aye, no doubt he’s come to regret his vows, surrounded by so many lovely women.” As he spoke his gaze was fixed on Val. Best you steal her before my son does, Tormund had said to him. Toregg has an eye on her.

Jon would be lying if he said that the thought of stealing Val had not crossed his mind more than once, but those were always foolish dreams, of the same sort as those where he dreamed his father was alive again and they were all safe back in Winterfell. And in his dreams Val always changed into Ygritte, shedding porcelain beauty for a more rugged sort, and every soft word from her lips became you know nothing, Jon Snow, and that was how he knew that he was dreaming.

“Well,” he said to Toregg, allowing himself a smile, “I will not stand between you and a lovely woman.” And he went. But as he did so, brief regret flooded over him, the memory of what might have been. I am the Bastard of Winterfell, he thought, no mother birthed me and loved me, and I will never have my own sons and daughters with the name Snow.

Slowly Jon went through the camp, his shadow flitting through the glare of firelight and over the pale
shimmering surface of the snow. He passed firepits with Northmen gathered around them singing ‘Alysanne’ and ‘Milady’s Supper’ and ‘Meggett Was A Merry Maid’. Sweet Donnel Hill was playing ‘Six Maids In A Pool’ on a broken-stringed lute. Inside the tents he could hear men and women grunting and moaning at the pleasure. Then he was past the camp and up among the trees, smelling fresh-fallen snow and weirwood sap. He remembered Ygritte again. “Deeds is truer than words,” she said, and drew me beneath her furs in the deepening moonlight. “I don’t want to leave this cave, not ever,” she said, as Gendel’s children watched our kisses from the tunnels below the earth. “You know nothing, Jon Snow,” she said, dying in my arms, as the arrow dripped feathers of blood in her breast, and left only death and tears and the smoke of burning towers.

“I could have been one of them, he knew, sure as sunrise. I could have been hers, and she mine, and we could have spent snow-dappled days and star-kissed nights together, beneath mountains and trees and the eyes of the old gods who have no names. We could have loved together, lived together, died together. All I’d have to do was throw down my cloak and turn my back on all that I knew. I wonder, if I went back, knowing all that would come after I left her behind, knowing how she’d die in my arms with tears in her eyes, would I have been able to leave her?

“I would,” he told himself, as he stood between the two great pines, black by the light of the moon. “I am a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch. I said the words before the old gods, and promised that I would not break them.” Qhorin Halfhand reminded me the same. “We are the watchers on the Wall,” he said, as I thrust Longclaw into his heart.

But the wind had an answer, and it said, you know nothing, Jon Snow.

“Did you love her?”

“I thought you were talking with Toregg,” he said to Val.

“I was,” she replied. “But talking is tiresome work, Lord Snow. And Toregg and I talked all the way up from Hardhome. We’ve exhausted all there is to talk about.”

Jon flexed the fingers of his sword hand. Ghost brushed against his leg. “And what about us?”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t we exhausted all there is to talk about?”

Val shook her head. “About wildlings and crows, yes. But about everything else… I hardly know you, Lord Snow. No one does.” For the longest time she paused. “But she did.” And paused again. “Ygritte. That was her name, wasn’t it?”

Wordlessly, Jon nodded. “It was. She died during the battle for the Wall.”

“Death is ever a cruel thing, but especially where love is concerned.”

“Love is death, too,” said Jon. “Love is the death of duty, Maester Aemon once told me.”

“Perhaps he was right,” she said, “but you don’t believe him, and neither do I. For what is love if not duty, and what is duty if not love?”

Jon considered that awhile. “She’s gone,” he murmured, “she’s dead. I burned her body.”

Val reached out and took his hand softly. “She isn’t gone. Not so long as you remember her name, and her voice, and what she looked like.”
Kissed by fire, Jon thought, and then, liar. He forced himself out of Val’s grasp. “She is,” he said bitterly, “she’s dead, she’s burned, she’s gone. She’s gone forever.” To think anything otherwise was only a child’s folly. The dead were dead, and that was that. Kill the boy. Jon went down the hill, Ghost at his heels.

“The gods, then,” Val called after him, “go to the gods.”

He stopped in his tracks. For a moment he wanted nothing more to shout at her that the gods were a lie too, that they were only stories. But then he remembered that Northmen and wildlings worshipped the same gods. That Ygritte had shared his gods. That they would pray to the same gods when the Others came.

And that had to be worth something, however small.

The tree was out in the wilds beyond the camp, but close enough to the campfires for him to venture there without feeling too isolated. The wind was high here, and the white moon shadowed the black branches against the snow, reaching out in all directions like outstretched fingers.

He knelt.

The weirwood fixed him with its blood-red stare. Dark eyes dripped sap and sadness. The thin red lines along the trunk had the look of veins. “Old gods,” Jon said quietly. “Old gods, show me…” Show me that we will get home safely. Show me that all will be well when we get back to the Wall. Show me my brothers and sisters, happy and safe inside the walls of Winterfell. Show me my father, returned from the dead. Show me Ygritte, kissed by fire. “Show me the truth.”

Up in the twisted branches of the weirwood a raven cawed. “Snow, snow, snow!” then “SNOW, SNOW, SNOW!” But even as their screams grew louder and louder, Jon listened to the whispered sound, to the voice carried by the rustling of leaves, faint and so far away. Promise me, someone was saying, promise me, Ned…

“Promise?” Jon furrowed his brow. What were they promising? He tried to work out if he knew that voice. Promise me, Ned. He had heard it before, more than once—

“SNOW!” the ravens yelled, a thousand voices and one, as they took to the air all at once, scattering red leaves and black twigs into the snow. “SNOW, SNOW, SNOW!”

Aaawhoaaaaaaaaaaaa, came a horn blast from somewhere up on the hill. Jon’s hand went to Longclaw in an instant, and Ghost reared up, red eyes aglow, snarling, both of them awaiting a second horn blast… and a third…

But neither came. “Rangers returning,” Jon said to himself. “Or wildlings.” A single blast could mean either nowadays. Two blasts meant foes, but of the human sort, while three meant the same as it always had. Three meant ‘winter is coming’.

“We’d best go and see who’s arrived,” he told Ghost. “Come on.” And together, black bastard and white wolf, they forced their way through the snow and back up through the camp, towards the longhall.

A group of black brothers, wildlings and Northmen had gathered around the eastern gate, but as Jon drew closer he saw that it was not greetings they were exchanging but angry words, and they had drawn spears and swords and axes. The Weeper? he wondered. The ranger who had killed three of his Sworn Brothers was the only person he could think of who would provoke such an angry reaction. He pushed his way through the press, Ghost at his heels.
It was a long time before he realised what their banners meant. Mostly because he’d never expected to see them again. But Ghost has. He remembered that night up near Hunter’s Hermitage, and what the wolf had seen as he slept. The scar on his chest tingled with cold. Bolton.

“I’ll cut out your fucking heart, bastard!” Asher Forrester shouted, as Donnel Flint and Hother Umber struggled to hold him back. Darrell Locke lunged for his axe. Rickard Ryswell was trying to stop his brother from drawing his sword. Jon found his voice at last. “Move aside,” he said, and then Left-Hand Lew and Leathers were with him, shouting “Step aside! Step aside! Lord Commander, coming through.”

Reluctantly the crowd parted. And there they were, Bastards. “Lord Snow,” said Ramsay Bolton, the Bastard of the Dreadfort. “It is such a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Jon stood guardedly, one hand on Longclaw’s hilt. “Why are you here?” How are you here?

Ramsay gestured to the men around him, in their spotted pink cloaks, all with squashed, cruel faces. “You hate us, I understand that. And you have good reason to. But you need us, my lords. You need every man you can find, wildling or Night’s Watch, Stark or Bolton. Because they are coming. We barely escaped the Others ourselves. It will not be long before they come for you.”

Ghost bared his teeth, a wordless, ragged growl. Mance Rayder and Tormund Giantsbane came up at Jon’s side, all staring at Ramsay. “We will be just fine without you,” Jon began coolly. “Now leave, before anyone gets hurt—”

A horn blew.

Aaaawhoooooo.

One, Jon counted.

The night wind began to wail. Ravens burst from among the black trees. Jon’s words froze on his lips.

Aaaawhoooooooooooooo.

Two. Ramsay frowned. “I did warn you.” Jon let out his breath, misty in the air. Hoarfrost crunched beneath his feet, and Longclaw’s grip was colder than Ramsay Bolton’s smile. The scar in his chest was burning with cold, but it was a dull, strange pain, one that Jon barely realised.

AAAAWHOOOOO000000000000, the horn screamed. In the valley below Craster’s Keep the white winds rose, as figures pale as milkglass wandered among the army of the dead.

And Jon Snow thought, Three.

Chapter End Notes

So, my friends, you just may get a Battle of the Bastards after all.
Naturally, the big moment here is the end of the chapter, but occasionally, you come across something accidentally profound, and this chapter had a lot of those moments, and one quote in particular which I think stood out, one that overtakes the 'Sons of Someone Else' speech as my favourite piece of dialogue from THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. Something very simple:

For what is love if not duty, and what is duty if not love?

And also:

“Deeds is truer than words,” she said, and drew me beneath her furs in the deepening moonlight. “I don’t want to leave this cave, not ever,” she said, as Gendel’s children watched our kisses from the tunnels below the earth. “You know nothing, Jon Snow,” she said, dying in my arms, as the arrow dripped feathers of blood in her breast, and left only death and tears and the smoke of burning towers.

I could have been one of them, he knew, sure as sunrise. I could have been hers, and she mine, and we could have spent snow-dappled days and star-kissed nights together, beneath mountains and trees and the eyes of the old gods who have no names. We could have loved together, lived together, died together. All I’d have to do was throw down my cloak and turn my back on all that I knew. I wonder, if I went back, knowing all that would come after I left her behind, knowing how she’d die in my arms with tears in her eyes, would I have been able to leave her?
We Night Watchmen

Chapter Summary

What were words compared to a sword in your right hand and a shield in your left? What were words compared to the angry rush of the wind through your hair as you ran along crooked battlements or the wet rain against your face as you clung to the moss-slick stones of some ancient keep, searching for secrets?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BRAN

It had been a long and bitter day, and it seemed likely the night would be long and bitter too. The candles on the sill were shivering, and the hearth was blowing out only grey ashes.

“When the Others come marching, you’ll need all the allies you can get, Lord Stark,” said Asha Greyjoy. “With Theon at my side, I can nullify the kingsmoot and Euron’s kingship.” She sipped the mulled wine. “My uncle Rodrik knows the specifics better than I do, so I will have him send you a letter when we get back to Harlaw.” She was too proud by half to plead, but her tone was more desperate than Bran had ever heard it.

“Theon burned Winterfell,” he replied. “Even if I did want to free him, I can’t, not without provoking half of the North. I cannot deny them justice.” His father would have done the same thing, he was certain. But would he have felt so hesitant about it?

Asha’s eyes turned cold. “So you would turn away ten thousand men to fight against the Others? And for what?”

“Justice.”

Her laugh rang hollow. “There’s no justice in this world. Elsewise the Crow’s Eye would never have been king, and my brother would have died cleanly rather than suffering in the dungeons of the Dreadfort.”

And my father might yet live, Bran thought.

“The Others don’t care about justice,” she went on, “But you do. Will it be truly just of you, when men and women are cut down in their thousands and the ironborn who might have defended them
“My bannermen would hate me—”

“And you are their lord, aren’t you? Be a man, not a boy.”

I’m trying. “I’ll have to think about it.”

Asha rose to her feet purposefully. “Men have been saying that to me all my life. Spare me your lies, Lord Stark.” She shook her head disapprovingly. “No need to see me out. I know the way.” With that she was gone.

The raven perched above the door turned its black eyes towards Bran. “Fly, fly, fly!” it screamed at him. “Fly, fly, fly!” Then it unruffled its dusty feathers, soared once around the room, and fled through the window into the night.

“My lord.” Ancient, wrinkly Clydas waited on the threshold of the Lord Commander’s solar. “Will you be wanting your supper here, or in the common hall?”

“I’ll eat with the men.” It would do him some good to be in the company of his friends after a long day of loneliness. “Can you send for Hodor, please?”

The courtyard of Castle Black was all slate and snow, starkly black and white in the light of the moon. It was deserted save for a few archers loosing arrows at the butts, and two dozen wildling boys pelting one another with snowballs in a lichyard of snow soldiers. Bran watched them, a little wistful, but then they were down in the wormways and the sounds of the world above faded.

Alys Karstark was coming the other way up the tunnel, watching him purposefully. “I’ve heard these are your last nights at Castle Black,” she said as they approached. “Are you heading back to Winterfell like everyone seems to think?”

Bran nodded. “I can’t expect Wyman Manderly to be the castellan forever. And there always must be a Stark in Winterfell.”

“Well, you won’t leave us without another feast, will you? I’m still waiting for that dance with Hodor.”

Hodor nodded and said, “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor.”

“You sound even more eager than I do, Hodor.” But when she looked at Bran, her good humour was supplanted by worry. “Are you sure, Bran? Yes, we need a Stark in Winterfell... but all of your bannermen are on the Wall, and not all of them are happy. The North is vast and disparate, Bran, and barely reunited in the wake of Bolton rule. Forgive my bluntness, but the moment you ride through those gates they’ll be flinging shit at each other all over again. And I haven’t even started on the wildlings... Mors Umber’s daughter was carried off by wildlings, you know. And the clans... their history is written in wildling blood, Bran!”

“And the Others will spill all of ours, if they get through. We have to hold the Wall together.”

“Together, Bran, aye. But now I hear you are leaving, and—” She shook her head. “Don’t say it. You’re as stubborn as your half-brother, and I know I’m not going to be able to turn you away from your duty, or whatever you’re calling this. Bloody Starks.” Without another word she was past him, huffing as she climbed through the tunnel.

Bran went the other way. The common hall glowed with orange firelight from three big hearths.
Tables and benches had been crammed in near to bursting, wall to wall. About three hundred men, women and children were gathered. Some wore the sable cloaks of the Night’s Watch, others the tangled brush-and-weave coats of the free folk, a few the chainmail and armour of the knights from White Harbor and beyond. Several kettles of mutton stew hung over the cookfire, filling the air with a rich, meaty odor. Men played with cards and dice over cups of brown mead, while dogs fought for bones under the tables.

“Bran!” Larence Hornwood called out, blessedly close by. “Shove over to make space for Bran,” he told Hal, the Greatjon’s youngest son.

Bran thought there was a lingering look of disapproval in the Umber’s gaze as Hodor set him down opposite Talia Forrester. “If you’re looking for Meera,” she said, “she’s gone to get some rest. She was up all last night and then until sunset.”

“Have you found anything?”

“Nothing more useful than what we already know: ironwood might be able to defend against the Others’ swords.”

“The Others hate iron,” Larence supplied.

Talia said, “Yes, but their blades shatter steel just fine, don’t they? Anyhow, then there’s everything about the Horn of Winter and the barrow kings... nothing’s a certainty, though. It’s all vague stories and legends. Nothing written by maesters, no illustrations or illuminations—”

Larence swallowed down his ale. “I’ve told you, this is a lost cause. What do you need to prove, anyway? We know the Others are real. Bran saw them. Do you think he’s lying to us?”

“No,” she replied, “but even if all the North rides together against the white walkers, it might not be enough.”

Bran groaned. “Not now. I just had Asha Greyjoy asking me about letting her brother go...”

Hal Umber stiffened. “They burned Winterfell, Bran. Your home. They killed Ser Rodrik Cassel, and Cley Cerwyn, and—”

“I know. I was there.” Sometimes, when he closed his eyes at night, he still dreamed of grey ashes, drifting in the wind. And of stone kings, sitting on their grey granite thrones, watching and seeing with their grey granite eyes.

Talia frowned. “I don’t like it any more than any of you... but he might be right. My sister Mira is a handmaiden to Margaery Tyrell, in Highgarden. If I send word to her, she might be able to convince Lord Tyrell, if we have the right evidence. The Tyrells have fifty thousand men, or more.”

Hal laughed. “And you think you’ll convince them to come north with books? Words are wind.”

“Besides, they’d take the better part of a year to get here anyway,” Larence added.

“It’s better than nothing,” she replied.

“Is it?” Hal asked. “We all lost brothers and fathers and friends at the Red Wedding. Thousands of Northmen were murdered, and tens of thousands altogether by the time the War of the Five Kings had run its course. Wildlings are bad enough... but we share the same gods, at least, and we all know what winter means. But Lannisters on the Wall? The Tyrells? Bran, this isn’t a good idea.”
“It isn’t my idea,” Bran said crossly. “We don’t need them... not yet... and every one one of our men is worth ten of theirs, as Lyanna says.”

Lyanna Mormont had been quiet until now, but here she nodded. “I do not like this plan, but I will support it if Lord Stark insists.” With Lady Maege on an errand to Bear Island to raise another three hundred men (who were worth three thousand southerners, as Lyanna would have it), the youngest Mormont daughter was acting as her House’s representative at Castle Black.

“Well, you should still send ravens.” Talia insisted. “The Watch did that when Mance Rayder was marching on the Wall, and Stannis answered their call. He saved them.”

“But we need something which proves the existence of the Others beyond repute if we want them to come north,” Lyanna said. “The hand of a wight, or a head, and some way to keep it from rotting while we show it to the southerners.”

Larence Hornwood’s scowl grew and grew. “People won’t like this, Bran. I don’t like this.”

No, but you’ll have to live with it. And so will the rest of us. He saw no reason not to send the ravens south, though he was loath to voice it. Hal Umber would not take that lightly, and his father the Greatjon even less so. “We don’t have a choice,” he said. “We need all the swords we can get, to face the wars to come.”

And Bran thought, all the swords. Every last one of them. In his mind a mad idea was forming – one of those ideas that was stupid for a certainty – but might well be better than the alternative. What would you do in my place, Father? he wondered. If you sat where I sat... if you still lived...

“I’m going back up,” he said suddenly.

“But you’ve barely been here five minutes,” Larence protested, “and you’ve hardly touched your stew.”

Bran pushed the bowl towards him. “You have it, then. I’m not hungry.” He was, but his more pressing concerns gnawed at him more than the hunger did. Besides, he could always get Clydas or Mully to fetch him something later. He looked around and called for Hodor.

But when they started out of the hall and back up the wormway, Lyanna Mormont’s shrill voice called back to him. “Lord Stark!”

Hodor lowered him so they could speak more easily. “Lyanna.”

“We’re talking properly here,” she said, “you’ll call me ‘my lady’.”

Bran’s cheeks flushed with shame. He could almost hear Sansa lecturing him on courtesy as he lowered his head. “My lady.”

“Better.” Lyanna brushed dust and cobwebs from her cloak. “I know what you’re planning to do, and I don’t like it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you do. I saw that look in your eyes when you realised the truth of it. And you know it’s foolish, but you’re going to do it anyway.”

“How can you know what I’m thinking before I do?”
That made her smile. “I know what people want, Brandon. You want to go back beyond the Wall and leave all of this behind you... but you have a duty here, and a duty to the North.”

“There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.”

“And yet still you linger.”

“Yet still I linger.”

Lyanna frowned. “Don’t just repeat my words. Instead, tell me why you’re still at Castle Black.”

Her boldness never failed to surprise him. Father had called his sister Lyanna stubborn and obstinate, too. Bran wondered if the Mormont girl’s naming had been more than just incidental. “I-I can’t just leave,” he managed to stammer out, “not when the fighting’s about to start. I’ll look like a coward...”

“And? Who cares? You know you’re not a coward, Lord Stark. That’s all that matters. Besides, what are you going to do? Fight them? You’re a cripple, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Asha Greyjoy said the same,” Bran murmured. “You say you know what I want to do. Do you think it’s a good idea?”

Lyanna pursed her lips. “No,” she replied sharply, “but the Mormonts are faithful, and loyal. I have spoken my mind, Lord Stark, but I will not go against you. Bear Island will not break faith with Winterfell. Not today.”

“Um... thank you...” He could think of nothing else to say. By the time he had finished stammering out his courtesies Lyanna had turned on her heel and was heading back into the hall. Bran heard laughter coming faintly from within, and for a moment he was tempted to follow...

...but remembering his duty, he urged Hodor in the other direction and they ascended through the tunnels. Bran’s heart was heavy in his chest, thumping away with an uncomfortable intent.

In the yard, the snowballers had gone away, but drifts continued to climb. The Wall was almost invisible, even with the moonlight shining through the darkness. At the southern gate a few black brothers stood sentry; black cloaks and blacker gloom made them seem as shadowy and foreboding as ravens.

Dark wings, dark words, Northmen were known to say. And more ravens would fly from Clydas’s tower tonight, when Bran’s task was done. As they climbed the ice-slick steps, he mulled over in his mind what he might write. Words had never been his strength; he had been an irritable student to Maester Luwin, he knew... but what were words compared to a sword in your right hand and a shield in your left? What were words compared to the angry rush of the wind through your hair as you ran along crooked battlements or the wet rain against your face as you clung to the moss-slick stones of some ancient keep, searching for secrets?

At the top of the steps Hodor opened the door to the Lord Commander’s chambers. Someone had left a flagon of mulled wine on his table. Bran filled his cup gratefully, and drank without a moment’s regret. This will be a long night, he thought, as he sent Hodor to bring ink and paper, and the Stark seal, imprinted into the night-black wax of Castle Black. “Now go and find Clydas,” he said, when the stableboy burned.

“Hodor,” said Hodor, slamming the door in his wake, his voice dwindling as he went downstairs; “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor...”

Bran stretched his arms and leaned back in his chair. There was so much that needed to be done. And
even then it might all come to naught. He shook away his doubts. But if we get even one reply, even one man to help us on the Wall, it will all be worth it. So he hoped. Hope was all they had.

Clydas arrived huffing and puffing. “I fear you caught me at a bad time, my lord. There are some matters which demand my urgent attention. I humbly beg pardon, but if you could keep it brief…”

“I need ravens,” Bran told him. “I need them to fly to Riverrun and King’s Landing and everywhere in between. I need to send ravens to all the Lords Paramount of the Seven Kingdoms.” Once the words were out of his mouth, he felt far more confident. “I need to know about the rulers of Dorne and the Reach, and how to appeal to their hearts and minds…” This is what it means to be a prince.

“Ravens?” Clydas nodded. “Oh, yes, we have ravens aplenty, my lord. Ready and eager to fly…”

So there was some good news at last. “My lord,” Clydas probed, as Bran had known he would, “might I ask…?”

“We need to appeal to the kings and lords of Westeros. I don’t… I don’t think we can hold the Wall alone.”

Clydas nodded. “Maester Aemon did something similar, back when Mance Rayder was marching our way... though we were fighting wildlings back then. My lord, if I may... southerners like King Stannis can understand a war against men, and the urgency of it. But if we’d spoken of white walkers and wights marching on the Wall... well, that makes a less believable tale. Lord Commander Mormont sent Ser Alliser Thorne south once with a wight’s hand in a glass jar, to present to the Lannisters in King’s Landing. He came home entirely unsuccessful. All he managed to do was bring us Janos Slynt.” The old steward broke out a small grin. “Aye, entirely unsuccessful. But the fact remains... they may not believe your words. After all, words are wind, as they say.”

Clydas had struck upon a raw nerve. “Well,” Bran said, “the letters can be a start. If we have to go further, the Watch has its share of knights and noblemen who can carry the messages to lordly courts in person. And some of my bannermen are better suited to diplomacy than to battle.” He thought of Talia, and wondered how many of the southern lords would act upon the word of a sixteen-year-old-girl. “As for myself, I won’t be at Castle Black much longer. I have to go back to Winterfell. Before the snow gets too bad for us to leave.” That was it. I have committed myself now.

Clydas did not look all that shocked. “How much longer you will be with us, my lord? Do you need me to make preparations?”

Bran glanced out of the window. The snow was piling up below, two or three feet deep in places. “Even if I did, you wouldn’t be able to do anything,” he told the steward. “Save it till the morning.”

Clydas smiled languidly. “I will, my lord. If you’re to be up all night, I’ll have one of the lads bring you some broth and bread. Though I really must get back now.” He did Bran the courtesy of lighting the hearth, and then a couple of candles, which he laid down upon his desk. Then, wishing Bran goodnight, he went out the way he had come.

A sense of pervasive loneliness filled the room as Bran picked up the parchment. Where to start? His uncle Edmure was the lord of Riverrun. And Rickon and Sansa were in the Riverlands, if his dreams could be believed. Bran decided to leave them until last, knowing they would be the hardest to write. I will be awake for hours with those...

The formal ones were the easiest. To Queen Daenerys, the First of Her Name, he wrote, and, to Lord Robert Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie, Warden of the East, and so forth. He wondered if this was how it had been for Father when he was Hand of the King; letters and letters and letters, with little
time for anything else. An hour passed; by then his fingers were aching and his wrists burned from the effort. But the candles had only burned down half an inch or thereabouts. Sighing, he signed the letter Brandon Stark, Lord of Winterfell, Warden of the North, and moved to the next.

To King Tommen, the First of His Name, he started, then stopped himself. He is a Lannister, but he was my friend once. For a long time Bran hesitated, then wrote out his courteous request for the tenth time that night. But something felt wrong: the brief time the prince and princess had spent in Winterfell could not be forgotten. The practise fights he’d shared with Tommen in the yard had seemed as significant as the duels of the twins Ser Arryk and Ser Erryk Cargyle, or Bloodraven and Bittersteel. We had a tally going, he remembered, seventy-one bouts to him and eighty to me.

It was strange what significance the companionship of two eleven-year old boys retained in his mind. If I had the time, I would go to Casterly Rock myself. I could convince him. I know I could. For the first time in years, he wondered after Tommen and Myrcella, half a world away. We were the children of summer. But winter is coming.

He was finishing the letter when the door creaked open and Meera came in, shaking snow from her boots and cloak. “I thought I’d find you in the King’s Tower,” she said. “But gods, Bran, it’s late!”

“I know,” Bran pressed the Stark direwolf seal into the letter for Tommen, then glanced outside his window for the first time in half an hour. The night was black, and turning blacker. “But I still need to write Sansa’s letter.” He rubbed sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Lyanna told me you were writing these,” she said, pointing to the pile of letters.

“Where did you—?”

“In the common hall. I had a few hours’ sleep, but there wasn’t much point in it. So I went and had a horn of ale with Lyanna Mormont. Talia and Larence were there too, but he was drunk and trying to kiss her, so she went storming off to the library.”

Bran smiled weakly. “They seem so...”

“...normal?” Meera’s laugh was bitter. “Oh, to be normal...”

“The gods love their little ironies,” Bran said. Old Nan had used to say that often. “When I was growing up, there were countless stories of knights and heroes, but...” He shook his head.

“Did you want to be a hero once, Bran?”

Bran took a sad, longing glance out into the night. “Once,” he said quietly, “back when I had my legs.”

“Jojen never wanted to be a hero,” Meera said quietly. “He just did what he had to.”

Bran chewed his lip. “I wish I could go back...”

She shook her head. “The past is already written. The ink is dry. Jojen said it was fate... but there’s no such thing as fate, Bran. There is no great plan, no reason why my brother died, no reason for any of it.” She shook her head. “And when they come...” Bran did not have to ask who she meant. “And they will come... it will be us against them. No great prophecies or magic warhorns or flaming swords. There’s nothing in the books but lies and legends, Bran. Dreams and dust.”

A great sigh went through her. Bran wished that he could have helped her, squeezed her hand, or reassured her in some way, but he did nothing. “Save the other letters for the morrow,” Meera said
eventually. “Don’t go exhausting yourself now. You know, you could just get the Watch to make a few copies. They must have a few stewards who aren’t busy...”

“They should be written in my hand,” Bran said.

“Yes, for the high lords,” she agreed, “but the others will settle for copies. If you insist on sending them to every lord in Westeros...”

“I wasn’t.”

“Well, you should. I doubt the Lannisters or the Tyrells are going to give you any response, but their bannermen might make a fuss. Tell Mully; I’m sure he’ll find someone to copy them for you.”

Bran considered that. “It’s a good idea. I’ll—”

“On the morrow.” She eased the pen out from between his ink-stained fingers and set it beside the still-melting candle. “You need your sleep, Lord Brandon.”

“You don’t have to call me ‘lord’,” said Bran. “You’re my... well, you’re my friend. My best friend.”

“Hmm. It so happens you’re my best friend too, Bran.” Meera sounded sad. Bran thought of Jojen, and knew why.

A sharp gust of wind came in through the gap in the window-frame, and the candle snuffed itself out instantly, ugly blobs of wax still trickling slowly down its craggy face.

“Come on,” said Bran, after a lifetime of silence. “We should go to bed. Can you fetch Hodor for me?”

She is no braver than I am, Bran realised as she went out. She’s afraid of what is to come, just as I am... and the Greatjon is too, and the mountain clansmen, and even Lyanna Mormont...

And what about you? Bran thought, as Hodor lifted him onto his back. Are you afraid, Hodor? he wondered, do you know what is coming?

“Hodor,” replied Hodor.

Inside his tower room, he sent Meera and Hodor away and struggled out of his heavy black cloak and tunic. It was no easy task, and it was even harder to force off his top layer of breeches, but he had to do that for himself.

Asha, he recalled suddenly, as he threw the furs over himself. I forgot to tell Asha...

But by now it was midnight, and there was nothing to be done. All he could do was hope she went through with it as he’d planned. We need all the swords, Bran thought, even the swords of traitors. His proposal of sending birds to the south had not angered Lyanna Mormont, but this, this was different.

Perhaps he might have thought differently, given more time. Perhaps the letters were enough. But by then he could feel himself falling into the endless well of sleep, and then being pulled away, away, away, until there was a swift grey wind running over his fur and crackling frost wherever he put his paws down and he knew he was in Summer’s skin.

The night was so thick with darkness and snow that the crows standing sentinel on Castle Black’s towers and ramparts never saw him. Veiled, he slunk among shadows and tall misshapen lumps that
might once have resembled men, but were now formless as the mountains and the forest. Winter was reclaiming her endless territory.

He ducked shadow to shadow, the man-Wall’s towering fastness shielding him from the bite of the cold wind. He heard a sentry’s boots kicking up snow, then growing silent as he slunk past. The cloying smell of fear rose from the man’s soft pale flesh and swirled into the air.

Then the man-Wall was closing above him, and he was alone in the caverns. Something was faintly whispering to him, though he could not make out the words. *Something old,* he knew, *something cold.* Ignoring their persistent hum, he moved onwards...

“Wolf,” he heard a man’s voice whisper, “is that a wolf?” But while the man might have suspected, he never saw him. A short ways further, and then he was outside the door, growling softly at the wood. Inside, a figure shambled from sleeping to waking.

The lock was brittle from cold, and he made barely an effort before the flimsy steel shattered between his jaws, and the door swung slowly open.

“W-wolf,” came a disembodied voice from inside. “Bran’s wolf...”

*Not Bran’s wolf,* he thought, *I am no man’s wolf.* But the broken boy replied sharply, *no, Summer, you are mine...*

Warily, he knelt before the words.

“Bran.” The owner of the voice reeked of fear. “Bran, are you...?”

A low growl rose in the back of his throat, deep and husky. *You follow,* he urged the man, *you come with me.* He turned around, scratching claws against the ice underfoot, and started off towards the world above.

They were coming to the surface now. He remembered where the kraken’s daughter slept, but the newborn glow of torches caught his attention. *Fire,* he thought, and then, *men.*

**AAAWHOOOOOOOOOOOOO.**

That was no wolf’s cry. The horn blast came in like thunder, shaking the world around him, and he felt himself slip, not in the snow but from his skin. *Find Asha,* a boy’s voice shouted desperately, *find Asha, and go with them!* Then he was wrenched away entirely, and Bran awoke abruptly in his own bed, listening as the horn blast was drifting away into nothingness. His limbs were tangled among the bedclothes, his face pale and his hair sweaty.

*I was Summer again,* he reminded himself. *I was with Theon, we were escaping, and then the horn blew...*

He twisted onto his side and glanced out through the gap in the shutters. Behind it, torchlight shone faintly and the wind screamed without mercy. It was a long time before Bran realised there had only been one blast: *rangers returning.*

*But who in their right mind would be returning at this ungodly hour?*

It took an immense effort, but he eventually levered himself over to the windows with the help of the iron bars Cutjack had put in for him. The shutters were caked with frost, but when he forced them open snowflakes skirled across his face, wet and cold as tears. A shiver went through him. Bran could have sworn he felt it in his toes. In that strange, fleeting moment, he had never felt so alive.

The sounds of talking drifted up on the wind, though whatever words they said were drowned out by
the sound of hob-nailed boots on the staircase below. Then Mully and Meera appeared in the
doorway, both breathing hard. “There’s a situation below, my lord,” Mully informed him. “We’re
meeting in the Shieldhall. We’ve had some rangers come back from beyond the Wall.”

Bran stiffened. “Jon? Is it Jon?”

“No,” said Mully, “but they might have news of him. I don’t know yet. They’re with Clydas, getting
checked over. If you’re coming, my lord, it’ll be twenty minutes.”

He nodded. “I’ll be there.”

Mully awkwardly glanced between him and Meera. “Well... I’ll leave you to it...” he said, and went
back down the stairs.

They were alone again. “I... uh... need to get dressed,” Bran stuttered out. “Uh... you should...”

“There are no secrets out beyond the Wall,” Meera murmured in reply. “Nothing I haven’t seen half
a hundred times before. And there’s no way you can change those clothes without Hodor’s help.”

Bran flushed and pressed his lips together, praying silently for the giant stableboy to come blundering
through. This isn’t right; she’s a girl, and...

Meera helped him from the window onto the bed, and together they drew him out of his damp blacks
and into new ones. Bran sat staring miserably at his pale, floppy legs as Meera helped him with his
breeches. They look like eels, he thought sadly, turning his gaze back to her eyes. Hers were dark
greenish-brown, not muddy like swampwater, but the rich, full colour of swaying seaweed. Does she
know? Bran wondered, as he shrugged one arm into his shirt. Does she know how I feel about her?
She was not pretty in the normal sense, but there were more important things than that. Lady Catelyn
had impressed that on Bran from a young age. “If I courted only handsome men, I would never have
married your father.”

But I’m a cripple. If he was whole, he might have told her what he felt. He might even have kissed
her... but how could any woman love a cripple wholeheartedly, when he was not even whole
himself?

Her hands brushed briefly over his, and Bran felt his face turning red. Stop it, he willed himself, stop
it, you are the lord of Winterfell, not some stupid little boy. Their eyes met... and mercifully Hodor
chose that moment to blunder into the room, shoulders heaving, shouting, “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor,”
over and over.

“We’re going back to Winterfell soon, Hodor,” Bran told him. “You can see the First Keep again,
and the godwood, and the great hall.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor mournfully, and this time his tone was a reminder of what they’d lost. Ser
Rodrik, Maester Luwin, Mikken, Septon Chayle...

Down they went. Were it not for the few pricks of orange torchlight carried by the sentries, Castle
Black would have faded invisibly into the night. Even so, it was dark enough for a man to pass
through the yard unnoticed. Or a wolf. As they descended to the armory walk, Bran glanced over
towards where he had last seen Summer, and found the place desolate. He is gone, he thought.
Though the question remained of whether he’d taken the Greyjoys with him...

We need all the swords.

His father might not have done as he had. But surely it was better to take a chance on Asha Greyjoy.
If she brings her men to the Wall as promised, we may well be saved. And if not...

If she had lied to him, or was unsuccessful in her plan, then all Bran could do was face the anger of the Northmen when it came.

Those thoughts retreated to the back of his mind as they approached the Shieldhall. The snow had piled up a few feet outside the tall oaken doors, and half a dozen black brothers were busy shovelling it away.

The arrival of the Northmen had given the Shieldhall new life. It was a break with tradition, but the Northern lords had mounted their shields up beside those of the Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch. Along the top rows were old splinterly shields blazoned with hundreds of devices in cracked and weathered paint: lions and griffins, trout and salmon, seashells and seahorses and lobsters wielding tridents, apples red and green, harpies and manticores, even a couple of dragons here and there. Below them the newly polished shields were hung, reflecting the firelight of two dozen braziers and the faces of those sitting at the benches. Northern shields. The Stark direwolf was there, in grey and white, and Mormont’s bear, and Glover’s mailed fist, the sun of Karhold and the unchained giant of the Last Hearth, Manderly’s merman, Hornwood’s moose, old Lord Locke’s keys, the four horseheads of the Ryswells, each a different colour; others were the arms of Forrester and Woods, Peat and Boggs, Flint and Dustin, the blue moons and pinecones and thistles of the mountain clans Harclay, Liddle and Norrey; more and more...

Beneath rows and rows of shields were not only Northmen but a few of Mance Rayder’s wildling chieftains, and the leaders of the Night’s Watch, Mully chief among them. Clydas sat trembling at his right. Bran’s seat was near the dais, beside a brazier that burned so ruddy and hot it made him sweat beneath his wools. On the tables were a dozen flagons of mulled wine and loaves of still-warm bread from supper. Meera sat at Bran’s table, and Lyanna Mormont too.

More and more came trickling in; the Greatjon and his uncle Mors, Larence and Talia. Some were lords, others captains and knights, a few merely interested faces. After about ten minutes, Mully started banging on a pot to call them to attention, but no one heard him. It took three Watch stewards banging pots in unison and Soren Shieldbreaker climbing onto the table and blowing his warhorn with ear-wrenching shrillness to quieten the hall.

“You probably all heard the horn earlier,” Mully told the hall, “one blast is rangers returning. Four rangers, led by Ulmer of the Kingswood.”

“Is it word from Mance?” a wildling shouted.

“Why didn’t they just send a raven?” Meera muttered across the table.

“They couldn’t,” replied Bran, “it was too—”

“Hush,” said a wildling woman across from them. “The old one’s speaking. I want to hear what he says.”

Clydas’s voice quavered so much that Bran barely understood it. “I... I had it from Ulmer,” he managed to say. “The Watch... all of our men, those who went north with Mance Rayder and those came from Hardhome with Tormund Giantsbane... they are at Craster’s Keep.” He took a breath. “Surrounded by Others on all sides.”

There was a moment’s pause. Then the Shieldhall went mad.

No cacophony of warhorns or banging on pots could calm this. Those who had seats at the benches
jumped to their feet and began to join the deafening calls of all those who were standing. Men were surging forwards through the room, fighting to be heard by those on the dais and those all around them, and there was so much noise that all Bran heard were the fevered shouts and yells of “MARCH!” and “FIGHT!” Tankards were waved, punches were thrown; the walls of the Shieldhall rattled so loudly Bran feared the shields were come tumbling down, and then the bricks of the hall, and then the Wall itself. But the blowing of warhorns had its way with them eventually, and slowly, so slowly, they quietened.

The thumping in Bran’s heart took longer to fade away. He felt dizzy, and too warm, sitting here, so, so warm...

Theo Wull’s booming voice was the first they heard clearly over the tumult. “If the white walkers want a fight of this!” he bellowed, “then a fight they shall have!”

That brought renewed roars to the Shieldhall, a single united cheer of “FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!”

But all the while as Bran sat dizzily under the shouts and calls, all he could think was no, no, no, you’ll die, you’ll all die. He knew they would.

He felt sick to his stomach, his face was wan and pale. Meera was mouthing “Are you alright?” at him across the table. He nodded his head, trying to stay upright, trying so hard, his breath coming thick and laboured, as though he were breathing through treacle...

Stop them, he thought, and wanted to scream it, to everyone and no one, stop them, stop them!

The Greatjon climbed up onto a table, tore down an Umber shield from the wall of the Shieldhall and banged it against the stone, clamouring for attention. “My lords!” he called out. “I have only one thing to say - I will not stand by and idly let them die! If any man in here loves his brothers and his friends, shout for a fight and come with me!”

“No,” Bran rasped out, lost in the din, “no, you...” His breath caught wetly in his throat, choking him; his hands felt clammy. “Bran,” said Meera, “your eyes, they’re...” He could hear someone screaming, far, far away – who? Who are you? — and wolves howling – Summer, where are you? - and icy fingers locked around his throat, and he was screaming, “No, stop, stop them, no, no!”

And all at once the Shieldhall was filled with the beating of black wings, and through the open windows and through the gaps in the timbered rafters came a dozen ravens, a hundred ravens, a thousand ravens, descending, all screaming, “NO! NO! NO!” in some disembodied, high-pitched voice. They swirled through the hall like a great black wind, cawing and shrieking and pecking at everything they could. And for one moment, he could have sworn they were yelling “BRAN!” and “STARK!”

“NO!” a voice yelled, in the instant of silence when the ravens ceased their calling.

It was a long time before Bran realised that it was his own. It was even longer before he summoned the strength to speak. “No,” he said haltingly, “we can’t. We can’t just...” His fingers opened and closed, slippery with sweat. “You can’t.” Every eye in the Shieldhall were on him. “If you go out there, you’ll die. I know you will. All of you will die.”

“Die!” shrieked a raven. “Die, die, die.” Then the others took up the cawing, from the tables and rafters, from high and low, left and right, “DIE! DIE! DIE!”

The world has gone mad, Bran thought, his head lolling back towards the brazier flame. Then his fingers lost their grip on the table, and he tumbled backwards over the bench towards the flagstones, falling, falling, falling...
I say as a general rule that my prose tends to get better with every passing chapter, but I think this is the first time where I really noticed it. Possibly because of the sheer amount of time I spent on this one. I wrote around 15000 words for this chapter (various versions of the storyline), and ended up cutting down to ~6400.

Even so, it's only half the story I meant to tell in this Bran chapter, so I'm saving the other half for his next POV, which may rival Myrcella III as the longest chapter in the whole story.
“Only the ladder is real. The climb is all there is.”

MYRCELLA

She broke her fast on morning bread with blackberry preserves, two rashers of back bacon, an egg boiled soft and half a honeycomb. Tyg brought the letter while she ate. His hands were gloved in moleskin and the bandages on his chest were gone. “Are you healed now?” Myrcella asked him.

“Mostly,” he replied. “Maester Modwyn says that I should be careful about straining it, but he’s not about to keep me from my longbow. And I’m not about to stay inside on a day like this.” Tyg went to the window and threw back the shutters. The breeze rushed inside to kiss their faces. Snowflakes weathered the stone floor.

“I can only echo the maester, Tygett. I would hate to see you hurt all over again.”

His cheeks turned pink. “Thank you, my lady. For coming to see me when I was ill. I… you were a great help.”

“You’re very sweet,” she teased. “It was nothing, though. Anyhow, you’re done here, Tyg. I’ll look for you in the yard.”

He blushed, bowed and went out, stamping snow across the flagstones. Myrcella picked up the letter, broke the red wax seal, and read:

Myrcella,

Don’t worry. I know what my duties are as a king, and I don’t intend to give them up. It is looking more and more likely that we will defeat Lord Stannis, especially with the snow coming across the mountains.

Eleyna has been most helpful recently. I’m not sure she’d make a good queen, but I do enjoy her company, and it’s nice to have someone to share my troubles with, even if it is only as friends.
Mother is constantly fretting about you and uncle Jaime, so you might do well to send her a letter explaining everything to soothe her worries.

Stay safe,

Tommen

It was no more and no less than she had expected. The news was encouraging, though it seemed likely she’d have to make the journey back to Casterly Rock at some point to stop Mother and Ser Kevan from interfering. Yes, a good start to the day, she mused.

Myrcella finished her breakfast, found her fur cloak, and left her chambers. Servants climbed the Kingspyre Tower as she made her way down, carrying wine flagons and basins of water for somebody’s bath. Lord Baelish’s construction was going well, both outside Harrenhal and within. New tapestries had been put up on the walls, and oil lamps lit once-dark corridors. Page-boys had laid down fresh rushes and herbs, and the kitchen smelled of baking bread. Mockingbird and falcon shields adorned the walls of the Small Hall behind the kitchens, where the better part of the castle garrison was at breakfast. In the yard outside, men of the sellsword companies cooked their food over campfires. One of the companies had a pig cooking over a spit. Boys with shovels moved to clear the snow over to the walls while others spread grit to make roadways.

Myrcella made her way through to the outer yard, finding it almost deserted. The flakes fell from above in slow, gentle flurries. Last night’s snowfall had buried yesterday’s maze of snowcastles and snow soldiers, so she had to start anew. She reckoned she had about an hour of blissful silence to work in before the yard started to get busy. An hour before Robert Arryn joined her.

“It looks all wrong,” he said, wrinkling his nose at her when he arrived at last, trussed up in his hat, coat and gloves.

Myrcella sighed. “I suppose it’s a matter of perception, my lord.”

Robert screwed his nose up as if he knew what that meant. “No,” he deliberated at last, “it’s all wrong. It just looks like a bunch of stupid lumps. And it’s boring too.”

“My lord knows best,” she said hollowly. “Perhaps you’d like to make your own castle and show me how it’s done.”

“No. I’ll help you with yours.” By ‘helping’ he meant knocking half of it down and building it all up into some crude misshapen mound. Myrcella had to resist the urge to slap the lord of the Eyrie in the face. She could not remember ever hating someone so much since Joffrey’s death. She was almost starting to hate Tommen too, for his role in the whole bloody thing. Damn him to seven hells. As she watched Robert demolish her castle, humming to himself all the while, she could not help but wonder how easy it would be to wrap her hands around his scrawny neck and strangle him to death. At least then I would never have to marry him. For some reason that made her laugh hysterically.

Robert gave her a confused look. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing, my lord,” she said, impassive again. “I found something amusing, that’s all.”

“Was it a joke? Tell me.”
“It’s… nothing.”

“Nothing isn’t funny. I hate your jokes.”

_I hate you_, she wanted to say, but she doubted it would be worth the effort of dealing with Robert’s rage, so she said nothing. None of this was worth the effort at all. Even if by some miracle I do not end up murdering him, it will take me weeks and months to win him over, and just as long to get an army we can use to fight Stannis. By then the fighting will be over, for better or for worse.

Robert had finished ‘improving’ half of her towers now. “It looks beautiful, my lord,” Myrcella lied. _It looks like a hill made of shit._ “Truly, if the Eyrie is half so beautiful as that, I fear I shall faint at the sight of it.”

“It isn’t the Eyrie, _duh._” Robert stuck his tongue out at her. “It’s Harrenhal.” And to be fair, it was a rather reasonable depiction of a half-melted ruin. Though not even dragons could make the castle look like such an ugly pile of powdered lumps.

“Oh, of course, my lord,” she said. “I didn’t think—”

“Sansa!” Robert all but shoved her aside in his haste to reach his cousin. Myrcella watched patiently as the Stark girl embraced the scrappy boy, mussing up his hair. For the briefest moment, she thought of Tommen. _Is it snowing in Casterly Rock?_ she wondered.

Rickon had joined his sister for the day, though the boy’s wolf was not here. He’d been locked inside the godswood, after he’d taken a chunk out of a stableboy’s knee and had threatened to do the same to Ser Lyn Corbray. But while the wolf itself was away, Rickon’s wolfish, guarded look was not. His eyes hardened when he saw her, and his mouth frowned. The air grew tense… then changed when a snowball hit Rickon square in the chest, thrown from Robert’s hand.

All at once the two boys were reduced to snowball fighting, then to playfighting, arms and legs and all, scrabbling among the snowcastles. When Myrcella looked away Rickon had Robert on the ground and was mashing snow into his face.

“They’re just boys,” Sansa said. “Even if we forget that sometimes.” She went to her knees in the snow and made to fashion a snowball of her own. “I think snow makes children of us all. Even us…”

“Yes.” Myrcella packed more and more snow against one of her towers. “But we can’t be children for real, you know that.

“It’s nice to pretend sometimes, though.”

“I don’t see the point in pretending. We’re only lying to ourselves, and to each other.”

Sansa put her snowball down. “I’ve been thinking… neither of us were ever the eldest. That was Robb for me… and Joffrey for you. When… when did we…”

“When did we decide that we would have to take responsibility for our younger siblings?” She shrugged. “Joffrey was never going to take responsibility for us. I suppose it was when we were about three or four. I remember there was a time when we went to Casterly Rock, and all Joff did was scream that he wanted to be back in King’s Landing. He was making Tommen frightened, so I had to do something about it.”

“What did you do?”
“Uncle Tyrion took me to the library and found a book of stories. I read them to Tommen. A lullaby of sorts, I suppose, while Mother was dealing with Joffrey. He said… he said… ‘Cella, are you like Mama now?’ And I suppose that I was. It didn’t mean anything back then, but… things randomly become significant… when you’re older.”

“Robb was never like Joffrey,” Sansa said. “We adored him, all of us. He would make time to show Bran how to do archery, but there were times when he sat and sewed with me. I used to tie flowers in his hair. He always looked so stupid.” She snorted. “I never cared for them as he did. Until… well, I suppose it wasn’t until after the wedding, when I left King’s Landing. I knew that I had to get back to them, somehow. And here I am.”

*I should have stayed in Casterly Rock,* Myrcella thought, *I should have stayed with Tommen.* Because it was hard to be apart from him, but even harder knowing that she’d let them be parted.

“You know… Robert… he’s like a brother too.” Sansa’s words were firmer now, and more meaningful. “He’s never had a sibling like you and I. But I love him almost as much as I love Rickon. And if he’s hurt…”

“I understand.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.” She didn’t know why it came pouring out then, but it did. “Some scheming Tyrell bitch hurt my brother. She will never hurt him again.”

The morning wore on uninterrupted after that. In the Small Hall behind the kitchens they supped on sausage-and-bean stew, and thick chunks of barley bread lathered with butter. Myrcella was quite content to eat alone, and stayed alone until Ser Balon Swann came to her with words from the king. “You are wanted in the yard, my lady,” he said.

She could have refused him easily, but by then the prospect of building up more snowcastles had lost its splendour, and some strange curiosity got the better of her. “To the yard, then,” she said.

Harrenhal had hundreds of yards; in this one they had set up quintains and wooden dummies and archery targets. It was too cold and too snowy to practise jousting at the quintain, but Ser Lyn Corbray was thrashing one of the dummies with his sword, and across the yard Tyg stood facing the target with a bow in his hand and a quiver slung over his shoulder. Myrcella halted on the balcony to watch as he pulled the string back to his chin, resolute, his arm muscles taut and his eyes unwavering in their concentration. A breeze picked up, tousling her hair, but it did not bother Tyg.

He loosed the arrow.

It made a solid *thunk* as it met the straw target almost dead-centre, wavering a little where it landed. “Almost perfect,” Myrcella called down from the balcony.

“Almost isn’t good enough.” He looked up at her, half-smiling. “The heart is a very small target, my lady.”

“Keep trying, Tygett. You may soon find it.”

She would have said more, but then she saw Aegon Targaryen coming down the steps of the nearest tower, and her conversation was at an end. “My lady,” he greeted her, with the hint of a smile. “I hope I did not distract you from anything too important.”

“Only my husband-to-be. I warn you, once I am Lady Arryn, I serve him first—”
“Oh, spare me. We both know that you have no such intentions. Not of serving him, and certainly not of serving me.”

“You are very observant.”

“Hardly,” he said. “But you’re not someone who likes being told what to do.”

“And neither are you,” Myrcella returned. “You’re a king, after all.”

Aegon’s pleasure was apparent in his bright eyes. “Yes, but unlike you, I learned humility once.” He waved a hand to his Kingsguard men. “Leave us. If Princess Myrcella means to murder me, I hope that she would have the sense to do it secretly.”

“Indeed.” Myrcella dismissed Ser Balon, and they were alone. “Is there something you wanted to speak with me about, or are we just making small talk?”

Aegon made no attempt to hide his frown. “You are not cooperating,” he accused. “I told you to send a letter to your brother, which you did, but then you sent another telling him to ignore the requests for his surrender.”

_Only Littlefinger and I knew about that._ She scowled. “I will not deny it.”

“Lord Baelish told me, as you’ve probably worked out by now. But even if he hadn’t, I would have known. You’re too prideful to even consider the prospect of surrender.”

“And why would I?” she challenged. “You threaten me with your vast army and your aunt’s dragons, but here you sit at Harrenhal, biding your time and doing nothing.”

“I am building alliances,” he told her.

“You’ve signed your treaties; the Tullys and Lord Robert said some words. Why not go back to King’s Landing? I doubt you’re staying here purely to see my wedding.”

Aegon offered her his arm. “Shall we talk somewhere less cold?” The snow was drifting down in slow, airy circles. He led her inside the tower and down the first flight of stairs. “On the contrary,” he said as they descended, “I am staying for your wedding. It is of great interest to me.”

“Is it?” She smiled. “Do you mean the wedding, or just Sansa Stark?”

“My lady—?”

“You aren’t the only one who Lord Baelish shares secrets with.” _Which means he is working behind our back to pit us both against one another._ “I don’t blame you. But you’re a fool if you think she’ll accept your offer.”

Aegon scowled. “Explain.”

“She’s just reunited with her brother for the first time in years. Do you honestly think she’ll just leave him behind?”

“The boy would travel to King’s Landing—”

“You’re even more of a fool if you think Sansa Stark will lead her brother willingly into the viper’s nest.”

“And what about you, my lady? Would you lead your brother into the viper’s nest?”
I already have. And she had no regrets about doing so. That is how the great game is played. There are pieces, and then there are players. “A crown does not give you power,” she said, and moved to head past him.

But Aegon grabbed her arm and forced her eyes to meet his own, flecked with purple madness. “Perhaps it doesn’t. But you are my captive, all the same, and you will do as you are told.” He all but pushed her down the stairs. “This way.”

Down they descended. They passed three landings, the darkness growing and growing as they went deeper. At the fourth landing, Aegon picked up a torch, turned around, and set off down a passageway. Myrcella hesitated a moment before following. When she’d been hiding in the tunnels under King’s Landing following Trystane’s death, she’d found dozens of skeletons, and some had died in unnatural ways. He could kill me down here and no one would know for days, she thought. But as they passed from sheer blackness into dim greyness, she realised where they were. “You’re taking me to the cells,” she said. “To see Ser Jaime.”

Aegon stopped, and squinted at her through the faint torchlight. “You know?”

Myrcella shrugged, whether she should have kept that knowledge a secret. “I always visit the dungeons when I’m someone’s guest,” she said, “they might have things down there that they don’t want me to see.” She could not help but smile. “Were you hoping to surprise me, Your Grace?”

He looked like he wanted to hit her. But he had the good sense to relent, at least. “Since you know about Ser Jaime, we can talk freely.” His smile unnerved her. “Most of my men would call him the Kingslayer. And rightly so. He killed his king, and that is an offense punishable by—”

“—Death. You needn’t look so smug when you say it, Your Grace. But if you were going to kill my uncle, you would have done it already. So, what do you really want from him?”

“Not from him. From you. I want your cooperation.”

“And I want you to set him free,” she said. “If you do that, I’ll send word to my brother and tell him to bend the knee.” The strangest thing was that she actually meant it.

Aegon shook his head. “We both know that is impossible.”

“Then make it possible. You are a king, so you say.”

“If my aunt hears that I had Jaime Lannister captive and let him go—”

“If your aunt hears that you secured the loyalty of the Westerlands, she can hardly be displeased, can she?”

The king furrowed his brow. “She—”

“Besides, why are you worrying so much about what your aunt thinks?” Myrcella asked. “You’ve hardly made a secret of the fact that you’re going to try and overthrow her.”

He shook his head. “That’s treasonous.”

“Of course it is. But the Iron Throne was not made to be shared.” She stepped close to him and said, “The pair of you will fight over it like dogs until you’ve torn each other to shreds.” And then the lions will come and finish off the victor. She turned away, still smiling. “I suppose you intend to be the last dog standing?”
“I am the king,” Aegon affirmed.

And any man who must say ‘I am the king’ is no true king. “Are we going to see Ser Jaime now?” she asked.

“If you want.” Aegon made it sound as though she had a choice.

The way to the cells was long and winding. Each tunnel branched into a hundred more, and it was a wonder that they did not get lost in this labyrinth. But eventually the king’s torch cast its glare over countless cells and countless prisoners within, and eventually they came to one that Myrcella recognised.

“Out of kindness I will leave you alone to talk,” the king said as they approached. “But I expect you to do something for me in return.”

It all made sense now. “You want me to convince him to carry your offer back to Casterly Rock.” She nodded. “A wise idea on principle, but what makes you think that Jaime will be any more likely to agree to it than I have been?”

“Ser Jaime has no motive to see the fighting continue,” said Aegon. “The very fact that he escorted Lady Sansa – his enemy – across the Seven Kingdoms to return her to her family shows me that he has no desire to continue this war. Whereas I am not so sure about you…”

“I have no desire for war. I want to end it as much as you do.” With my brother on the Iron Throne.

Aegon gave her a dubious, disbelieving look, then stepped backwards and left her there in front of Ser Jaime’s cell. She waited for him to go before stepping forwards, close to the bars. “Jaime,” she said quietly, “Ser Jaime…”

Something stirred weakly in a corner, rising from its pile of rags, and green eyes blinked at her through the choking darkness. It was a long time before a voice joined them. “M… Myrcella? Is that…”

“Yes,” she replied, squatting down in the gloom. “It is.”

In the darkness, she could not tell whether the shuffling sound she heard was him moving or just a rat scuttling across the flagstones. “You shouldn’t be down here again,” he said.

“Neither should you.”


“Bran,” she realised, and wondered how she had failed to work that out. She remembered a sweet little lad of about twelve, who loved to climb the highest trees whenever he was not fighting her brother with wooden swords. He never fell. A boy who might have held affections for her that he was too nervous to voice. “I never fell,” he said, confident in his foolishness. “Don’t be scared, princess, I never fall.”

“Of course you did.” Myrcella felt nothing. “He… he saw you, didn’t he?”

Ser Jaime’s breath misted as he sighed. “You should go, Myrcella.”

But she was undeterred. “You pushed him because he saw you and Mother with each other. You pushed him to protect us.” And she knew that she ought to feel something at that, shock or sadness.
But she felt nothing. Jaime stared at her, unblinking. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said eventually. As though the lie would cover his tracks. Myrcella reached through the bars, finding his hand. “I know,” she said, trying to meet his eyes. “I know the truth.”

“No, you don’t. You heard a rumour, that’s all.”

There was nothing to be lost. “Are you my father?” she asked, as she always did.

“No,” he replied, as he always did, and looked away, unable to face his lie.

For the longest time they sat, trying to face each other in the dimness of the cell. Then Jaime looked away and said, “why are you here?”

“Aegon sent me,” Myrcella admitted. “He wants—”

“I know what he wants. He wants me dead. And wouldn’t that be ironic?”

“Well,” Myrcella said, “you’re something to me. Whether you’re my father or my uncle.”

“You know…” Jaime’s breath was a ragged rasp. “Sometimes it’s better not to pry in places where you’re not wanted. Ned Stark learned that, to his peril.” He made a noise that resembled a laugh. “And Jon Arryn. I wonder if the little Arryn boy wants to kill me too.”

*If he does, I’ll kill him too. And painfully. “I don’t like seeing you like this,” Myrcella said.*

“I don’t either. The executioner’s block would be a welcome change in scenery. In Riverrun, the dungeons were underneath the Red Fork, so if you put your ear against the wall, you could hear the river. Here, it’s just blackness.” He chuckled at his own joke. “Sometimes I wonder if this is what the seven Hells are like?”

“A prison?”

“Not necessarily a prison. Just knowing that freedom is on the other side of a locked door.” He chewed his lip. “Strange, isn’t it, how imprisonment makes men into philosophers. I’ve never spent so long debating the meaning of life. And it makes you wonder… was the Mad King mad before he went into Duskendale, or only afterwards?” He was talking to himself more than he was to her. “If the king had died that day, and Prince Rhaegar had become king, with my father as Hand. Did Ser Barristan save the Seven Kingdoms when he saved Aerys, or did he doom them?” His eyes had gone a funny green colour, the way Tommen’s did when he was daydreaming. “I hear him
whispering to me as I sleep. “Burn them all,” he says, “burn them all, burn them all, burn them all…” Would it have been easier to let them burn. All those people who hated me, who whispered ‘Kingslayer’ behind my back for years thereafter?

Myrcella let his words trail off into silence. Then she said, “If Aegon freed you, here, today, where would you go?”

Jaime looked up as though noticing her for the first time. He shrugged. “Casterly Rock? King’s Landing? The seventh Hell? I’m sure they have a room for me there.”

Myrcella considered that. “Aegon has made me an offer.”

“Oh?” He raised an eyebrow.

She told him.

After, Myrcella found herself walking back among the darkened cells, not knowing how long had passed since she’d gone down there. Jaime had been more amenable to the idea than she would have liked. Part of her had been expecting him to refuse, but his sanity had prevailed. “There’s not much that could be worse than this,” he’d said. Myrcella was inclined to agree. It did hurt her to see Jaime like this, much as she was loath to admit it.

“You.” The voice came from her left. “Girl.” It was rough and grating, brutal but oddly familiar. “Lannister girl.”


“Call me Sandor,” he rasped. The stink of him was old boots and stale ale and rough leather. “What in seven hells are you doing down here?”

Myrcella had half a mind to ignore the question and push right past him, but something told her that she would never have the opportunity to speak with the Hound again. “I might ask the same of you,” she replied.

“Seven fucking hells,” he rasped. “You look like her. Almost the exact same. She and the Kingslayer came riding through our village one day, when I was about five or six. Before all this happened to my face.” He waved a hand at his scars. “My father said we had to bend the knee and look at the floor, but I sneaked a look at Cersei. She was all fair and pretty, yes, but when she curled her lip in disgust, even I knew that her angel’s face hid a snake’s heart.” He spat. “Fuck her. Fuck you too, girl.”

Myrcella knew that she could not hold back. “No, Hound,” she replied. “Fuck you.”

For the barest moment, Sandor Clegane looked surprised. Then he began to laugh, a dry, rasping thing that was akin to choking. Did Joffrey make the same noise when he was dying? she wondered. “You shouldn’t be here,” the Hound said. “Cersei would have a fit if she knew you were talking with me.”

“No. She’d kill you. You fled from the Battle of the Blackwater—”

“—and abandoned her precious Joff.” His lips curled. “Fuck the king, I said. The fucking fire, girl. You should have seen it. Twenty, thirty feet here, all green and swirly. The smell of river sewage mixed with burning flesh. When he burns, a man’s skin goes like pork crackling, you know. It hurts your eyes to see it, hurts your mouth to breath the smoke.” He brought his face close to the bars. “Scared?”
Myrcella considered that. She doubted that she could win Clegane to her side, but it was surely worth a try. “You’d have to be mad not to be,” she admitted.

Sandor Clegane licked his lips. “Aye, girl. Might be you had some sense after all. But if the Lannisters tell me to go and fight in a fucking inferno, the Lannisters can all—”

“—go fuck themselves. Yes, you’ve already said.” She paused. “Sometimes I feel the same way too. We’re not good people. Not me, and not you.”

“You can say that again,” the Hound muttered. He seemed to really see her for the first time. “We’re not so different, you and I. We both hate our brothers.”

“Hated,” Myrcella corrected. “I was there to see Gregor’s death, you should know—”

“Hate,” the Hound said. “We hate our brothers. Gregor’s death isn’t going to bring an end to that… and I wasn’t talking about Joffrey.” He grinned, showing yellow, broken teeth. “Doesn’t it just infuriate you, little lion? Knowing that you’d make a far better queen than either of your brothers, and knowing there’s nothing you can do about it. Don’t tell me that you’re here in this cesspit out of your own choice. He sent you.”

“Tommen—”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never wished for him to die.” His face was pressed up against the bars now. “That you’ve never wanted to hurt him. I’ve seen you do it, girl. We both know what Joff did to him that night. We both know that you know.”

Myrcella shook her head. “I don’t understand—”

The Hound spat. “You Lannisters, always lying. An angel’s face hiding a snake’s heart. I wasn’t just talking about your mother. You must picture it. You sitting on the Iron Throne with a golden crown on your head, and all of them grovelling on their knees. You want power, girl. And sometimes it comes to you that all you have to do is kill a boy, and you can have that.”

Myrcella steeled herself. Then she loosened her grip on the torch, and threw it inside the cage. The Hound snarled, scrambling back as the leg of his breeches caught fire, then forwards in an attempt to beat out the flames. She did not care whether he burned or not. The echoes of his curses faded as she went down the corridor towards the steps that led up into the croft of the Kingspyre Tower. At the second turn of the stairs she stopped and leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, biting her lip hard for fear that she might start sobbing. I will not cry, she thought. “I have wished it, and I knew. I always knew. ‘Because I can,’” she heard Joffrey’s voice echoing in the dark stairway. “Because I can.”

“My lady?” She opened her eyes and found Brienne of Tarth, wielding a torch. “Are you alright?”

“Yes. I was…” Lions do not cry, she repeated in her head. “Were you going down to see Ser Jaime?”

The tall woman gave her a guarded look. “I was, my lady.”

“I’ve seen him. He’s… fine. It might be that Aegon will release him soon.” She was not quite sure why she was telling Brienne all of this. It was plain that she cared for Jaime, yes, but still… the lady had never looked upon Myrcella with anything other than suspicion.
“I… good.” Brienne sounded as uncertain as Myrcella felt. “You should have an escort if you are going back up to the castle, my lady. I could take you up to your chambers. If it please you.”

“Yes. The king’s men, they left me… if… if you would.” She bestowed a smile upon Lady Brienne. Side by side they ascended the stairs. Both of them were ill-suited for conversation, but Myrcella did not really mind that.

By now the yards above were blanketed with snow, and the gargoyles had turned to shapeless white lumps atop the crenels. “The storm is only going to get worse,” Myrcella said. “Maester Modwyn reckons that we’ll have a blizzard by the day of the wedding.”

“I have never known snow like this,” Brienne admitted. “Though on Tarth, this sort of weather is scarcely seen.”

They were passing through a dark archway into another yard when Ser Lyn Corbray came down the steps to her left. “My lady,” he said to Myrcella, while ignoring Brienne completely. “You are to come with me.”

“I am escorting Princess Myrcella to her chambers,” said Brienne.

“Not anymore,” Ser Lyn replied. “The Lord Protector has requested an audience with her. And he asks that she be prepared to sup with him, Lord Arryn and Lady Stark.”

“What Littlefinger wants does not matter,” Brienne said. “Now step aside, if you would.”

But Ser Lyn moved to block her way. “I will not be challenged by the likes of you, wench. Go and prance in silk, as a proper woman ought. Though I doubt it will make you any less ugly.” When Brienne did not react to the jibe he could not resist another. “Tell me, does the mirror shatter when it sees your face?”

“No,” said Myrcella. “But I trust Lady Brienne to shatter your face, if you do not get down on your knees and apologise to her.” Ser Lyn had not been expecting that; plainly he thought that the future Lady Arryn would be a ‘proper woman’ and content to prance in silk. How wrong he was. “Apologise, now.”

Ser Lyn was too proud to bend his knee, but he did mutter out some words of apology. In a way, he reminded her of Robert. They are all children, no matter what they say otherwise. “As for Lord Baelish’s request, I will answer it, but at my own behest, not yours or anyone else’s.” This would not win her the knight’s loyalty, but it would win her some small respect, and she needed that if she even planned to make allies among the Vale lords. “Brienne, you may go.” And they went their separate ways.

The knight led her through cloisters and along twisting passageways, all shadowed beneath the candlelike towers of Harrenhal. The moon loomed pale and pregnant behind the Tower of Dread. Half-melted stone gleamed like gobbets of black blood as they slithered down the towers. Atop the stone crenels, gargoyles leered down at her with mad black eyes.

Ser Lyn was not much of a talker, or maybe that was his shame showing through. So it fell to Myrcella to make conversation. Appeal to his pride, she told herself. “Is that Valyrian steel I spy at your swordbelt, ser?”

“Lady Forlorn,” he replied. “I won it on the battlefield at the Trident, when I slew Prince Lewyn Martell and a score of other Dornishmen who tried to slay my lord father. None succeeded.”

Myrcella had heard that story before. But she noted that Ser Lyn had omitted the fact that his father
died of his wounds anyway, shortly after the battle. *Pride is his failing, indeed.* “My brother has a Valyrian steel sword too,” she told him. “He calls it Lawbringer.”

Ser Lyn scoffed. “Any man who wields Valyrian steel should know how to use it. You will forgive me for saying so, my lady, but your brother is only a boy.”

“Robert Baratheon is his father,” she lied, “and Jaime Lannister his uncle. With bloodlines like those, he will make a fine swordsman someday.”

“Hmm.” Corbray had no reply for that, so he switched tack. “I trust you are enjoying your time with Lord Robert?”

“You could say that. He is rather too fond of this Moon Door business, mind. ‘A castle is not complete without one,’ he says.”

“He is his mother’s son,” said Ser Lyn. “Lady Lysa was fond of dispatching criminals in that fashion. I believe your own uncle Imp was among those the boy wanted to execute, but his sellsword unjustly beat down Ser Vardis Egen and Lord Tyrion managed to escape. *I would have beaten him, though.*”

“I don’t doubt that.” Myrcella wondered what it would feel like to throw the lord of the Vale out of his own Moon Door. *Life’s little ironies are its greatest gift.* “Lady Lysa was not the first ruler of the Vale to exit through the Moon Door, was she?”

Ser Lyn shrugged. “I do seem to recall the tale of a certain Ronnel Arryn – the boy-king who ruled in the Vale when Aegon Targaryen and his sisters came to Westeros. His younger brother Jonos rose up against his rule when their mother died and had his brother thrown through the Moon Door.” A shadow flitted across his face. “No man is so accursed as the kinslayer. The Arryn bloodline has still not wiped that stain from its memory. Some say that its lords are cursed to live short lives, never to see their children grow up, and those that do are born weak of mind, weak of seed, weak of body.”

And Robert is all three. *I have truly landed myself a prize here.* “Lord Robert has no siblings,” Myrcella said. “No uncles or cousins?”

“You are asking about the succession in the Vale?” Ser Lyn laughed. “I would tell you about the convoluted fashion in which Harrold Hardyng – Lady Waynwood’s ward – is next in line to be lord of the Vale, but it would take too long.”

*I will have to speak to this Ser Harrold, then,* she surmised. Likely he would prove a more attractive prospect than Robert… and marrying him would negate the need for Littlefinger as a middleman. “Is Ser Harrold afflicted with the Arryn sickness?” she asked.

“Not as far as I know.” If he’d meant to say any more, she never knew, for then they were outside Littlefinger’s chambers.

His solar was a dim room with not enough fireplaces. A chill was coming through the walls, making his mockingbird banners flap in the night wind. Baelish dipped his pen back in the inkwell and glanced down at her. “My princess. I do hope my summons has not troubled you terribly.”

“Hardly,” Myrcella said, with a sideways glance at Ser Lyn. *Shouldn’t he be leaving?* Littlefinger saw her looking. “Ser Lyn is privy to our plans as well,” he said. “Fear not, his loyalty comes as a given providing he gets what he wants. Doesn’t it, ser?”

Corbray nodded. “It does, my lord.”
What does he want? If she knew, perhaps she could make him answer to her instead of Littlefinger. But that would have to wait. The lord of Harrenhal stepped out from behind his desk and beckoned her to his table. “Even as Lord Protector of the Vale, I have to pour my own wine,” he complained. “Not that I am surprised, though. What squire would ever want to serve me?” He filled three cups. “I can see that our princess still mistrusts you, Ser Lyn,” he said as he passed Corbray one. “Tell me, how can you convince Princess Myrcella that you are true to our cause?”

“You can’t.” Ser Lyn’s smile was a strange, twisted thing. “But the other lords of the Vale have more disdain for me than seems fair, even my own brothers. Whereas I have opportunities here.”

The gods help us if he is lying, Myrcella thought.

Littlefinger’s gaze drifted back to her. “Many a man has called Ser Lyn hot-headed and rash, did you know? I would beg to differ. For someone so impulsive, he has a remarkable talent for choosing the right side.”

Myrcella was growing less and less certain with every passing moment. “And what is your part in this, Ser Lyn?” she asked.

“If Robert should mysteriously die, both you and I will come under suspicion, my lady. We need an ally among the Lords Declarant who can help divert any investigation against us. Hence the need for Ser Lyn, who will divert their suspicions by finding himself in a… compromising situation when things gone awry.”

“What?” Myrcella looked at Littlefinger like he was mad. And from the plan she’d just heard, he might very well have been. “So… Ser Lyn will be arrested… and then what?”

“Well, once the Lords Declarant have strung him up for treason, Ser Lyn stands before all the court and tells them that he was only playing a part in a much greater game.” He smiled. “Aegon Targaryen’s. Dear Aegon, who has made no secret of the fact that he would rather have a strong lord of the Vale – Harrold Hardyng, mayhaps – than some sickly twelve-year old. And then… chaos. The Riverlands, the Vale and the North will all ride against King’s Landing, and you will summon your brother’s men and ride east. Even the Tyrells may join us – they have no love for murdered children. By this time Aegon and Daenerys will have destroyed each other utterly, of course, and we will sweep in and take the capital.”

Ser Lyn rubbed Lady Forlorn’s hilt in an oddly sexual manner. “And we will leave behind thousands of dead Dornishmen, and a feast for the crows.”

Myrcella nodded. “As we discussed.” So now she knew the entirety of the plan. “There is one thing I do not understand, though. Why are you doing this, Ser Lyn? As I see it, the only way this ends is with you in chains.”

“Why, some miraculous new evidence will come to light absolving Ser Lyn of his crimes,” Baelish said. “The new lord of the Vale may even grant him land and title for his trouble, especially if his brother Lord Lyonel should perish in the fight for King’s Landing.”

Of course, that would never happen, Myrcella knew. Littlefinger would have Corbray murdered or executed, leaving no loose ends. “This will have to take place after the wedding, then?” That left the uncomfortable matter of consummation, but she could fake that easily enough. She’d lied to the lords of the Vale, claiming to be a maiden, but it was easy enough to produce a bloody sheet to satisfy their ridiculous demand for proof. Besides, Lord Arryn was too young to be expected to take part without any urging.
“We will need to time everything very carefully,” Lord Baelish said. A low, tremulous knocking interrupted his words. “And those will be our guests,” he said, half-smiling as he crossed the room. “Well, Ser Lyn, you had best go.”

“I had,” the knight replied. “Until the morrow, my lord.” And he went.

Lady Sansa had changed her clothes again. Tonight she was gownéd in moonstone grey silk, with a high sable collar. Underneath that she wore riding breeches and fur-trimmed boots. She would never have dared to wear something so unladylike in King’s Landing, Myrcella thought. How we have changed.

Rickon and Robert sat either side of her, the lord of the Eyrie nearer to Myrcella. Littlefinger bestowed Sansa with a kiss on each cheek, and ruffled the boys’ hair. It was almost fatherly. Would Jaime have done the same? she found herself wondering. Or Robert, if we truly were his?

They started with pumpkin and butter squash soup and hot bread, then came a whole ham, a steak-and-kidney pie, butter beans and green beans with bacon, with flagons of hippocras and sweet berry wine to wash it all down.

“Is there any news from Raventree Hall?” Sansa asked Littlefinger. “Rickon and I are most anxious to meet this nephew of ours—”

“You might do well to go there yourself,” Littlefinger suggested, “a letter can conceal any sort of lie. Whereas your own two eyes will never betray you.”

“What’s this?” asked Robert.

Sansa explained, “My brother Robb wed a Westerlander lady called Jeyne Westerling. A few months ago, she gave birth to his son, a little boy also called Robb. If the boy is able, he may have more right to the North than any of us at this table. We don’t know if Bran can have children, and Rickon is… well, Rickon.”

“I don’t want to be Warden of the North,” Rickon said. “I’d rather be a knight. Or a Northern warrior, protecting my people and my family. Like Robb, only without being king. Besides, Bran will be a better ruler than me.”

“You should bring your brother south someday, Sansa,” Littlefinger said. “I am sure he would love to meet you.”

“Soon,” she replied. “You may have a point about going to Raventree Hall, Lord Baelish. From there we can head to Riverrun, or north to Winterfell. But that will have to be after the wedding, of course.”

“We should hold the wedding soon,” Myrcella heard herself say. “The longer we wait, the weaker our alliance will be. We should show the rebel lords of the Vale that we are a united force.”

Sansa scowled over the rim of her goblet. “Well, let us not be too hasty. Perhaps it would be better to deal with Lord Royce first, and hold the wedding as a show of our newfound unity.”

“The siege of Runestone could last many moons,” said Littlefinger, “if we wait for Bronze Yohn Royce, we may be waiting a very long time. I say let the man fester in his castle. When he looks near to surrender, Lord Robert can go and see to the proceedings himself.”

The lord of the Eyrie blinked his big blue eyes. “M… me?”
"Yes, my lord. And who better? Lord Royce is committing treason as we speak, but that can be forgiven, for the nonce. But if he stands on the ramparts of Runestone and refuses the command of his liege lord, then his open defiance becomes so much worse."

"I’ll come with you," Rickon offered to his cousin. "I’ll help, I’ll be your guardsman, or something."

Robert’s lip quivered, his fork halfway to his mouth. "I don’t know. I… I’ll try."

"Your father would be proud to hear it," said Littlefinger. "I would much prefer it if Lord Royce came quietly, but I do not have high hopes for that. If he does rebel, we could always name someone more sympathetic as lord of Runestone. Ser Harrold Hardyng, I am thinking."

"Do you think that would be a good idea, Uncle Petyr?" The boy’s weak chin wobbled. "I think it would. I didn’t like Lord Royce anyway. He had too many moles."

Quite suddenly, Myrcella could stand it no longer. Her stomach was starting to roil, and the smell of her food made her feel oddly queasy. She choked down a final sip of wine, said "Excuse me,” rose to her feet, and walked briskly out of the door.

Her chambers were not far, mercifully. Once inside she slammed the door, ran to her window and stuck her head out, letting the night breeze caress her face. She hoped that it would blow away her tears, and her fears, and her doubts. I cannot do this, she thought, cannot kill a child, however vile he is; I cannot be a part in Littlefinger’s scheme… but at the same time I cannot marry Robert Arryn. I cannot. And then the sobs were welling up inside her all over again.

"My lady?" When Myrcella realised that she was not alone, she spun around so quickly she heard the bones crack. "What?"

Tyg stood by the fire, warming his hands. "My lady," he repeated, more softly this time. "Are you alright?" The rushes scratched against his feet as he advanced.

"Yes," Myrcella replied. "I… no, I’m not."

It was so easy after that. Every word she spoke made her feel lighter and lighter. Unburden yourself of sin, she remembered Septa Eglantine saying once, and your soul will be so light that you float through the seven heavens like a feather.

It was almost tempting to believe the septa’s words. But was a long time since Myrcella had believed in any gods.

Before she knew it, she had Tyg’s hands in her own. They were callused and red welts and cuts went all the way up to his forearms. "You’re hurt," she said softly. And so am I.

Tyg stiffened under her touch. He tried to find a man’s voice, but only produced a boyish squeak. "My lady… you were saying something about your wedding?"

"Was I? Oh.” She squeezed Tyg’s hand and squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears in. "Marriage… it does not suit me, I fear… but in order to… for my family, yes. This is something that I must do."

Tyg’s moss-coloured eyes reflected her green ones. "I understand,” he said.

Myrcella placed her hands against his chest, feeling for someone else’s heartbeat to add to her own. He is not Trystane, but I will not have my prevailing memories of love be of Robert Arryn. I will taste freedom one last time before they lock me in my gilded cage. Fuck family, duty, honour. This is for me. She took a deep breath. "You’ve been good to me, Tyg. All through this journey, you’ve…"
In the end, he kissed her. That wasn’t how she’d expected it to happen, but she saw that the tears were in his eyes as well. *He never thought this would happen either.* She didn’t know what it was, but the two of them were sharing the same sorrow. *He loves me,* she knew, and some small part of her supposed that the feeling – at least in the sense of friendliness – was true for her as well.

Their fingers entwined as lovers and soon so did they. Tyg worked shy hands all over her neck and arms, while she unlaced his breeches and took him in her hands, forcing him back onto the bed as his lips explored hers. They fell into bed together, the clothes of a princess and a squire spilled across the quilts.

There was no romance here, Myrcella thought afterwards, as she lay with her head against his chest, both of them heavily breathing each other’s smell, their bodies entwined beneath the covers. There was no deep lust as she had felt with Trystane, but it was *something.* And that was the only thing that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Bloody hell.


That was quite a long chapter, in case you hadn't noticed. It was a very interesting period in Myrcella's character development. I don't think it was quite as good as 'Hear Me Roar', but it was very, very close.

As always with these huge >8000 word chapters, I appreciate your reviews even more than usual. So this is a review beg, I suppose, but I think it's justified here.

You've probably worked out that basically everything Littlefinger says is a lie, but he's probably more truthful about his plan here than he is anywhere else. Even still, Ser Lyn and Myrcella are fools to trust in anything he says.

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On a somewhat more random note, I rewatched “The Watchers on the Wall” this weekend. I'll be honest and say that I didn't really like it before the rewatch, but if anyone has doubts about GOT as a whole production, watch that episode again, and tell me that the show's not fantastic when it wants to be.
They supped on rabbit stew and barley bread, and tried to convince themselves that they were at a king’s feast table, not in a damp, snow-laden tent outside the walls of Lannisport. That was hard, since the bread was more sawdust than barley, and there was no rabbit in the stew.

Around the hall men spoke in hushed voices, and some made to entertain themselves with games and drinking, but the mood was sombre and sour for the most part. And it was starting to snow again.

*That does not bode well for us,* Mya Stone thought as she chewed down her tasteless meal. It snowed every night now, and the storm was drawing closer and closer with each day, many reckoned. “It will not matter,” the king’s supporters argued. “Stannis fought through the cold at Winterfell in a winter much worse than this, but he was still victorious.”

Others argued to the contrary. “The Northmen already inside the walls won that battle,” Lord Peasebury was heard to say. “The Lannisters have no such qualms as to the loyalty of their men.”

“Misplaced loyalty, you mean,” replied Ser Richard Horpe. “We wouldn’t want to think that you were abetting treason, Peasebury…”

Mya did not think that the fat lord Peasebury was a traitor, but she was not so certain of Lord Piper, whose youngest son was still a Lannister captive, nor of Lord Jonos Bracken, who seemed twitchy of late and spent a lot of time whispering among his captains. *Some of these Riverlanders are having their doubts*. It would be only too easy for them to turn their cloaks and head over to join the defenders inside the city.

But such matters were not the concern of a bastard girl, and so she gave them as little thought as she could. *Let those be Stannis’s problems.* The king had not called on her since the episode with Clayton Suggs, though he was rarely shy about sending his subordinates to give her orders. Mya had seen more of Godry the Giantslayer and Ser Richard Horpe than she could stomach for one lifetime, but they were not deterred.

Thus it came as no surprise when a squire appeared and told her that Ser Godry Farring wanted
words. She was not remotely pleased, but as much as she disliked the Giantslayer, he was better than Ser Richard Horpe, who only sneered at her and doubtless thought her a stupid woman. “Ser Clayton Suggs thought the same,” she had cautioned him more than once. “And look where that left him.”

Ser Richard had coloured for half an instant before regaining his usual icy pallor. “Those are not wise words, girl,” he told her. “Many think that you had a part in Ser Clayton’s death.” By ‘many’ he meant himself, no doubt. “If you go around threatening knights like that, you may find those rumours getting round rather faster than you would like.”

And the rumours had gotten round, though of course Ser Richard had started them himself. For one of King Stannis’s leading battle commanders, Horpe was surprisingly poor at covering his tracks. All it had taken was a few words to Edmund Blackwood, one night when he’d decided to bed her again. *Men have loose tongues when they find themselves that close to women. And lusty boys even more so.* That was the one useful lesson she’d taken from Randa Royce.

Ser Godry Farring was outside the tent, with three of the king’s guards around him. That was more than usual.

“The king wants to see you,” the knight said, already turning away.

Mya felt a curious warmth in her belly. It was pleasant to have a surprise every now and again. She increased her pace to catch up with Ser Godry as he wove a path between the tents. As they drew closer to the camp’s heart, random and ramshackle squalor gave way to ordered rows and columns of identical beige tents, with half-frozen latrine pits dug round the outer perimeter and guards watching from small wooden watchtowers. Stannis thrived on order. Which made her wonder how he could cope with the chaos of war.

Ser Richard Horpe was outside the king’s tent. “His Grace is within,” he sneered at her. As though she couldn’t work that out for herself.

The king was veiled half in darkness, crouched over a table strewn with maps. All animal hides and vellum etched with deep blue and red ink. *But no white,* Mya thought. For maps do not show the advance of snow. A plate of cheeses and meats - honeyed ham, salt beef, that sort - sat beside him, gone cold in the long hours untouched. A few candles burned, filling the air with the scent of lemongrass and strewing-reeds, as if they were standing a in a castle room with four walls rather than a dark and dingy tent.

“Did I distract you from your evening’s entertainments?” Stannis asked. His voice was as hollow as he looked, grey and fleshless and bland.

“Hardly,” Mya replied. She might have made another comment, but the king was not one for sarcasm, and especially not tonight. His eyes were as dark and forbidding as chunks of obsidian.

“You will forgive my abruptness in bringing you here,” he said.

“I am at Your Grace’s command.”

Stannis arched an eyebrow, equal parts doubting and curious. “Are you?”

“I am. Who else would I serve?”

The king did not answer. But he did not have to, since both of them knew that Mya Stone had never been much good at serving others. “Can you read?” he asked.
“Your Grace?”

“Can you read, I said.”

“I am a king’s daughter, not some barefooted peasant.” Mya held out her hand. Stannis placed the letter into it with a discontented look. “Ser Davos did not learn to read and write until a couple of years ago,” he said, “you will forgive his messiness.”

The Onion Knight’s writing looked like a child’s scrawl. Mya had to squint to read it, and even then she could not make out half the words. Eventually she managed to piece together some meaning from it. “He was at Riverrun…”

Stannis frowned again. If he’d been expecting Mya to allay his concerns, she had sorely failed. “Melisandre went too far,” he said darkly, “and Selyse too. I warned her – and I was such a fool as to believe that would be enough.”

“And now Ser Davos is on his way here,” Mya stated.

“And Shireen too.” Stannis ground his teeth. “That does not please me, no. Not one bit. But there is nothing else to be done. I suppose Davos could have left my daughter at Riverrun or Harrenhal, but we have no one in the Riverlands we can trust with Selyse’s small authority gone. It is not safe for Shireen here—”

“You could leave her at the Golden Tooth, Your Grace.”

“I could. But she would still be at the mercy of the Lannisters. And with winter coming, I would sooner know where she is, rather than leaving her fate to chance.” He glanced at Mya, and for a moment it seemed that he was looking for her validation, for her confidence in him. The bastard girl stood by and said nothing.

“Winter is coming,” the king said abruptly, in a cold, dispassionate tone. “Stark words. But now even the stalwart Starks have turned their cloaks and left me to die in the wilds of the West. I should have known it all along. No man could truly ever love me, or Melisandre’s red god.” He curled his lip and clenched his jaw again. “Damned Starks. And damned fire gods.” Stannis’s hand went to the ruby-studded hilt of his longsword, pale and bony as they clenched around the metal. “Lightbringer,” he said acerbically, “the Red Sword of Heroes, wielded by Azor Ahai himself.” A bitter laugh escaped his lips. “Oh, it glows with pretty colours of a night, and light does wondrous things to it, but it is a trick. False fire, not true. And believe me, there are no heroes, Mya Stone. Not among men.”

“You don’t believe—?”

“Of course I believe,” he snapped. “That’s all I have left. Foolish, fickle, twisted belief. But what is belief worth, if you do not truly mean it?” Darkness came into his eyes. “Robert would have loved this, you know.” The words came out of nowhere. “Everything about war was attractive to him. The fighting, yes, the feel of steel in your hands and the smells of blood and boiled leather… the camaraderie too, aye. Him and Ned Stark… bloody, thrice-damned Ned Stark…”

“He was never much of a strategist, my brother, in spite of his supposed reputation as the greatest fighter who ever lived. I was not at Ashford, but they tell me that his strategy was to fight with two wings, as you might expect, and to lead in the vanguard himself, to inspire his men. It might have worked well enough against Mace Tyrell, but Robert’s host fell apart when they came up against Randyll Tarly’s organised ranks, and he was forced to flee, spreading his host to the seven winds. Robert himself made it to Stoney Sept, but it was only due to Ned Stark and Hoster Tully that he left the town alive.
“Robert never saw this side of the war. Jon Arryn once told me how he spent three days in solitude before the Trident preparing battle plans, and of how Ned Stark was with him most of the time. ‘But Robert was never made to be king,’ he said, ‘He will always need strong, loyal men around him to help him rule. And there is none so loyal as a brother.’ He was right about the first part, at least. Robert was no king. He had no sense of what duty meant, and no respect for the Iron Throne either. He was never meant to rule... perhaps it was some cruel jape of the gods to make him my father’s firstborn.” He laughed, bitter as ever. “Robert was a terrible king. Not worse than Aerys or Joffrey, but close, for certain. Only none of us had the strength or the heart to tell him otherwise. But despite knowing that, Robert was my elder brother, and my king too. I lived to serve him, and I did. But when he needed me most... when the realm needed me most... I was on Dragonstone, brooding... and for what?”

Skeletal fingers clutched at the hilt of the False Sword of Heroes. “Maester Cressen once told me that war brings out the worst in men... he was right. My squire is dead, the son of the only friend I had, killed for my sake on the battlefield. I murdered my brother in dishonest combat; I went for a dagger when he offered me a peach.” Then the king let out a sudden, deep breath, like a drowning man breathing air for the first time. “But I must continue to do my duty. As must you, Lady Stone.”

“And... what is my duty?” Mya asked quietly.

King Stannis frowned. “We will never defeat the Lannisters in the field,” he said at long last. “When we lost Riverrun, so too we lost Melisandre, and the favour of the Lord of Light. When the snows come, they will bury our army and every man in it. And the snows are coming soon.

“But there is a way that we can win.” He took Lightbringer from its scabbard, and ran the steel along his palm, sharp and sudden. Blood welled on the surface of the blade, and the fat teardrops lingered there a moment before falling, falling, down to the dusty rushes.

“What do you want me to do?”

“All I want you to do,” the king replied, “is kill a boy.”

Hesitation overcame her. The Lannister boy. And Mya remembered the way she’d had her bow pointed at Princess Myrcella, and that lingering moment of doubt, that second that seemed to last her age, as she aimed her shot, and did not move. Then she wondered why she was having her doubts about saving her father’s feigned children, and no answer came to her. “I will need a way to get into the city—”

The king waved a hand. “You shall have all you need. But it is of the utmost importance that we move quickly. The longer we wait, the stronger the Lannisters become. I will not lose my crown to a bitter snowfall—”

“Your Grace.” Ser Godry Farring entered through the flap. “Your Grace, we—”

“We are under attack,” Stannis said gravely. “From within or without?”

Farring frowned. “Both, Your Grace.”

Stannis Baratheon cursed under his breath. “Who?”

“The Lannisters, my lord. The Lannisters are outside our gates, and they’re opening—”

The king pushed past Mya, clutching Lightbringer in his fist. Out into the night he went, and the shard of pale grey steel began to pulsate and shimmer. The air hummed. There is power in king’s blood, Stannis had said, and had tempered the steel with his own. Why? Did he know that the
Lannisters would be coming? But there was no time for such questions. An urgency was in the air and she was eager to meet it. So Mya rose to her feet, unbuckled her own swordbelt, and followed the king.

Smoke from the fires that ringed the camp tousled the night sky. There came shouts of “To your spears!” and “Ready yourselves!” from among the tents. Shields and spears dragged and beat against icy ground, mingled with the beating of drums and trumpets.

Mya shoved her way through the crowd, away from Stannis’s men, and found her way up to the palisade wallwalk. Leaning against a makeshift merlon she unslung her longbow and pulled an arrow out of her quiver. Smoke stung her eyes as she drew the string back and searched to find the foes moving among the trees below, shrouded in bits of grey-green brush to disguise themselves. Ser Godry was shouting, “NOCK! DRAW! LOOSE!” but she did not bother to keep to his timing. Arrow after arrow went sailing over the walls. She did not see how many found their mark, but she knew that some of them had succeeded.

And then Ser Godry was calling “Down! Cover!” and the Lannisters had catapults all of a sudden and stones were flying this way and that. They battered the fortifications like stone fists, and the wooden splinters from their impacts nearly skinned her cheeks and sent her diving for the ground. Then they had not only catapults but rams too, struggling to climb the hill but still a very real threat. Mya knew that the gates would not last long at all under that onslaught. She crouched atop the wallwalk and loosed a couple of arrows down, hoping to find the men pushing the great wooden beast up the hill. There was a dull throbbing pain in her leg, and when she looked up she realised that she was no longer on the wall, but lying on her back in the snow outside the gate, with the taste of blood in her mouth. “Move!” Ser Godry Farring screamed, “Move, you move!” They came through the breach roaring. “Hear me roar!” and “Lannister!” and “King Tommen!”, and their men screamed back, “Baratheon!” and “Ours is the fury!” and “STANNIS! STANNIS! STANNIS!” until their throats were hoarse.

She had a sword in her hand now, and a dirk at her belt. All I want you to do is kill a boy, Stannis had said. She wondered if the Lannister king was here – but dared not wonder long, for just then there came the thunder of warring blades right beside her, and the Baratheon soldier fell dead in the snow. For a moment, Mya watched her foe, trying to get a glimpse under his iron halfhelm, trying to remember which house emblazoned its sigil with a red stallion. Bracken, she thought, but the Brackens are on—

—our side. And he lunged at her all the same. Perhaps in the frenzy of battle he did not know who was who; perhaps the Brackens had turned their cloaks. There was no time to know what was happening, or to care. There was no time to know what was happening, or to care. Mya barely knocked away his first sword thrust. Then he roared and attacked her again and again and again, a downsing at her chest, at her thigh – her thigh with an arrow in it, when had that happened? – and up towards her helm. She got inside his blade somehow and thrust her dirk sharply into his gut, once, twice, thrice, and twisted. The sword dropped from his hand, and he dropped with it; Mya fell onto him, struggling to her feet as the dead man twitched in the snow before her.

Snow.

In all her years in the Vale, she had never seen snow like this. It fell from the sky so thickly she could barely see three feet in front of her, and all the while the drifts grew deeper and darker. One moment she was watching Stannis’s burning banner, flapping above the army, and then it was gone into the mist, and flakes swirled everywhere they could. Mya stumbled onwards, past ghosts fighting in steel and between the grey silhouettes of trees. Behind her she could see the smoke of the burning camp, but that was the only way to orientate herself. Stannis, Stannis, where is Stannis?
She scooped up a fallen shield. It had a Lannister lion on it, but nobody would see that, and nobody would care. Onwards she ran, crouching low behind it. Blood trickled slowly down her leg from the arrow wound, leaving her trail in the snow. Mya careened into one man from nowhere, sending them both tumbling into the dust. For a moment, they grappled, rolling, over and over. *Downhill*, she thought, towards the Lannisters. Then they smacked into a tree, and when the stars had gone from her eyes she looked to see that blood was trickling slowly out of his head from where he had impacted, and his eyes were rolling, unconscious. Mya brought out her dirk, crusted with pink snow, and made an end to it.

She struggled back to her feet, and fell at once when she tried to take a step through the deepening snow. *This battle is lost*, she thought, lurching back to her feet, *Stannis is lost, for sure.* Mya could smell the camp still burning, up on its high hill. She glanced to the sky. The snow fell like a thousand stars, but she could not see the moon, or even the black void of night sky. *The Lord of Light has deserted us.* That was absurd, she thought, and wondered if Stannis thought the same thing.

She did not know how, but she ended up with Edmund Blackwood somehow, by some cruel jape of the gods. Snow and sweat matted his hair underneath the helm, and ice beaded on his gloved hands. “The fight is over!” he kept shouting at her, “we’ve lost, we’ve got to get back, we’ve got to—”

“St-Stannis.” She was so tired that she could barely speak. “Where… Stannis?”

“Bugger Stannis!” he roared back at her. It seemed that they were alone, but they might have been in the very centre of the battle, with fire and steel raging all around them.

Mya found herself shaking, partly from the cold. “He’s my uncle, I have to go back, I have to—”

“Stannis is dead!” he shouted back at her, wrenching her arm so that she stayed close. “There’s no point staying here! We need to go back, to the Golden Tooth, to Raventree, even to the bloody Wall! Anywhere that isn’t here! We need—”

Something hit her in the back of the head—

—and she dreamed of snow falling thick and white and endless and of a man throwing her into the air and laughing all the while and of an old falcon lord with a kind smile reaching down and ruffling her hair and of mules and their old familiar smell and three waycastles with stew bubbling in black iron kettles and swords coming together in the night and wind whistling black and red and blood bubbling out from a cut on her knee and the taste of mud and graveworms and voices calling “*Stannis! Stannis! Stannis!*” and the feel of her naked skin against another warm body and of firelight flickering through the gaunt echoes of the world and of a boy with a thousand eyes and one saying “*Fly! Fly! Fly!*” and of stone and sky and snow and the scent of pennyroyal extract and green tea leaves that grew in nettle bushes and of fresh clean mountain brightness and of voices crying out and horses crying out and of magic swords and onion knights and cracked yellow paper and the battle, the battle, the battle—

Chapter End Notes

So, Stannis monologued, we had a vague, shadowy battle and a slightly menacing ending. I agree that it doesn't make for the most compelling of chapters, especially after a 5 day wait, but I've got some other stuff in production that's more interesting.
Her uncle’s tent stank. The dozen or so healers that Lady Dorna had summoned had tried every remedy they knew, so the air was awash with the smells of pennyroyal syrup and mandrake root and roasted fennel, willow bark and milk of the poppy and the queer Eastern substance the maesters called dragon’s blood. There were jars of vinegar and jars of fat black leeches, flagons of honey and boiled wine.

“All of this will not help,” Lord Qyburn murmured to the queen as they stood in the doorway of Ser Kevan’s pavilion. “They would be better served leaving him to get some bed rest, rather than filling the air with such dubious vapours.” He sniffed discontentedly.

“Well, hopefully one of them will find a remedy that works,” replied Cersei. And later rather than sooner, she hoped. She turned to her aunt Dorna. “I will pray for my uncle’s swift recovery.”

“I am not such a fool as to believe that, Cersei.” Dorna Swyft pursed her lips. “There are other things that I might choose to believe. Rumours. But since you are my niece, I will pay them no heed. Fare you well.”

“And you. I will see you at the feast tonight.” That done, Cersei swept from the tent, trailed by silk and lace and Lord Qyburn. Once she was out of earshot, she turned to him and asked, “How long will it be until he is recovered?”

“Fully?” Qyburn chewed his lip. “The arrow may have deadened his left leg entirely, Your Grace. The damage could be with him for the rest of his life. As for when he will be recovered enough to sit on the council again... hmm, two months, possibly three.”

“Two months.” The queen nodded. Two months will be enough. “You have done well, Qyburn,” she said. “And no doubt you will prove yourself even more useful to me in the weeks to come.”

“Oh, I hope so, Your Grace.” He bowed his head. “I hope so very much.” There they went their separate ways, each of them to their own work. Cersei watched him go. Qyburn still unsettled her greatly, but she no longer doubted his loyalty.
But there were other loyalties to be affirmed.

Tommen was seated on a camp chair in his pavilion, reading a letter with a cup of wine in one hand. “Mother,” he said, jumping up to embrace her. He was taller than her now, and a little broader too. “How is uncle Kevan?”

“He will recover, sweetling. Even if it takes him a little while.” She clasped Tommen’s hands in hers. Bandages still swathed his left hand entirely. “Until then, we must learn to work together.”

Tommen nodded. “I have a message from Myrcella,” he said, waving the letter. “Her wedding is going ahead as planned.” That made him frown. “Do we have to...? I mean, now that Stannis is beaten, we don’t really need the Arryns—”

“We need the Vale if we are to emerge victorious in the wars to come.” And we don’t need Myrcella interfering in everything. It was a harsh truth, but that did not make it any less true. “No. She serves us best where she is, though I pity her with that Arryn boy.” If she has half the wits I think she has, she will deal with him as I dealt with Robert. Sweet nothings and promises, and a great deal of sacrifices.

She remembered the singer whose tongue Joffrey had had removed. ‘Come on then’, our brave king cried. I’ll have your ugly head. You’re nowhere near as murderous as the lion in my bed.”

Hardly a compliment, but he was right. Most men were too blind to understand what was right in front of them.

“She says that she’ll go through with the marriage, but on her own terms,” Tommen read to her.

That worried Cersei, but she did not let it show. She had killed Robert, yes, but she had not been such a fool as to openly demonstrate her hatred of him. Strange to think, that there must have been courtiers and smallfolk in King’s Landing who believed that King Robert had loved his queen more than anything. Perhaps he did, but Rhaegar stole his queen from him. And so Robert stole my prince from me. Sometimes she dared to wonder how things might have been, if Rhaegar had been victorious on the Trident. I doubt they would have been anything like this. Unless Rhaegar had pined for Lyanna Stark too, and the same bitterness had overtaken her. And Jaime...

“Does she say anything about Jaime?” she asked Tommen.

“He is alive and well, she writes. Nothing more than that.”

Alive and well. That was all she needed. If Jaime was alive and well, then miracles could happen. If Jaime was alive and well, perhaps one day he might be home, too. And this time, I will make sure that he never goes away again. She dared to dream of marrying him in Lannisport’s sept. Men would whisper, but what of it? They’re so small I can’t even see them. I only see what matters.

“Jaime will come home,” she said. “He will. I know he will.” Her fingers squeezed Tommen’s again, and that was what brought her back. “How is your hand? I can have Lord Qyburn look at it, if you’d like that.”

“No.” He narrowed his eyes. “Maester Creylen has already seen it. He says to wash it out and put clean bandages on it.” He smiled. “It’s getting better.”

“And what about you?”

“Mother?”
“After the battle at Sarsfield, you seemed a little... upset. You weren’t yourself.”

“I’m fine now. Really, I am. I was just a little boy, back then. But I’m a king now. A man at heart.”

“Who told you that?”

“Eleyna. Lady Westerling, I mean.” His face turned a little pink.

Cersei smiled. “You do know that you cannot marry the Westerling girl, don’t you? The betrothal Ser Kevan made was only temporary.”

“Oh. Yes.” Tommen gave a shy, uncertain nod. “If we’re finished here, we should go to the council. I wonder what they’ve got to tell us. Do you think—”

“You have your father’s wit when it comes to words,” said Cersei. “But I am not blind to your attempts at distraction. Do you like that girl?” she asked with a frown.

He had turned even redder. “We really should go and see to the council—”

“Of course, Your Grace. I forgot, this is not the time for idle discussion. Perhaps we can talk later, at the feast. Well, to the council.” Cersei linked her arm with his, and together they proceeded from the tent.

Snow crunched beneath her boots as she walked. Cersei wore her gowns cut short, with felted breeches under them, as it was easier than luggering around heavy silks and velvets. Her woollen underclothes helped keep off the cold, and all her clothes were lined with ermine and sable and fur. Winter is here. Ned Stark had been right on that account, even if he had been wrong on everything else.

“Did you see the snow last night, Mother?” Tommen’s voice had the excitement of a child half his age. “It was like being back in Winterfell all over again. I remember one night where the snowdrifts were so deep that we nearly lost Cella in them.”

“I hope not. Your sister should have taken better care of herself.”

“She was hiding in the godswood. Me and Bran spent the better part of an hour looking for her.”

Bran. The Stark boy. Cersei regretted that Jaime had been forced to push him out of the window. Her children had been fond of Stark’s brood, even if they were uncivilized brutes. “Sweetling,” she said to Tommen, “do you remember the day when Bran fell?”

His lip wobbled, and then became a slow, sad frown. “No,” he murmured eventually. “It... it all went by so fast. I don’t remember any of it. It was all a blur.”

She squeezed his hand again. “You shouldn’t feel any guilt, you know that. It was nothing to do with you, there was nothing you could have done—”

“Don’t you think I know that?” He rounded on her suddenly. “Don’t you think I’ve thought a thousand times about how I could have saved my friend? If... I should have been there. But Father wanted me to go on his stupid hunt.” He kicked at the nearest drift, sending up a wave of snow. “I know that better than anyone.”

Cersei watched him as he stormed off ahead. Odd, she thought, and there is something he is not telling me.
They did not speak until they were inside the Guildhall. Low lantern light lit the council chamber, and shadows glowed dark orange against the walls. The lords of the war council wore mail and plate and boiled leather, and smelled of iron and sweat and smoke and blood. Cersei took her proper seat, at Tommen’s right hand, with no Kevan Lannister to sit between them.

“Please begin, my lords,” the king said.

Ser Addam Marbrand went first. “We have tracked the remnants of Stannis’s forces north, towards Ashemark. I have sent my father a missive, informing him—”

“You should go after him yourself, Ser Addam,” said Cersei. “No one knows that region better than you.” And I would sooner not have one of Ser Kevan’s cronies sitting on every one of my councils.

“Are you certain that he is dead?” asked Ser Harys Swyft. He was Kevan’s man through and through, but far too stupid to pose a threat.

“We found his magic sword,” said Ser Lyle the Strongboar.

“And?” Cersei wanted to see this relic for herself.

“It is in my tent, Your Grace. If you would like it as a keepsake—”

“Does it glow?” It had glowed on the night of the parley, that was certain. But in the end, all of Stannis’s theatrics had come to nought.

“No, Your Grace.”

The queen allowed herself a brief smirk. “It would seem that Stannis’s fire god was not so powerful after all.”

“Oh, indeed, Your Grace,” said Ser Addam. “The Seven saw us safely through the battle. I have spoken with the High Septon, and he thinks a ceremony at the Great Sept would suit, to honour the dead—”

Why? They cannot hear us.

“Yes. That should be adequate. We must give the dead their proper tribute. And what of Stannis Baratheon? I should like his head, to mount above the city gates as a warning to any who might still proclaim loyalty to him.”

None of them seemed to want to answer that. “Your Grace,” Ser Addam said unsteadily, “we could not find his body. Likely it was lost among the dead in his camp, there were thousands of them—”

“Lord Farman,” she continued, cutting Marbrand off, “is the Lannister fleet sufficiently stocked to ferry our men to Highgarden? I have half a mind to teach the Tyrells a lesson in betrayal before heading to King’s Landing.” She would wait for Lord Randyll Tarly’s arrival first, though. Lannister scouts at Crakehall said that he was only a few days out.

The lord of Faircastle spent half an age awkwardly hesitating. “Well, Your Grace—”

“They are not finished, then.” Cersei pursed her lips into a frown. Can they do anything properly? “How long will you need.”

“M-months, Your Grace. A year, mayhaps. Two years.”

“You expect me to wait two years before attacking King’s Landing?”

“Your Grace, we had not expected that you would need them so soon—”
“Clearly not. You made a presumption, my lord. Soon you will learn that your presumptions are almost always wrong.” She cast her eyes across each of them. “You disappoint me, sers. I expect you to prove your worth. Ser Addam, you will ride for Ashemark; Ser Lyle, you will head east, towards the Golden Tooth. And if neither of you return with Stannis’s head, your heads will be up there instead.

“Lord Farman, I will give you two months to finish the construction of our fleet, and no more.”

“Your Grace, it is impossible—”

“Not another word. Do as you have been commanded, or suffer the consequences. That will be all.” Cersei pushed back her chair and left them to bicker amongst themselves. There was no time to waste.

There was a bitter taste in her mouth as she made her way to the stables out back, and mounted up onto her horse. *If I were Jaime, they would all come flocking to me,* she thought. *They would not dare oppose anything that I said.* But instead they sat and openly defied, because how could any woman possibly have any comprehension of what war truly was?

*I know war better than any of them. I know what it is like to love and to lose and to live without. I fought ten thousand battles at Robert’s side, and he never gave me credit for any one of them. I spent days in labour, and a lifetime recovering from the pain.* Her hands ached, her loins ached, her head ached, every part of her swam with the pain of knowing that she could not be around to protect them forever.

They drew up outside the Great Gate, where the City Watch had the largest of its barracks. Above her the walls of Lannisport were crumbling and broken, wooden hoardings splintered, chalk dust cascading slowly down. The queen dismounted and went inside through the low door, down a set of steps, her purpose ringing out plain in every footfall.

“They are ready for you, Your Grace,” said the captain of the guards. “Down here, if you please.”

He led her down a winding passage and out into a grand stone room ornamented with pillars. The two lords were standing behind a table, dressed in woollen finery but manacled at the hands. Jonos Bracken was in dun, with a red stallion on his cloak, Clement Piper in sky-blue and white.

Piper dropped to one knee at once, while Jonos Bracken remained standing even as she stared him out. Cersei decided to make an example of the kneeling man first. Though from what she was seeing now, that would not be overly difficult.

“You swore an oath to my father Tywin Lannister after the Red Wedding,” Cersei said, “yet you broke it all the same, and turned your back on House Lannister. I would be well within my rights to have your head cut off, and your son’s.”

“W-we... we were loyal to House Lannister until the enemy was at the gates of Pinkmaiden. We did not surrender until the Blackfish was riding through the streets of the town—”

“Yet you surrendered all the same,” the queen replied. For a moment, she was tempted to give this pathetic weasel the death he deserved. But that would win her no friends. “On your feet,” she commanded, “and get out of my sight.”

“You might as well take my head off, Your Grace,” said Lord Jonos once they were alone. “My
knees do not bend as easily as Piper’s.”

“No, but they will bend, in time. They tell me that you were among the first to turn your cloak when the battle went awry for Stannis.”


“I can hardly call your actions brave or honourable, since you fought for Stannis at the Golden Tooth and Sarsfield, but they were wiser than those who fought with the pretender to the end. Such as Tytos Blackwood.”

She had him there, she could tell from the gleam in his eye. The Brackens hated the Blackwoods, and the Blackwoods hated the Brackens. Rivalries like these were easy to play into. “Is Lord Tytos dead?” Bracken asked hopefully.

“Fled,” Cersei told him, “with the remnants of Stannis’s force. But we will root them out, given time. And perhaps you could aid us in that, my lord.”

“How so?”

“You hate Tytos Blackwood. But you also know him very well. How he thinks in a fight, what he will do when threatened, where he will flee to. I will send you out with Ser Addam Marbrand and the remainder of your men. Bring me Tytos Blackwood’s head to mount alongside Stannis, and I could give you a rather large slice of the lands that once belonged to Raventree Hall... aye, and to Riverrun.”

“The Tullys—?”

“Why, the Tullys may be the most heinous traitors of all. I can offer you Riverrun. Stannis can offer you a grave.” It was important to remind him what the alternative was. “Doubtless a Bracken sword spilled blood during the Night of the Wolf. Perhaps it was a Bracken sword that slew my father Lord Tywin. My son the king is merciful, but he will be keen to punish my father’s murderer. He loved Lord Tywin well, you know.”

Bracken snorted. “Forgive my impropriety, Your Grace. But your father was a man to be feared, not loved.”

As am I, Cersei thought. “Fear is just another sort of love, if you look at it in a certain light. But I digress, Lord Jonos. You must make a choice: Riverrun or death.”

And Jonos Bracken chose Riverrun, as she’d known he would. Cersei climbed the stairs from the cells feeling oddly satisfied. Perhaps this day would not turn out to be a complete and utter failure after all. Even if she couldn’t promise him Riverrun at once, the Lord of Stone Hedge could be a powerful ally, of the sort that Cersei needed to supplant Ser Kevan’s influence on the small council.

She had chosen not to convene the council today. It would be easier to see them all separately rather than invoke the unified wrath of Ser Kevan’s sycophants. And as for her uncle himself... well, a trip to Castamere would not go amiss, both for the benefit of his own personal health and to oversee the rebuilding of the castle. A royal command could be coaxed out of Tommen and it would not be difficult to convince Aunt Dorna that she and her children would be safer away from Lannisport and the Rock than they would be here. And that was not even a lie, so her pious aunt should find no fault in it.

Yes, all things considered, it had been a rather fruitful day, despite the disagreements with the war council. As she told Eleyna Westerling that evening, as the girl sat on the stool opposite the queen’s
bathtub, watching her intently. The girl had not looked remotely surprised at this random summoning to Cersei’s tent. More than that, she looked pleased. In that, the queen was finding Eleyna rather like Margaery Tyrell, and consequently insufferable.

_We should have stuck with Sansa_, she thought, _bugger Father’s alliances, at least the little bird would have made a docile queen. And had she lived, Joff might have survived his wedding, too._

“Ruling is no easy task,” she told Eleyna. “I once told my little brother that it was like lying on a bed of weeds, ripping them out by the stems.”

“Your little brother? Lord Tyrion.”

“Of course.” It had been a very long time she had last thought about Tyrion, come to mention it. _Perhaps he is dead. Perhaps the Targaryens took his head off, and Lord Cafferen lied to us about his survival._ That would be no great loss. She felt oddly antipathic it.

“You have a brother, don’t you, Lady Eleyna?”

“Rollam.”

“Rollam.” Cersei nodded. “The Lord of the Crag. I seem to recall that he was recently betrothed to Ser Addam Marbrand’s daughter.”

“Yes. His Grace helped… organise that for us.”

“Oh, yes, the king can be very generous towards those who help him.” The words came easily and softly, silk edged with steel. “And less generous towards those who do not.”

Eleyna Westerling bobbed her head. “I… I will remember that, Your Grace.”

_Oh, you’d better._ “I remember what it was like to be young like you. I suppose you must have a fair few suitors, as the beautiful daughter of a house as ancient and noble as the Westerlings…”

The girl coloured. “Only one, Your Grace.”

“And is he fond of you?”

“I… I think so.”

Cersei smiled. “Then we shall have to see if the king can arrange a betrothal for you.”

Eleyna’s smile only served to remind the queen of how stupid the girl was. _She is no fit consort for a king. The loss will break the girl’s silly little heart, to be sure, but hopefully she will learn what the real world is like, and her place in it. As I did._ Cersei had cried for hours on the day that the Mad King had rejected her father’s proposal, but in the end, she was alive, here and now, and Aerys, Rhaegar and that Dornish slut Elia were dead and buried. _And I kept Jaime._ Her brother was worth a hundred silver princes, and a thousand Robert Baratheons.

“I had plenty of suitors in my youth, but precious few that pleased me,” she continued. “The first was called Gerold. He was a groom or a squire, but four or five years my elder. I never knew for certain who picked the flowers for me, but I did see him in the Stone Garden the night before, down on his hands and knees.”

“What happened to him?”

Cersei snorted. “Oh, he was far too lowborn for a Lannister of the Rock.” _And he was never real,_
besides. I have only ever loved Jaime. She let those words hang in the air for a moment. “Tell me more about your mysterious suitor, Lady Eleyna. It makes me feel young again.” She thought of giggling girlish fancies, and her sessions of embroidery with Melara Hetherspoon and Fat Jeyne Farman. Melara had been even stupider than the Westerling girl, daring to think that Jaime loved her. Of course, that had never mattered in the end.

For the first time in an age, Cersei thought of Maggy the Frog. *Your death is here tonight, child,* she’d told Melara. *Can you feel her presence?* And then Maggy had fallen down the well and the queen had been left to puzzle over her prophecy alone. *And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar shall wrap his hands around your pale white throat and you will know no more.*

*Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds.* The bathwater had suddenly gone very cold, and the candles were all flickering.

It came as a surprise when the Westerling girl finally spoke. “My suitor… well… I think you already know, Your Grace.”

Cersei frowned. “You’re right. I do.” All at once she had had enough. “Let me tell you this: you will never marry my son. Ever. Do you really think that you stand a chance?”

The girl swallowed. “I… I…” Then she seemed to find her resolve, and set her mouth in a hard line. “Does your son regularly invite ladies to share his tent? Sometimes we do more than just talk, you know. The king is a fifteen-year-old boy, and when drunk he might be easily encouraged to try new experiences…”

“Oh, to be sure. Is that the end of your feeble threat? Very well, let me answer with mine. I suppose even the Westerlings have a singer, back at your impoverished ruin of a castle.” Eleyna did not answer. “Does your singer know ‘The Rains of Castamere’, perchance? I imagine he probably does. It is a popular song.” She rose from the bath, water dripping down her legs, her hair soaked with lavender salt, and stepped out onto the mat. The Westerling girl averted her eyes, afraid to even look upon her. *I am a lioness,* Cersei thought. *I am the queen.*

“If you so much as touch my son,” she said, drying herself on one of the towels. “I will do to House Westerling what my father did to the Reynes. You may go.”

The girl tried to keep her head up her to make her look less fearful. And failed. When she was gone, Cersei sat down on her bed and waited for her maids to come by. The gown was plush red velvet with padding and bronze plates over the shoulders, slashed with stripes of golden satin. *Lannister colours, to show what is in my heart.* Her handmaid and cousin Joy Hill brought her cloak. Cersei did not want to hide her colours, but better to look shrouded than shivering. “This will serve,” the queen murmured as she stared into the looking glass. *Yes, this will serve nicely indeed.*

The queen rode from her tent to the main pavilion on a white horse, escorted by Ser Robert Strong and a dozen knights. Along the way, they passed soldiers clustered around campfires and forcing their way into the massive feast tents. “*Long live House Lannister!*” they called as she rode past, and “*seven blessings upon Your Grace!*” and “*Long live the king and queen!*”

*They are behind me,* Cersei thought. *Even if Ser Kevan and his dogs disagree, there are no shortage of soldiers to carry Tommen’s banner all the way to King’s Landing. They were drunk on victory, yes, but if she moved quickly their battle-hunger would carry them forwards in earnest.*

*And if Ser Addam or Ser Lyle will not lead them, I will go myself. That was a sweet thought. Like Nymeria the Rhoynish warrior-queen, or Aegon’s queens Rhaenys and Visenya. I will wear Jaime’s golden armour, and lead them to the gates of King’s Landing, to the Red Keep, to the Iron Throne.*
Eventually they came upon the main pavilion, an immense construction of red silk and cloth-of-gold, as big as any castle’s great hall. Cersei walked between rows of benches crowded with knights and lords of the Westerlands until she reached the dais.

Her assigned seat was between Tommen and her aunt Dorna, who occupied the space that would normally have been reserved for her husband. “Kevan has sent for you, Cersei,” Lady Dorna said. “He wishes to ensure that you are comfortable with your new responsibilities.”

“How very gracious of him. But my uncle should not concern himself with such things, not right now. I hope he is resting well.”

“He is better than he was this morning. Which is not saying much.” Lady Dorna frowned. “I will not be staying long, I fear. My appearance here is little more than courtesy.”

Cersei smiled. “I would hate for the stress to wear you down, aunt. Qyburn has told me that Castamere is fit for a household to inhabit, now. I don’t imagine that the smoke of Lannisport can be doing Ser Kevan much good. And your children… Martyn, and Janei, is it…?”

“You wound me, aunt. You know how much I love my family.” More than you know. Ser Kevan might have some knowledge of her and Jaime, but Dorna Swyft was clueless on the matter. “I suppose it might be best to keep us all together, though,” Cersei went on. “Your daughter… I am in need of a new handmaiden, and your son could squire for… Ser Damion, maybe?”

“I told you earlier that I am not blind, niece. Surely your duties as Queen Regent are more pressing than taking care of us. We can mind ourselves.”

“You love your children, Cersei thought, as she watched her aunt consider the meaning of that. As I love my own.

“I will think about it,” Lady Dorna said eventually. “But now I must go.” She apologised to Tommen, and Cersei watched her make the long walk back between the benches, and out into the night.

Later, as the queen finished her third cup of wine, Lord Qyburn came up onto the dais and knelt to whisper in her ear. “Lord Randyll Tarly is here, Your Grace.”

She had been expecting this ever since Qyburn’s news of Tarly’s defeat at Highgarden. A beaten dog always returns to his master. A pity that he had chosen to return tonight of all nights, but she was hardly busy up here on the dais, nor was she enjoying herself. Tommen had drunk far more wine than he probably should have, and she found him staring into the distance at the Westerling girl more than once. Not that it matters. The girl knows her place now. She will not go against me, not after once I said. And with “The Rains of Castamere” echoing through the hall, Cersei doubted that Lady Eleyna would forget herself.

Cersei said her farewells to Tommen and made her way out the way Lady Dorna had gone, Qyburn at her heels, and Ser Robert Strong following third. “Where is his lordship?” she asked, once they were out of earshot of those in the pavilion.

“I took the liberty of directing him to your tent, Your Grace. Before Ser Kevan’s men could intercept him. As for the army he has brought—”

“Army?” Cersei could not help but smile.

“Sixteen hundred, Your Grace. Half a hundred knights among that number, the rest spears, crossbowmen, common men-at-arms.”
“Well, we must see to it that they are properly accommodated.”

“Their captains have been directed to the feast tents, Your Grace, while the rest will partake in the common feasts. They will be well-fed, their horses watered, and they will have a place to sleep for the nights.”

“Have them prepare a barracks in the city,” the queen said. “I think that Lord Tarly’s men will be here to stay.” *Especially with what I am about to offer him.* She could not help but smirk. “That will be all, Lord Qyburn.”

It was strange to enter her tent and find it already occupied. The lord of Horn Hill stood alone in front of the hearth, wrapped up in steel and leather. He was a tall, broad man, with a bald pate and small eyes, every inch a soldier. Lord Randyll bowed his head when he saw her, but did not take a knee as Cersei would have liked. *No matter. Let him keep his pride. It will do you no harm.*

“I trust you had a pleasant journey on the ocean road, my lord,” she said.

“We encountered a spell of bandits near Crakehall, but other than that there was nothing amiss.”

“I was sorry to hear of your son’s death, too.” Polite courtesies would not go amiss. “Dickon, was it?”

“Aye. He was a good lad. He died bravely.” It surprised Cersei how dispassionate he sounded. *But then, fathers never love their children as mothers do.* Robert Baratheon and her own father had more than proved that.

“I find it strange that you did not send word of your coming,” the queen continued, as Joy Hill poured cups of mulled wine. “Forgive me, Lord Randyll, but that makes me suspicious.”

“I assure Your Grace that we bear you no ill will,” he replied, “we are loyal to His Grace the king. And I am your stalwart Warden of the South, now and always.”

*Tyrion’s letter,* she remembered; Tarly had made mention of it when he sent ravens to every corner of the realm announcing his claim to the Reach. “Of course,” Cersei said mildly. “No one can doubt that. Coming all this way… what is that if not a show of true loyalty?”

“I live to serve,” said Lord Randyll.

*Yes, but to serve whom?* Tarly was a proud man, and all too often proud men served only themselves, and were reluctant to bow.

But Lannisters had dealt with proud men in the past. *And so he spoke, and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere…*

“Tommen would be glad to hear that,” she said, “and gladder still to confirm your position. We have need of strong military minds now more than ever. You are the only man who ever defeated my royal husband on the battlefield, Lord Tarly, and that is more than testament to your strength.” And that would serve to feed his pride even more.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Help us take King’s Landing, and we will give you the Reach. With the Tyrells having turned traitor, we need a loyal friend—”

“I thought the king might have doubted me,” Lord Randyll replied doubtfully, “given that he has
invited the Tyrells to treat with him.”

Cersei scowled. “I fear I do not follow.”

“Your Grace?” His frown matched hers. “Lady Margaery and her husband Quentyn Martell were riding only a few miles behind us, my scouts report. Like as not, they will be here inside a few days…”

_What? Why was I not told of this? How did Qyburn not know?_ She must have looked an utter fool in front of Lord Randyll then, disarmed by a simple fact like that. She felt blind in one way.

“Tomen… he… yes, of course.” Cersei groped for understanding. “Naturally, His Grace was merely keeping his options open.” Some strange immutable fury was boiling inside her. _Even my son is keeping secrets from me now. Is this Ser Kevan’s work? Or the Westerling girl’s? Or some sinister plot from Margaery Tyrell herself?_ “We shall meet the Tyrells when they get here, and not before,” she went on. “But I doubt that anything will come of that.” _I hope._ “As for you, my lord… what would you have of me?” It was important to make Lord Randyll hers, before someone else jumped in.

“I want Horn Hill back, Your Grace. The Tyrells have the castle under siege, and my wife and daughters are their captives. And I want the Reach, as was promised to me.” He waved the paper under her nose again. “For that you shall have the undying loyalty of House Tarly.”

Old men might spend weeks and months and years perfecting their plans, ensuring that everything was perfectly set up, at every stage of execution. Her father had been like that, and Cersei sought to be the same. But this idea came to her on the spur of the moment, and quite simply she knew that it was right. _Daughters, you said?_ If you stand by me, Lord Randyll, I can offer you far more than just the Reach.

After, once agreements had been made and Lord Randyll she trudged across the camp beneath the smoke-dark sky, in the direction of Tommen’s tent. A light rain was falling; Cersei heard barking dogs and neighing horses all across the valley. _I should like to return to the Rock, _she thought, _leave Ser Kevan’s men to squabble at their war councils, and get back to ruling._ Alas, she could not; that would be seen as retreating, and they would never respect her after that.

_We must go forward._ On the morrow, she would meet the war council again, and formally send Ser Addam and Ser Lyle to her duties. Leaving her to deal with the Tyrells. _Why did Tommen ask them to come here?_ she wondered irritably. Her anger only grew as she approached the tent.

“Your Grace.” Ser Jasper Peckledon moved between the queen and the tent entrance. “I am afraid His Grace is occupied at the moment.”

“Step aside, ser, or I will have Ser Robert remove you.” Cersei stepped neatly around him, and shoved her way through the tent flap.

She found Tommen lying back against his pillows, clad only in his shirt and underclothes. His face was reddish from all the wine he’d drunk and his hair was a scraggly mess. The Westerling whore was dressed only in a robe of pale blue silk. When she saw Cersei, her face went white, then red, then—

Cersei spoke very slowly. “Get… out.”

“I—”

“GET OUT!”
The girl left with same dignified half-run she had used to escape the queen earlier.

Tommen approached her. “Mother, I… I kissed her. That’s all. I just… I’m…” He clenched his hands into fists, unclenched them again.

It was all Cersei could do not to hit him. I will destroy that girl. I will tear her to shreds and burn the ashes. “You stupid boy,” she managed to hiss, “have you got any idea what you’ve done? Do you think Lord Tarly will let you marry his daughter if he thinks you’re…” She could not find the words.

“Mother, what are you talking about? Lord Tarly’s daughter… I…”

“He has three. You will marry one of them, and that will be the cost of our alliance with House Tarly.” The anger had fled. Her tone was as cold and lifeless as Lord Tywin’s.

“Alliance with House Tarly? I… what? When did you—”

“Be silent. I’ll not be questioned by you, given what you’ve done with the Tyrells.”

“I only meant—”

“You think you know what ruling is, Tommen?” It had gone far beyond a mere dispute now. “Do you honestly think you know what sacrifice is? You think you can rule the Seven Kingdoms by following a middle path, through diplomacy and kindness. Would you pardon Stannis as well? When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground. The Tyrells abandoned your cause; there will be no negotiation with them. And you will not marry some whore who has no benefit to our cause whatsoever, just because you like the way she looks at you. Do you understand me?” She grabbed his wrist, admonishing him as though he were a boy of five and not five-and-ten.

Cersei was certain that he would back down. But she was wrong. For in that moment, those eyes were not hers, nor Jaime’s, but her father’s.

“Fine. There is no middle ground,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean I have to side with you. I heard you at the war council today, obsessing over some march to King’s Landing. We’re not going to King’s Landing. I asked Margaery here so that we could negotiate terms of peace between the Reach and the Westerlands, not to start another war. And I’ll marry whoever I want, because I am the king, and you aren’t.”

“Any man who must say I am the king is no true king,” she said, as her father had once told Joffrey. And left him.

The queen did not sleep well that night. She dreamed a dark dream that she had not dreamed in a long time, that she was back in the woods with Melara and Fat Jeyne Farman, and that Maggy the Frog tasted her morrows in a drop of scarlet blood.

But when the time came for the witch to speak, instead of muttering about golden crowns and golden shrouds, she said, “Gleaming is the brother, white and giant tall. He shall slay the valonqar, and bring about his fall. Yes, gleaming is the brother, a metal giant’s gleam. He shall slay the valonqar, making you a queen.”

When morning came, she awoke in a cold sweat, and sent Joy Hill to fetch Qyburn at once. The giant could only mean Ser Robert Strong, she mused. And the valonqar… well, that was Tyrion.

But if the words foretold of Ser Robert killing Tyrion, then why did she feel so afraid?
This chapter reminded me of why I love Cersei Lannister. This is where her story really takes off. Overall, this may be one of my favourite chapters in terms of the character voice.

Cersei isn't stupid, just sometimes irrational, and occasionally very unlucky as a ruler. She makes some pretty logical decisions regarding Jonos Bracken and Clement Piper, and she dealt with Randyll Tarly effectively. However, we can see her overconfidence and arrogance coming through, as well as the failing that Littlefinger mentions to Sansa in AFFC as Cersei's main weakness: her inability to predict that pieces in the game of thrones have a mind of their own. That's why she fails with Tommen in this chapter, even though she succeeds pretty well in other places.

Also, it was nice to see Qyburn again. I've just realised that this chapter is only his 2nd appearance in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, but we will be getting more of the guy going forwards.

Next chapter: Jaime.
THE MANY-FACED GOD

Chapter Summary

“...there is always a choice, child. The choice is yours.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THE DEAD MAN’S DAUGHTER

The bargeman was singing the old song about the shipwrecked princess, his voice lilting in time with the sway of the boat. “She was a princess faraway, floating further day by day. The white waves might have had their way, but the sea gods had a different say...”

The girl called Lyanna listened from the back of the moonlit barge, one arm clasped in Aresto Oterys’s. What gods does he keep? she wondered. The House of Black and White had statues of the Stranger and the Black Goat of Qohor, and Red R’hllor, and the Lion of Night, and many others. Lyanna did not know all of them all, but surely there must be a vengeful sea god somewhere among the dark graveyard of old statues.

The bargeman crooned another verse. “The princess is ours, the gods bemoan, she’ll never find her way back home, for the way is seaweed and harsh black stone, and rivers run black through the kingdom of bone...”

Aresto squeezed her hand. “It’s a good song,” he said quietly.

“I’ve heard it many times before,” she replied. “My father used to sing it all the time.” She felt a pang of guilt. A girl has no father.

“Who are you?” the kindly man had asked that morning when she left the House of Black and White, as he had the day before, and the day before that.

“No one,” she had answered, as she had the day before, and the day before that. “A girl is no one.” But she remembered what the waif had said on that rooftop, and her words rang truer day by day. You are but a nummer, and a poor one at that. And that is all you ever will be. They couldn’t be true, though. If they were, the kindly man would have asked me to leave the temple. So it isn’t true.

A girl is no one, she asserted.

Or rather, a girl was Lyanna, of the House of Tarellys, and she was beautiful. As they skimmed across the dark water of the canal, the lantern threw up the reflection of her face. “She was a beauty
spurned,” the kindly man said as he brought her the face. “And a beauty undiscovered, so no man will know you.”

A beauty spurned no longer. Aresto Oterys had been taken by her almost at once. Lyanna knew his secrets and his woes and his darkest, deepest desires, and in return she had given him everything she had, save for the truth behind her mask. He loved the dead man’s daughter deeply, and the dead man’s daughter would no doubt have loved him, so she did. Or tried to. But after tonight, the young bravo would never see her again. A girl is no one, and Lyanna of House Tarellys was never anyone. Such were the ways of the Faceless Men. And after tonight, she would be one of them. “All you have to do,” the kindly man had said, with the hint of sarcasm in his smile, “is kill the Sealord of Braavos.”

The girl still wondered why. Ferrego Antaryon was an old man, and ailing; they all knew that this might very well be his last party. Yet somehow the dead man’s daughter doubted that she was the only one out to kill him tonight. Although... if it was so, why would the Many-Faced God send me to do this thing, when he could rely on one of the Sealord’s other enemies to do it for him?

But such a thing was not for her to question. Valar dohaeris, she thought, valar morghulis. She blinked twice, three times, opening her eyes again to the world. The Sealord’s Palace stretched out before them across the shimmering stretch of pearly-bright water, a dark silhouette against the bright moon. Half a dozen other craft joined them as they drifted in, pink and purple lanterns glittering at their prows. “Not much farther,” Aresto said. “Do you like it, my lady? The palace is beautiful by day, but even more so by night, all agree. Yet only we chosen few ever get to see that beauty.”

Lyanna could not deny that the Sealord’s Palace had a certain something in the misty night, but she would not have called it beauty. It was more than that: a mystery unsolved that turned towers and walls into great shadowy monuments, and brought life to the statues and gargoyles overlooking the canal water. Quick as a snake, the girl thought. Quiet as a shadow. The boats drifted in, graceful as swans, with hot lanterns for eyes.

Aresto stepped out first and extended a hand to help her onto the pier. The moonglow caught her eyes, nearly blinding her. Were she not holding his arm she might have slipped in her heeled shoes. Lyanna would rather not wear them, but she must needs look the part of a nobleman’s daughter, so her nimble feet were as cloaked and disguised as the rest of her.

Who are you? the wind asked again.

“No one,” she replied softly.

“My lady?” Aresto gave her one of his boyish smiles. “Did you say something?”

“No. I was just... thinking.”

He nodded. “We should go up to the palace.” Lyanna did not fail to notice that he was shaking a little as he offered her his arm. He is nervous. She was not. Calm as still water. Calm as still water...

She counted the guards as they climbed the steps and passed through the iron gates: ten, twelve, fourteen... Too many to fight. I will have to find another way out. That would not be hard. The Sealord’s Palace had all matter of ledges and walkways and outhouse towers, and olive trees overtopping the fences. A cat could climb them easily, she thought.

But she was not a cat. She was Lyanna, she was the dead man’s daughter, she was no one.

The hall was full of bright new torchlight, burning amber and soft red in the wall sconces. The guests
were in bright silks and chiffons, with collars and hems of frothy gold. The wine ran in streams and rivers from tall crystal fountains into the waiting cups of the Braavosi nobility and all their guests below. Great trestle tables were laden with dishes of saffron-poached swan and jellied eels and chunks of blue snakemeat, and so forth. There were feathery grains and tall marrow-like vegetables and pieces of fleshy pink and orange fruits for those who did not want to feast themselves on meat. But for the most part the food went ignored in the face of Ferrego Antaryon’s other entertainments. There were more musicians in here than Lyanna had ever seen in any one place, dozens of fiddlers and harpists, a score of lutists, trumpeters, and singers ranging from deep broad-shouldered baritones to the eunuch boys of Volantis and the other Free Cities. Elsewhere there were dancers and tumblers. Out on the terrace they played with fire and dancing bears.

Even Aresto seemed surprised by the size of it all. “I did not think it would be this grand,” he murmured quietly as they passed through.

A yellow-garbed mistress heard them. “Ferrego’s last party,” she said, “of course he’ll make it a big one. Wouldn’t want to leave us all disappointed.” She went back to her wine.

They ventured further into the palace. Everywhere was deep velvet carpets and bright Myrish rugs, trodden beneath the feet of Antaryon’s guests and watched over by the pale stone statues of all the Sealords that had come before him. Secret doors led to secret places. Lyanna caught a young couple kissing in an alcove, blind to all around them. She caught Aresto glancing at them, then shyly back at her.

He wants me, but he is too timid to ask, she thought, and squeezed his hand a little. She had learned tactics in seduction from Selessa at Enyo’s bakery; perhaps she would be able to put them to use...

In a wood-panelled room at the heart of the palace, a crowd had gathered. “What are they looking at?” she asked Aresto as they pushed their way through.

He climbed up onto a chair to get a look over their heads. “Tormo Fregar, it would seem.” Aresto extended an arm to help Lyanna up.

For all that she had heard of him, Tormo Fregar was not particularly impressive to look at. Though the cut and expensive material of his clothes spoke to his wealth, as did the pigeon’s egg-sized gemstone around his neck, the overall picture was somewhat gaudy. “Now, now,” he was saying to a tall stork-like woman. “Now, we mustn’t insult Ferrego’s hospitality, Lanea. But I am inclined to agree with you. I think blue would look good for the drapes…”

Aresto seemed unimpressed. “…already assuming he’ll be the new Sealord.”

He will be, Lyanna knew, but she could not tell him that. “It’s a little disrespectful,” Aresto continued, “still, I can’t say he’s wrong. They won’t choose anyone else.”

And then they were moving through one hall into the next, and everything dwindled into a whirlwind of colour. She was certain that they went through most of the rooms in the palace, yet there was still no sign of Ferrego Antaryon. “Where is the Sealord?” she asked Aresto, but he did not know either.

Two hours till midnight, the girl thought.

All the great and the good of Braavos were here tonight. She spied brightly-garbed magisters and sober-clothed men from the Iron Bank sitting together, diplomats and dignitaries from foreign cities and states, a host of courtesans: Bellegere Otherys, the Black Pearl, in yellow silk with a string of pearls around her nut-brown throat; the Merling Queen, accompanied by four Mermaids in shimmering silvery-green silk; the Daughter of the Dusk...
A great orange leviathan of a man named Donesto Tromel made an abrupt entrance accompanied by his own marching band. It appeared that he had been denied an invitation, something which he did not seem all too pleased about. After making a rather loud drunken ruckus, he retreated back into the night vowing revenge.

The party slowly staggered back into motion.

*An hour till midnight,* the girl thought.

Shortly after Tromel’s exit, a troupe of trumpeters came down into the main hall, and began to play a loud, screeching song that set all the guests to dancing. Aresto was talking with one of his father’s friends as the music started, and Lyanna knew that this was her chance. She ducked through the halls until she found the staircase, winding tall around the edges. She made her way through the crowd, and up the steps, up and up. *Swift as a deer. Quiet as a shadow. Calm as still water—*

Lyanna reached the upper balcony and squatted there, looking over the hall like a hawk. Then she turned away from the staircase and entered the marble maze of corridors, checking the doors and passages left and right—

“Child,” said a voice. “I can hardly see a reason for you to be skulking around up here. If you weren’t so well dressed, I might take you for a thief.”

Lyanna’s head snapped round. “Who are you?” she asked the woman before her, unable to keep the note of curiosity out of her voice.

“I know you,” she thought, *I have seen you before.*

The woman smiled. “I confess myself surprised,” she said, making her slow approach towards Lyanna. Her feet, oddly bare, made no sound against the tiled floor. “Most people know my name, if not my face. Most *men,* at the very least.”

“But we are not men,” said Lyanna.

*Valar dohaeris,* replied the courtesan. She *was* a courtesan, Lyanna was certain. Not some threepenny whore who made her living in a back alley, but a lady of the court, who received gifts far more freely than she gave them. *Great lords and noblemen will beggar themselves at her feet.* All threepenny girls aspired to be courtesans. Hardly any of them succeeded.

*She is not the Veiled Lady,* Lyanna thought. *She has no veil. And the Black Pearl is black, and I saw her downstairs besides. Not the Poetess either, she never goes anywhere without her book.* Then she realised. *Her voice... there is something in her voice.* It was oddly melodious, as though every word were a song—

“—The Nightingale,” she broke out, “you’re the Nightingale. The one who sings.”

“The one who sings,” the Nightingale agreed with a small laugh. “Quite right. I sing indeed. My suitors tell me that I am the finest singer Braavos has seen for a hundred years.” She paused, awaiting Lyanna’s reply.

“I... I suppose that you must hear that quite a lot,” she replied. “But as I haven’t heard you sing, how could I tell you that truly?”

The Nightingale smiled again. Her face was as pale and exquisite as porcelain, but her hair was wild, streaming down in pale, reddish-brown ringlets kissed with streaks of silver. “You are more amusing than most, child. What do they call you?”

“Lyanna.”
The courtesan considered that. “It is a pretty name, Lyanna. But you must have another name? A family name?”

“I-...” With a start of horror she realised that she had forgotten. *Tellerys?* she wondered. *Temerys?* “I-I...” She must sound like a stranded fish, dying on the cobblestones.

The Nightingale smiled. “And here you are,” she murmured vaguely. “Never mind your name. I learned long ago that names don’t mean everything.” She reached out and touched Lyanna’s cheek, gently brushing her hair away from her face. “You remind me of myself at an age, child. Do you like to sing?”

“Sing?” Her voice felt thick. “I... no, not really.”

“You should try, sometime. Your voice carries a certain confidence. Men would hear your words and fall under your spell, I think. If you can do that, you can make them believe anything.”

“And women?” wondered Lyanna.

“Oh,” said the Nightingale. “Women are somewhat less fickle, I have found. If you mean to seduce them so, I wish you good fortune.” She softened her smile. “Will you walk with me?”

Lyanna could hardly refuse. “Where are you going?”

“To see some very important people. Would you like to meet the Sealord of Braavos, child?” She did not give Lyanna time to reply, but threaded her arm through hers. Together they glided through the moonlit hall. “Singing is my talent,” the Nightingale said as they walked, “but I have tried music and poetry, archery and penmanship, and I knew an old warlock from Volantis who taught me a little alchemy and deception once.” She had dropped her voice to a hush, like the whisper young girls used to share their secrets. “I was good at some, and less good at others. But everyone has a talent they prize above all else. Mine is singing. I wonder, child, what is yours?”

Lyanna thought about that for a moment. “Dancing,” she said at long last. “Though I’m quite good at needlework as well.”

The Nightingale gave her a secret smile, as if she understood. “Ah,” she said, “of course. I can see why.” By now they were outside the Sealord’s door. The Nightingale moved between the guards and reached out for the handle... and stepped back as a yellow-haired man in a dark grey cloak stepped out in front of her, his pale face flushing red. “Oh... my lady,” he murmured. “I...”

“Most aggrieved. You will not find my lord of Antaryon in a good mood tonight, my lady. Him and his...” He shook his head. “Damn them both.” He shouldered past them and disappeared down the hall, cursing.

“I hope Massey has not put you off meeting with me,” said a reedy voice from inside the room. “He has a persuasive art, I admit.”

“He is a knight, Lyanna thought, a Westerosi knight, by his accent. “Somewhat? Oh, believe me, I am.” The knight ran his hands listlessly through his thinning hair. “Most aggrieved. You will not find my lord of Antaryon in a good mood tonight, my lady. Him and his...” He shook his head. “Damn them both.” He shouldered past them and disappeared down the hall, cursing.

“I hope Massey has not put you off meeting with me,” said a reedy voice from inside the room. “He has a persuasive art, I admit.”

“But I am no stranger to persuasion.” The Nightingale strode boldly inside. “So you will not convince me with any of your familiar tricks, Ferrego.”

The man who must be the Sealord relaxed in his chair. He looked even older than Lyanna had expected. His eyes were withdrawn and small, his cheeks grey and sallow. It was no longer a mystery to her why he had not made an appearance in the main hall this evening. If he had, his
guests would have been so convinced of his frailty that they would probably have starting plotting their coups before midnight.

“Oh, our host has familiar tricks, to be sure,” said a voice. “Why don’t you let me try you with some of my unfamiliar ones?”

Nothing in her life had ever made Arya so shocked as when she turned them to see Tyrion Lannister sitting in the chair opposite the Sealord. But he’s in Westeros, she thought, that, or he’s dead. “How are you here?” she blurted, unable to stop herself.

The Imp turned to her, looking slightly bemused. I could kill him right here and now, she thought, I could kill him as I did that Night’s Watch deserter. Dareon, she remembered. His name was not the only thing coming back to her—

Lannister furrowed his brow. “Do I know you, girl?”

“No,” Arya managed to say. “I thought you... looked like someone else.”

“We little folk aren’t all the same person, you know.” He looked equal parts affronted and amused.

“No. Of course not.” She felt so stupid. But none of it made sense. How could the Imp be here, of all places? And how had she not known about it?

Lannister moved his eyes to the Nightingale. “You are one of Lord Antaryon’s companions, my lady?”

“Companions?” The Nightingale raised an eyebrow. “That is one way of putting it, I suppose. And you must be this Westerosi lord I have heard so much about.”

“Nothing too troubling, I hope. I would prefer for my reputation to remain unsullied by rumours.”

Ferrego Antaryon spluttered out a laugh. “As do we all,” he managed eventually. “Almost always in vain. Men love their stories, even if they are just that.”

“Well,” said Lannister, “I was certainly guilty of a little rumourmongering in my youth. My sister was not amused.” He grinned and turned back to the Nightingale. “The Carons of Nightsong have nightingales on their sigil, I seem to recall. Are you some distant cousin?”

“No,” the Nightingale replied.

Lannister gave that a rueful smile. “I suppose that’s a good thing. The Carons are dead and dispossessed now, by the order of my lord father. They were screwed over by Lord Tywin almost as much as I was.”

“What happened to your nose?” Arya asked. He’d had a nose at Winterfell, she was certain of it. Hadn’t he? She couldn’t really remember that far back.

“Why, aren’t you just full of questions, lady...”

“Lady Lyanna,” she said, “you can call me Lya.”

“Lyanna?” the Imp murmured. “Perchance you are from the Seven Kingdoms, my lady? There was a Lady Lyanna there, about twenty years ago. And a great war which set all our lands to bleeding.”

Arya knew that only too well. She remembered her father in the godswood, looking solemnly round at the trees, scraping blood from the blade of his sword Ice with a ragged grey cloth. I have no father,
she had to remind herself, *I am no one. And the dead man’s daughter does not know of Lyanna Stark.* “My father visited the North a couple of times,” she allowed. “Before I was born, I mean. He said it was lonely there.”

Tyrion Lannister gave her an odd, long look. “He spoke truly. There are places up north where a man can stand and be alone for miles around. It’s rare that you find a place like that. Perhaps my road will lead back there someday.”

“And mine,” the girl murmured.

“And then there’s the Wall... my lord Antaryon, have you ever seen the Wall?”

“I should have,” said the Sealord. “But I have not, and I doubt I ever will.” He stretched out and found the Nightingale’s hand. “Someone will have to see it for me, I think.”

There was a brief, solemn pause. Then the Imp stumbled to his feet. “Well,” he said to the Sealord, “I will leave you here, I think. I mustn’t keep our friend Illyrio waiting.”

“Where are you going?” asked the Nightingale.

“To the theatre,” said Lannister. “Phario Forel is putting on a production of something called *The Bloody Hand.* About me, as it happens. I think it should be interesting, though I don’t doubt that I’ll be able to play myself more convincingly than any of the actors at the Gate.”

“I wish you,” the Sealord said, then broke off in a coughing fit. He cleared his throat. “I... I wish you... an enjoyable evening, my lord.”

At the doorway the Imp turned back and regarded them all with a mocking half-bow. “Keep my friend Ferrego in good company, my ladies,” he said, and backed through the outer door.

The Nightingale watched him go. “I have heard a lot of rumours about Tyrion Lannister,” she said coolly. “But I’ve never claimed that they are particularly righteous.”

“I keep interesting guests in my little menagerie,” said Ferrego Antaryon. “But I should be able to play myself more convincingly than any of the actors at the Gate.”

“Massey?” the Nightingale was saying. “Aye. And he seemed as upset as always.”

“Hmm,” said the Sealord. “There is something to be admired about his persistence, though he should have found some common sense by now. The Iron Bank will not bend.”

“You will get nowhere telling Massey that.”

“Would that I could tell his king. Then he might recall his knight back to Westeros and we could have some peace and quiet...” He let out a laugh which quickly transformed into a cough, rattling his shoulders back and forth. Quivering, he reached out and plucked a kerchief from one of his pockets, brought it to his lips. Arya glimpsed the silken square as he pulled it away, the fabric stained red.
The Nightingale frowned her concern. “Are you alright, my lord—?”

“Quite. This reminds me that you should not trouble myself with the likes of me. Go on, my lady. Leave me to die in peace.”

“Ferrego—”

“Go,” he said, more firmly, then cleared his throat again. “Not you, though, girl.”

It took a long while before Arya realised he was talking to her. “My lord?” she said, trying a wobbly courtesy, all the while wondering what the daughter of a dead captain would say to the Sealord of Braavos. She would be all stuttering and stammering, she decided, like Bran with the princess at King Robert’s welcoming feast.

She pushed that thought away. No One did not have brothers called Bran and Robb and Rickon and Jon Snow. Stick ‘em with the pointy end. She thought of Needle, tucked among its pile of rocks, and of Yoren pulling her down into the crowd, his knife sawing at her hair and him shouting “Don’t look,” as the tears rolled hot down her cheeks, and of the kindly man in the House of Black and White with a stone bowl in hand, asking “Who are you?” over and over and over...

I am no one, she decided.

They were alone now. She had her knife, tucked away in her pocket, and a vial of poison up her sleeve. The poison would be easier, she thought, but she’d have to get to the Sealord’s cup first, and that would not be so easy...

“Come closer, child,” Ferrego Antaryon said, “now, what is your name?”

“Lya... Lyanna,” she said. “But everyone calls me Lya.”

“No, they don’t.” His smile was sad. “You lie well, child. But I have been the Sealord of Braavos for many years. And a part of me always knew... that it would end like this. In my dreams I see men and women staring at me from dark alcoves and alleys. Men with shadowed eyes, and no faces. So. You are the Faceless Man who will bring my end. Or the Faceless Woman, rather.”

He knows. That did not surprise Lyanna as much as it might have. Or perhaps it was that the day had already yielded so many surprises that another was hardly a surprise at all. “Do you deny it?” the Sealord asked.

There is no way back now. “No.” A pause. “What will you do?”

The Sealord laughed at that. “Die, I expect. Surely you have not failed to notice that I am entirely prepared for this. The First Sword of Braavos usually never leaves his master’s side. But Qarro is not here tonight, as you have probably noticed. And have no fear, he is not hiding in the rafters or anything like that.”

Lyanna stood very still. A breath of wind hissed through the windows, and the hearth-fire cowered before it. “How did you know?”

“That is the wrong question, child, and it has a boring answer besides.” He sounded like the kindly man, disappointed in her failings. “The question is why have I let you?” Before she could reply the Sealord held up a hand and went on undeterred. “This is so much greater than either of us, child. And so much older. You know the history of Braavos’s founding, I presume?”

“The escaped slaves ran from the Valyrian dragonlords,” Lyanna answered. “They—”
—they built in city in this distant archipelago, among the mists at the end of the continent. Hoping that they would be far enough away to remain unbothered by the chains of Valyria, and hidden from their beasts ranging above."

"Dragons..."

"Dragons," agreed the Sealord. "Braavos remembers the dragons, and half of Braavos would see them dead. Tormo Fregar would have us invade Westeros and kill Daenerys Targaryen’s dragons using some foul magic, and after tonight he will have his wish. Your Faceless Men will help him in that. With the death of dragons they will serve the Many-Faced God and the Free City of Braavos both... and they are not alone. Illyrio Mopatis wants the dragons dead too, but for very different reasons, I think. The same of the maesters of the Citadel, and the lords of the Reach and Dorne in the Seven Kingdoms. And at the heart of it all lies Aegon Targaryen, Daenerys’s nephew. The Prince that Was Promised, to hear some tell it."

"The Prince that Was Promised?" Arya frowned.

"Oh, child." The Sealord reached out a liver-spotted hand and folded his fingers into hers. “This game we are playing extends farther than you could ever know. Winter is coming. The watchers on the Wall speak of the Others returning to the realms of men from the North, while the Last Lights who man the Five Forts east of Asshai report the same. If they speak truly... then all of Westeros and Essos must stand united... and Aegon is the key to that. It will be. It must be.” He grabbed her hand tighter. “For a long time I have tried to delay what is inevitable. But time is a tide, and onwards it will roll, bringing fire and blood and death to us all..."

Arya’s mouth was dry. “How... how are they going to kill the dragons?” she asked.

“I think you already know, child.”

After a while she realised that he was right. She did. The dragonhorn in the House of Black and White, she realised, and the eggs, the ones that Jaqen brought from Oldtown. And I played my part in all... they sent me to Daenerys, to watch her, to learn her ways and to see how she would react to provocation. They had her account of her journey written down somewhere, and all the ledgers and letters she had stolen for them. I was only ever their piece in the greatest game of all.

“But there are those who would see the world differently,” the Sealord said. “And I am one of them. The dwarf, Tyrion Lannister, is another, and this knight Massey. It is men like them who I truly feel sorry for. Like as not, they will not survive till morning. Once I am dead, Tormo Fregar, Magister Illyrio and the rest of your Faceless brothers will be quick to swoop down and take command of the Arsenal, and all the armies and navies of Braavos. From there they will head to King’s Landing, to do what they must.”

He was straining to say something else, Arya knew, but she had to urge him to say it. “Is there another way?”

The Sealord let out a hiss of breath. “I do not know. But I know this: Fregar’s way leads only to destruction. This horn the Faceless Men are keeping does not kill dragons, child. It only transfers control of them from one owner to another... and when that happens men will fight over dragons and the war will go on and on and all the world will burn. And if these stories of the Others are real...” He pressed something into Arya’s hand, something small and sharp. A dagger. “I must die tonight, child,” he said, “I know that. If you do not kill me, Fregar will do it himself.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why... why are you telling me this?”
Ferrego Antaryon smiled. “Because I knew you would listen. And that shows me... and you... I do not think you are truly one of them...” He brought the blade of the knife up to the apple of his throat. “...there is always a choice, child. The choice is yours. I know this. I have seen this. It must be. Take the horn. Burn the horn.” His eyes turned bright and burned into hers. A few last words escaped. “Only one thing...” the old man said, “you... you must have a name, child. Who are you, truly?”

In that moment, Antaryon’s words were not solely his own. They belonged to Jaqen H’ghar and the kindly man, to a girl’s mother and a girl’s father and a girl’s bastard brother, to many and more that she had known and forgotten. And to herself. Who am I?

“Someone,” she replied quietly. “But I don’t know who.”

The night was unseasonably warm. Rather than heading out the front way, she found a window that overlooked the gardens, unlocked it, and stepped out onto the narrow ledge that ran round the outside of the palace. From there it took only a few minutes of shimmying and a short climb down a rope of grey ivy to reach the pastel tiles of the courtyard. With a sudden start she caught a guard’s pale eyes staring into hers from across the courtyard. Briefly her heart set to racing, but when she realised that the guard was dead it stilled again. Valar morghulis, she thought, and then, it has begun.

She slipped out the gates unnoticed. It was time to cross the city again. Only this time the canals with their bobbing poleboats passed by beneath her as she traversed rooftops and snuck through secret backstreets, routes Cat of the Canals and Blind Beth the beggar girl had known so well. Above the silent, austere avenues of the Purple Harbor she ran, and through the smoke-and-piss alleys of Ragman’s. One last bridge crossed a wide grey canal, and then the House of Black and White was before her on its rocky atoll, a stolid grey fist against the cloudless sky.

The kindly man was waiting for her in the sanctum, smiling, as always. For a long time he watched her in silence. Then he said, “Come,” and beckoned her to join him beside the pool. All around them the stone eyes of gods stared down from cold faces, betraying nothing in their gazes.

“Has a girl done what she was asked to do?” the kindly man asked.

“She has.”

He had a mildly amused look. “And what is that?”

“The Sealord, Ferrego Antaryon, is dead. He was old and ailing, but someone crept in and cut his throat while he was not looking. He died quickly and painlessly, but no one is quite sure when, or who wielded the knife.”

“Oh?” The kindly man’s smile grew. “That bodes well for some, I should think. A certain Tormo Fregar among them, who will become the new Sealord, given that men in his employ have already cut down all opposition to his rise. And so a tyrant will rule Braavos, for a time.” His grey eyes flashed. “I wonder... did the Sealord say anything to a girl, before he parted this world? A few final words?”

“No,” she said. I am not lying. He said some words to Arya of House Stark, but I am no one. Or so she told herself.

“As you will.” The kindly man perched on the lip of the pool, and drew a stone cup from inside his robes. “Three times a girl must drink before she is truly Faceless. Thrice you have killed for us. Thrice you have served the Many-Faced God. Valar morghulis. Valar dohaeris. But only twice you have taken the cup. There must be a third.” He filled the cup with water from the pool and offered it to her, brimming with black salt water.
The Name of the Many-Faced God is one of my favourite chapters in this story, even if I'm pretty sure I'll end up changing the name soon. It's the beginning of the end of the Braavos story, which will probably continue in the three subsequent chapters (meaning delays on all other storylines, which is a shame), but in terms of Arya's character it's the biggest advancement we've seen in a single chapter.

Also, sorry about the cliffhanger.
The Bloody Hand

Chapter Summary

The seven-faced god has cheated me. My noble sire he made of purest gold, and gold he made my siblings, boy and girl. But I am formed of darker stuff, of bones and blood and clay, twisted into this rude shape you see before you...

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place concurrently and immediately following the previous chapter, entitled: Him of Many Faces.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION

“The seven-faced god has cheated me. My noble sire he made of purest gold, and gold he made my siblings, boy and girl. But I am formed of darker stuff, of bones and blood and clay, twisted into this rude shape you see before you.” The moon rose behind the stage, and the dwarf’s features became waxy and wan and twisted.

“Wise words,” Tyrion remarked.

“You said them first, my lord,” Numbers murmured from the next seat.

“Oh, yes. But I do not remember ever being quite so eloquent about it.” He nodded to the stage, where the dwarf’s monologue dissolved among hissing and snarls from the crowd. “I think he plays me rather well.”

“I think you play yourself better, my lord. Though strictly speaking, he isn’t you.” Phario Forel’s The Bloody Hand told the story of Hyrion Bannister, the dwarf son of Lord Hywin, serving his nephew Jeffrey in King’s City. At the very least, Forel could have made an effort to make up some new names instead of just switching a couple of letters.

“Look!” A boy came rushing onstage, carrying a tall lion banner. “Look, my twisted lord, look out there, to where the stag king comes.”

The great yellow sack of suet beside him stirred. “This is a new addition,” Illyrio Mopatis murmured, “it should make for an interesting sight.”
“Ah, the Blackwater.” Tyrion absently fingered the stub of his nose. “Look now, here comes my beloved nephew.”

Joff’s actor had such a smarmy smile that Tyrion was left wondering whether he’d been in King’s Landing himself. His armour was studded with glassy jewels and sparkled like a mirror. In an unwavering clear voice he began to speak:

“I am come to battle, uncle dearest,
if nothing else, this eve seems fairest,
for the fights to come.
I know we’ve had our share of strife,
You slew my father’s friend - good Ted Stork,
and now you’re lusting for for my wife,
But together we must turn our eyes,
now, and bring the brave battle,
to my traitor uncle, o’er that hillrise,
Before King Hobert’s blood was cold,
he who has lusted for a throne so long,
conspired with liars new and old...”

Tyrion was almost nodding off by the end of the king’s speech. He instead studied his dwarf actor, who apparently had no instruction other than to snarl and look suitably menacing.

“Put up your sword,” Jeffrey said, “the time is ripe. Seven give strength, now let us fight.”

Enter Mannis Geratheon, the golden king’s treasonous uncle.

“A traitor’s bastard sits my throne,” he proclaimed to the audience;
“both city and kingdom are mine own.
The truth is written in my hand,
the law of every sunset land.
See his golden crown so starry bright,
but my brother’s own was black as night.”
Some assembled hissing and booing went up from the audience. More followed when Stannis’s red woman mounted the steps to the stage, and joined him in his dark words. “Gods be good,” Tyrion murmured, “if he had been this dastardly, we would have had a much easier battle. The smallfolk would have run out of their houses to fight beside us.”

Numbers started forward in his seat. “Hush now, my lord, it’s starting now.”

“You words are wrong,” the Imp onstage was saying,

“your cause wronger still.

_Turn your eyes south by east,

and gaze across the night so still._”

Stannis turned his gaze towards the back of the stage. Here darkly-cloaked assistants rolled wooden models of ships across a sea of dark blue cloth. “My army awaits upon the sea, ten thousand men, who’ll fight and die for me, you’ll see.”

“Oh, we’ll see,” the dwarf replied. To a man on his side he called: “Bring my arrows and bring my bow, and a trusted man, who can fire further than I know.”

“This was Bronn’s part,” Tyrion explained to Numbers. “I thought he’d want to be here to see it, but...” Nevermind that. Bronn had disappeared as they approached the covered theatre, among seedy winesinks and whores who were not at all shy about their wares.

“You play this game, you wretched Imp,” Stannis pronounced.

“But only a fool could truly think,

_that bow and arrow would serve to sink,

all the ships of my damnation fleet._”

“Here it comes,” said Illyrio Mopatis, curling his fat lips.

“I am wretched, but my cunning comes higher,” replied the dwarf.

“But your boats are wood, and my flaming shafts,

my lord, as you’ll see...

are tipped with points of wildfire!”

A hush went over the audience.
“Ha!” cried King Jeffrey, “we have you now,
your ships will catch from bow to prow,
so watch your doom as it unfolds,
as the flames burn green and red,
and Bannister gold.”

From the back of the stage came a huge and calamitous bang, and the wooden floor shook, sending King Jeffrey and Lord Mannis staggering like fools. Green smoke burst and crackled through the air, and the wooden ships were wreathed in green flame. As was the red woman, who made her exit screaming, as a gale of laughter rippled through the benches. “Most ingeniously done, my lord,” Illyrio Mopatis said.

“He!” cried Jeffrey, “my inferno is bold, but the fight’s not over, my uncle holds.” Mannis had ringed himself with shields and swords, while his bannerbearers were the first to advance, poking their flaming stag banners at the Lannister pikes and maces. Jeffrey and his uncle met in single combat. The Bloody Hand seemed serious enough, but occasionally it devolved into comedy, and that was seen as Jeffrey tripped and fell again and again under his uncle’s shattering blows. The audience responded with nervous laughter and various cheers, neither certain whom to root for. They do have a dilemma. If Joffrey wins, then the devious Imp leaves to fight another day. But they see Joff as some brave hero, for whatever reason, and his loss will sadden them.

The clash of kings took a change for the worse when the Imp charged in. It was difficult to see whether he was going for Stannis or Joffrey, and harder still for a black cloud swirled around the fighters, hiding them from view. When it retreated, the dwarf was lying on his back, and a great bloody cut marked his face roughly. Jeffrey was on the ground too, and his uncle had a sword at his throat. “The battle is won!” King Mannis called out to his men. “I have defeated the false King Jeffrey and—”

A horn blew. The candles flared up again at the back of the stage, and Tyrion watched as more knights came riding in on wooden horses, and one man vaulted from the back of his, brushing sawdust from his long crimson cape. Meanwhile drums and trumpets warred offstage to make their advance sound more threatening. King Mannis took one horrified look, spread his cloak like the wings of a raven, and fled cawing into the night.

“’Tis Hywin Bannister,” called a herald, “the city is saved, the battle is won, joy and vict’ry to everyone!”

“You saved us all,” King Jeffrey said,

“we won this war, you and I.

Come, let the dead rest, and we’ll bask in glory.

And so happy it ends, the Blackwater story.”
For long moments there was silence as the king and Lord Hywin trooped out. A brief moment of darkness followed, and then the candlelight faded and alighted upon the Imp, Hyrion Bannister, alone in the centre of the stage, leering at the audience through the fleshy scar as he made his speech:

“Now I wait here in the close of battle,
waiting for my war to end. Doubts eat at
my malice-ridden mind, as I wonder
How this devilish plan may play it’s hand.
The boy’s my nephew, yet he has scorned
Me all my life. I’d have no sorrows if
he had died here on this dreary night.
Not for my sister’s sake; her love is cold,
And never serves to warm my lonely bed.
Now I’m marked too, I sport a foul scar,
The legacy of my nephew’s battle.
I am bitter at that fault of my king.
As his wars marked me, mine shall mark him.
Yea, I’ve made my choice. And so I will,
Give King Jeffrey to the Stranger... and yet...
This niggardly doubt, within and without,
will haunt me till my days run out.”

The curtain fell abruptly. Tyrion turned to Illyrio Mopatis. “Is that it?”

“For now,” said the magister. “They need to prepare for the second act. I hear there is a wedding to be had, and murder to be seen. Did you enjoy it?”

“It was certainly rather surreal. How many men can say that they’ve watched plays about themselves?”

“Few men are interesting enough to warrant plays about themselves,” Mopatis replied. “I extended my patronage to some Tyroshi players a few years ago, and in return they made their new production about my life. It was possibly the dullest thing I’ve ever seen. And dismally inaccurate.”

“You can say that again,” muttered Tyrion. “It would be a frightful shame if they gave good King Jeffrey to the Stranger, yes.”
Illyrio raised an imaginary wine-cup. “May he drink deep, and have a long and fruitful reign!”

“Long may he reign,” Tyrion echoed. “Though I’d be interested to see how I’m going to get out of
this one. A trial before the court is hardly the most thrilling of endings, especially if it doesn’t end
with a beheading.”

“I imagine they’ll take some liberties with the material, change a few things here and there. There’ll
be some missteps, of course, but unlike your story, this play has an ending in the foreseeable future.”

“Oh, good. Say, is this Phario Forel around somewhere? It would be interesting to talk to him, don’t
you think?”

“We might find him back at Ferrego’s palace. Phario Forel is among the great and the good of
Braavos, after all. An uncle of his was the First Sword once, you know.”

“Well,” said Tyrion, “if _The Bloody Hand_ is anything to go by, I’m inclined to say that Master Forel
is somewhat less than great. And somewhat less than good, actually.” He rose from the bench.
“Now, pray excuse me, I need to find Bronn. Numbers, come.”

“Where are we going, my lord?” the boy asked as they headed away from Illyrio and the benches.

“Someplace away from Illyrio’s stinking breath,” Tyrion said. “The man smells worse than a
cheesemonger. And I need a rest before we get to the bile that is the second act of Forel’s play.
Where is Bronn?”

“He said he was looking for a woman.”

“A good thing there’s only one woman in all of Braavos, then,” he replied acidly. “Well, let’s start
searching, then. I doubt I’ll mind missing the start of the next act, though I would like to be back in
time for Joff’s wedding—”

Tyrion moved off, but Numbers stayed where he was, pointing across the square. “I think I’ve found
him, my lord. Bronn isn’t about to go searching around Braavos for a brothel when there’s a
perfectly good one right there.”

The dwarf moved to follow, but stopped dead in his tracks when he heard the sound of bells,
emerging from the dark grey mist that was settling over the city. “What’s that?” he asked. “It’s not
midnight already, is it?”

Numbers looked back at him. “I don’t think so, my lord.” He furrowed his brow. “Are... are we
under attack?”

Tyrion turned, attempting to find the source of the sound. It seemed to be coming from everywhere
though, as if every bell in the city were being deliberately rung at once, their timing so impeccable
that it seemed to be... not a warning, but a _signal_. “A signal for what, though?” he said aloud.

That was when the theatre went up in flames.

Gouts of black and yellow fire burst through the roof behind them, filling the night air with dust,
driving the air out of their lungs and making them both stumble backwards. Then the explosion came
again, as sudden as wildfire, and near as violent; Tyrion stumbled away from it, cracking his knee
against a low wall. Somewhere nearby, a woman was screaming. And then Numbers was screaming
too, and—

A sudden blow knocked him to his knees, and he went down hard, his head striking the cobblestones
first, filling his vision with blue stars and yellow smoke. Am I dying...? That was too surreal. Dying like this? Now there’s an anticlimax to your tale, Forel... It was so impossible that Tyrion burst out into sudden, spontaneous laughter.

This is not how a Lannister dies, his father said.

And now could feel himself being dragged backwards, and he could smell hot smoke, and something like roast pork... or burning flesh... he thought of Illyrio Mopatis, probably turning to ask in his huge yellow silks, grease dripping down his jowls... he thought he heard Bronn’s voice, gravelly and hoarse: “Fuck me, I’m not going back in there,” it said, and “They tried to kill him already; I won’t risk myself for that...” But that couldn’t be Bronn, because how could Bronn be here? He was in the brothel, just across the street... just across the street from the smoky desolation of burned timbers and ashy stone. This is like the Blackwater, after Ser Mandon slashed my face in half; Tyrion thought in his one lucid moment. Pod pulled me out of the slaughter and back inside the castle walls as Father’s men came riding in. He was seeing flashes of it, green and red and gold, but nothing he could properly understand.

No, this is not how a Lannister dies.

And then it was midnight, and the air tasted of blood where he’d bitten his tongue and of star-speckled dreams. Later on he dreamed of his lord father, only Lord Tywin’s skin was cracked and grey, and his eyes burned with pale green fire and black smoke. You are an ill-made, spiteful little creature, the eyes said, full of lust and envy and low cunning... I wanted to carry you into the sea and let the waves wash you away... because you are my son...

He awoke to the light of a pale orange lantern, swinging feebly above, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Tyrion blinked sleep from his eyes, contemplating how easy it would be to simply let tiredness overcome him and slip back into bliss...

No. Gingerly, he lifted a hand to feel the back of his head. The raised bump there felt sore and still throbbed like a bastard. But I am alive. I am still alive. Somehow. His other senses were returning to him, and from the briny smell of things Tyrion judged that he was in the brig of a ship, or else down in some dank cellar. Or a prison. I would not put it past my luck. He wiggled his toes, feeling about as lively as a sack of potatoes. “Unh...” A low moan emitted from the back of his throat.

“My lord.” Someone pressed a skin to his mouth, and watered wine ran down his gullet and down his chin in equal parts. “Careful, my lord, you don’t want to swallow too fast.”

“That’s... that’s... uh... what my father said when Mace Tyrell was busy sucking his... his cock.” That was the punchline to some joke, but Tyrion could not see why it was funny. He spat out a bubble of wine, rolled feebly onto his side, and let it dribble down onto the mattress. “Head... feels... strange.”

“At least you’re alive, my lord. We’re alive.”


“Where else would I go?” The boy’s tunic was torn and tattered, grubby with blood and smoke. “Here, I’ll help you up.”

It took the pair of them an immense effort to finally haul Tyrion to his feet. For the longest time all he could do was hold onto a tall wooden support in an attempt to keep his footing. “Am I drunk, or are we spinning, or is it both?”
“Neither, my lord.”

Tyrion shook his head, hoping to clear his thoughts... and failing. “What happened to us? Illyrio said... I’ll take you to theatre, he said. It’ll be fun, he said. And then everything was on fire.” Did he plan for that to happen?

Numbers frowned. “There was... it all exploded at once, my lord. Not just at the theatre, but all over the city. There were people... like shadows in masks. I never saw their faces. They were going round killing everyone. We got you out of the fire, but Bronn ran off—”

“He might have made a wise choice there.” Tyrion staggered forwards, seating himself on a stack of wooden crates. “As for you... well, loyalty... it will not always serve you well...” His tongue was feeling heavier by the second. “I should have stayed... asleep...”

He was about to ask Numbers to drag him back to bed, but just then he heard commotion from above, raised voices in argument. Whatever wits he had lost in waking, his curiosity remained. “What’s that?” he asked, far louder than he’d intended.

“We can’t just let them have the city,” one of the voices said.

“We can’t fight them either,” another replied, “half the army, most of the Arsenal, and the Faceless Men on their side...”

“A few swords will not harm us. We have the harbour, and the Titan is still ours.”

“Yes, but for how much longer? And besides, even with all our ships, what can we do? Give Braavos to Tormo Fregar...”

“...and let him start his own tyranny? It is called the Free City of Braavos, my friend. I will not let Ferrego’s death give rise to this.”

“His blood is on your hands, Qarro...” After that it descending into inordinate, wordless shouting and swearing in High Valyrian, Braavosi and the Common Tongue.

Qarro, Tyrion thought. He recognised the name, but it was a long moment before he remembered why. Qarro Volentin. The First Sword of Braavos. No longer, if Ferrego Antaryon is dead. “The Sealord...” he rasped out to Numbers, “how did he...? How...” He sighed. “Tell me the rest.”

Numbers did exactly that. “I... I found you in the smoke, my lord. The theatre was burning, but I pulled you out.” Only then did Tyrion notice the bandages swathing the squire’s hands, and the welts beneath. “We might not have made it if they hadn’t come, though. You’re heavier than you look.” It was said jokingly, but the dwarf was not in the mood for japes.

“They? Who are they?”

“Oh, everyone. I don’t know who got there first... there was Izembaro, I think, the one that played King Robert, and some of the other mummers, and Phario Forel, who wrote the play. Then the knight Massey, he said we should come up here. He didn’t want to bring you, but Qarro made him. Qarro Volentin, I mean. And the rest of them. Some from the Iron Bank, actually, and a few of the guests. There’s lots of courtesans here: the Black Pearl, the Veiled Lady, the Merling Queen, too...”

“Mummers and bravos and courtesans,” Tyrion murmured. It sounds like I missed a wonderful evening. His voice was returning to him, though it came hoarse and gravelly. “And me, in the midst of it all. What a delightful menagerie. So, then... I suppose our present company are those still opposing Tormo Fregar? Where are we, by the way?”
“Someone’s palace. I think his name’s Prestayn.”

“Moredo Prestayn?” Tyrion knew the name.

“That might be it,” Numbers said, “anyhow, this is his palace – nearly as big as the Sealord’s – and he’s got some warehouses that back out into the Drowned Town and then up to the Arsenal.”

_The Arsenal_. “So we still have the ships.” That was good. Tyrion recalled Antaryon telling him that Braavos’s galleys were its walls.

Numbers frowned. “Well, my lord... about half of them. Or maybe less. And some of ours are burned. But we still have the Titan, so we can stop them getting out. The Sealord sent Qarro Volentin up there to secure it yesternight, before everything went wrong. So it’s still in our control. I think.”

“You _think_?” Tyrion struggled up from his seat among the crates and barrels. “I hate being left in the dark. Where are Volentin and the rest? I want to speak with them.” _Even if they do not want to speak with me._ The way in which they had left him to rot in the dark proved that. “Come on.” Tyrion stumbled to his feet and unhooked his cloak from a nearby peg. _I still have my shadowskin, _he contemplated. He was surprised Bronn hadn’t stolen it when he ran. _So much for the loyalty of friends._

Even with his lantern, the stairs were dark and disorienting. “This reminds me of my lodgings after the Blackwater,” Tyrion said as they went up. “My sister and my lord father rewarded me with... hmm... comfortable lodgings, you might say. A bed to shit myself to death in, and a maester to ensure just that.” _What are you saying, dwarf?_ He had no clue why any of this was coming out now. “I defied them, of course. I’ve always delighted in that.” He pursed his lips. “It’s a shame we never got to see the end of _The Bloody Hand_. Illyrio told me that it makes a few deviations from the real histories here and there. I don’t suppose the dwarf is venerated of his nephew’s murder and his contribution to the battle is recognised?” _Though that never happened to me either._

“No, my lord,” said Numbers. “From what I’ve heard, he summons a demon and breaks out of his cell, then goes and murders his father on the privy.”

“Well,” Tyrion replied, as they climbed a twisting stair, “in that case, Phario Forel has a far better imagination than I. On the privy, you say? How quaint. I’ve always wondered whether Lord Tywin really did shit gold.”

He could see the top of the stairs now, and a dim orange light was emanating from above. Voices echoed down the tunnel, but there were too many for Tyrion to understand even one of them. A short ways further, and they emerged in a cavernous stone room that bore a surprising resemblance to Casterly Rock’s great hall. Along the far wall were half a dozen stone hearths, each carved to look like creatures of the deep, anemone and whales and a couple of krakens, with onyx and ruby jewels in their eyes, their paint speckled with silver. The floor was all Myrish rugs around long ebony tables, all set with silver dishes and candles the colour of midnight. _This Moredo Prestayn is not a beggar, at any rate. My lord father might even be envious, if he weren’t so bloody prideful._

“I was expecting us to be refugees in some damp and dreary hall,” Tyrion said, “this is as though the Sealord’s party never ended.” And he supposed that in some sense, it had not. Someone – it might have been Jaime – had once told him that there were not a million miles between a folly and a fight. Moredo Prestayn’s gathering, such that it was, proved that only too well. Roughly half of the guests still wore their garb from the Sealord’s Ball, though the silks were sullied with smoke and soot, while others had donned military attire, steel helms and breastplates and swords hanging in their scabbards. Some sat languidly with wine-cups clutched in feeble fingers listening to a sad-sounding lutists,
while others – men, mostly – crowded together around the middle table, conspiring in hushed voices. Tyrion made up his mind, and waddled towards them.

He heard Ser Justin Massey’s voice first, rising above the rest. Bloody brilliant. So there is at least one person here who hates me. Tyrion could not see through the sea of heads, so he climbed onto a nearby chair and then up onto the table to make out what was happening. “There are sellswords in the Chequy Port, I know that for a fact,” Massey said, “and if were to ride down into Andalos—”

“We do not have time to ride to Andalos,” replied a sallow red priest. On either side of him were a septon and a Moon-worshipper. The danger must be real for all of these to come together, Tyrion thought. “The attack will come tonight, or on the morrow at the latest.”

“It would do us no good anyhow,” said bald Qarro Volentin. “Fregar has the Pentoshi magister on his side. Between them they will have eyes on every road and waterway from here to Pentos.”

Ser Justin protested, “There are other sellswords. Or we could try and search the Harbor for men willing to fight.”

“And gather an army in Ragman’s Harbor, is that the way of it?” It was Phario Forel, the playwright. Tyrion meant to have a word with him about The Bloody Hand, but that could wait. “An army of drunken churls and whores?” Forel went on. “You have grand ideas, Massey, but not a lick of common sense.”

“Who are you to question me, Forel? I have fought battles and wars, while you sit in your garden writing bad plays and poetry—”

“Come and say that with a sword in your hand.”

Massey grinned. “Gladly.”

“Both of you sit down and be quiet.” From his commanding presence, to the way he sat as though he owned the place, Tyrion took this to be Moredo Prestayn. “If you continue with this argument, I will have you both thrown out into the street and left to Fregar’s kindness.” He had a hawkish look as he stared around the table. “I do not envy Lord Ferrego, even in death. No doubt even as they murdered him he could hear your incessant chirping.”

“You are not the Sealord, Moredo,” Qarro Volentin said warningly.

“Oh?” Prestayn’s eyes had a flintiness not unlike to those of Tywin Lannister. “And which of you will be willing to continue as Sealord when the glory of battle is gone and the real matter of ruling begins.”

Time to make my entrance, thought Tyrion. “Why, me!” he called out over the tables, making sure they all heard him. The uneasy wave of laughter was exactly what he had been expecting, but it got their attention. He waddled consciously towards them, hopped up onto a chair, then stood in the middle of their table. A taller man would have looked mad doing this, or else he would have broken the table. My height has come into play as I’d hoped, for once. “I can hear you sniggering,” he said, “but that is because some of you do not know me. So allow me to introduce myself—”

“Imp,” said Ser Justin Massey. “Let the men do the talking.”

“Oh, I am a man, Massey, have no doubts. I’ll even show you, if you’d like, though I wouldn’t try and compete.” He smiled at the assembled faces. “I have it on good authority that Ser Justin is somewhat lacking in a particular area.” At that, even Moredo Prestayn cracked a smile. And there I was thinking he was alike to Father. “So, then, introductions. I am Tyrion Lannister, the Imp, the
Halfman, Lord of Casterly Rock. Or, as my friend Phario Forel might put it, I am the Bloody Hand. I
defeated Stannis Baratheon on the Blackwater, and held the Seven Kingdoms together during the
most troubled time in recent history. You might call me a gift from the gods in a time like this. I
would humbly refute that, and ask for a chair. My feet are beginning to ache. And some wine. My
mouth is as dry as an old bone, and I can see I have a great deal of talking to do.”

There was a strange, strained pause. Then the old septon stood up and said, “Here, my lord. Have
my chair.”

“Most kind of you.” Tyrion took his seat, and filled a cup of wine. “Now—”

“You cannot be Sealord of Braavos,” said Qarro Volentin. “You are not Braavosi, for a start.”

“No. And I’m somewhat lacking in terms of imposing stature, too, which is useful for a leader. But I
have no lack of wits or cunning, and it seems you need those sorely at the moment. So whoever
intends to be the Sealord would do well to listen to what I have to say.”

“And what is that?” asked Moredo Prestayn.

That was when it all fell apart. “...Regrettably, nothing at the moment. I am somewhat ill-informed
on the situation at the moment, you see. For now...”

“So you can offer us nothing?”

“Nothing but my wits. But if you told me—”

“Oh, shut up about your bloody wits!” Justin Massey shouted. “You have nothing, Imp, nothing to
give us!”

“I think he deserves a chance, ser.” Looking up, Tyrion was surprised to see that it was a woman
who had spoken. And not just any woman, but Bellegere Otherys, the Black Pearl; she had swapped
her silks for loose red-brown leathers. “Lord Tyrion is amusing if nothing else.”

Tyrion nodded in grateful courtesy. “Thank you, my lady. Perhaps you would like to inform me of
the situation, then?”

She gestured towards the window. “We have a fleet,” she said, “unfortunately, my companions here
are traders and sailors by nature, and their ships are hulks with vast holds made for carrying mustard
jars and barrels of pickled herring, not armaments and ballistae. Nonetheless, we have more than
enough of them, and we have the Titan. Lord Ferrego had the foresight to see that we had secured it,
before...”

Tyrion nodded. “My father once told me that one man on a wall could be worth a hundred beneath
it. I suppose the same goes for the Titan of Braavos.”

The Black Pearl continued, “when... if we can destroy Fregar’s fleet, he will be powerless to fight us
any further, and we can take Braavos back. And we can find friends in the other Free Cities, or
across the Narrow Sea...”

_She means Daenerys_, Tyrion thought. “I will sail back to my queen and see what I can do,” he
promised. “We—”

“It is growing late,” interrupted Moredo Prestayn. “Unless anyone has any actual ideas—.” Here he
glared at Tyrion. “—I suggest we all go and get some rest and reconvene in the morning. Qarro, you
may want to head over to the Arsenal and prepare our defenders. Doubtless Fregar will attempt some
The First Sword of Braavos nodded and rose to his feet, one hand brushing the bravo’s sword at his belt. “Wise words.”

The table was dispersing already. Tyrion was only mildly affronted by their decision to ignore him. Perhaps Prestayn had the right of it. I have no ideas... yet. He waddled around the table until he found Numbers, near the back of the crowd. “I heard what you said, my lord,” said the boy. “It was very... helpful. I’d listen to you, at least.”

“You might, but they will not. Unless I can think of a proper plan come the morrow,” Tyrion said. Though that won’t really matter if we all die here tonight.

“I’m sure you’ll find something, my lord.”

“I wish I believed that.” Tyrion stopped in the archway. “It may seem a strange request, Numbers, but I find myself in urgent need of fresh garb.” Presently his clothes were stained with soot and sweat, and the ends of the woollen cloth were frayed and torn. “I’ll keep the doublet and the breeches, but I want fresh smallclothes and a new undershirt. I’m sure you can find a set somewhere.” That said, he dispatched the squire to his task and continued through the hall alone.

It was strangely liberating to be entirely free from his retinue. In King’s Landing he wouldn’t have been allowed to go to the privy without a dozen guardsmen watching. See, Bronn, he wanted to say, see how little I actually need you? Tyrion stood and stretched, letting out a little yawn. Massey and the others can wait, he decided. I am in sore need of some entertainment, he thought, and resolved to look for a library or a whore, whichever one he came across first. He knew which one he would sooner have, but he saw no reason not to pretend his desires didn’t exist. You’re only lying to yourself, dwarf, a small part of him said. And you will never find what you’re looking for. That’s something you know as well as anyone.

Where do whores go? That question had been with him since Varys had visited his chambers, that night in King’s Landing. Once Tyrion might have wondered how the eunuch knew about her, but that question hardly seemed worth asking, now that he knew what Varys was capable of. Doubtless there is someone in this room who is one of his, watching me and reporting back on everything he sees. There must be... unless he expected me to go with Illyrio, in which case he was thwarted by me and Bronn. Tyrion laughed inwardly. If Bronn was hoping for a way out of Braavos, he will not find it, not while the port is still closed and all...

...but he might know where whores go.

Twenty years had passed since, but Tyrion Lannister would never forget that day. The road was long and lonely, and the sky had nary a cloud in sight. It was autumn again, the third of my life, and we were at a gentle trot, nothing more than that. She came running out of nowhere, like a fairytale, and the wind was a breath in her hair, and her eyes... her eyes were rivers. Jaime did the talking, while I sat and stared and stammered my courtesies and my understanding. Jaime japed that I was never normally this quiet. “Once he gets going, he’ll never stop,” he said, and that was that. When she climbed up onto my horse and we rode off my throat was dry as an old bone, and I could find nothing to say. Had she really been enough to stop his breath like that, or had the languid, hazy years between then and now made his memory hazy? I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair...

Only then did Tyrion realise how absently he was wandering. He was away from the main hall now, in a shady alcove surrounded by blowing blue curtains; a place where you could hide your secrets in plain sight, and it was oddly familiar in its unfamiliarity. And from somewhere within came the soft
murmur of sobbing. It sounded like a child.

For a moment he lingered, his fingers tickling the soft cloth of the curtain, creeping closer... then he sighed and turned to go. *Leave them to their sadness, as I would want to be left to mine.*

The worried sobs stifled. “Is someone there?”

*A girl’s voice,* Tyrion thought. *Seven hells.* He was tempted not to answer, but his curiosity got the better of him. It always did. “Yes... I... I’m here.” *As if that means anything to her.*

Nervous hands puckered the edge of the curtain, then pushed through. At first Tyrion thought he was staring back into the big brown eyes and smooth pink cheeked-face of a child, but then he realised that the proportions were wrong – almost charmingly so. *Almost.* And then: *seven hells. What are the chances?* From somewhere down in hell, he could hear Lord Tywin Lannister laughing.

“H-hello,” she said.

“Hello,” said Tyrion. It felt hollow, but what else was he supposed to say? None of his books told him what he was supposed to do when some dwarf girl came running over and all but clung to him.

She had a glance up into his eyes, one black and one green, then across the scar that marked his nose. Recognition bloomed in her eyes. And then she fell onto a nearby bench and burst into tears.

Tyrion was never quite sure how he ended up squatting on the bench beside her, with his arm half-around her shaking shoulders, but there he was. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“P-P-Penny.” She did not sound quite sure of it. “And you’re the one from the play. *The Bloody Hand.*”

“I prefer Tyrion.” But her words confirmed his suspicions that she had been the dwarf in the play yesterday, though he *had* been convinced that it was a man. *Unless it wasn’t her, but—*

“Oppo,” she said meaninglessly, “he played you.”

“Who’s Oppo?” asked Tyrion.

Penny burst into tears all over again. It was some time before she calmed enough to stammer out, “M-my b-brother,” before slumping against Tyrion’s shoulder. *She needs a drink,* he decided, *and even if she doesn’t, I definitely do.* Through an indiscernable mix of soft words and dragging her along the floor he managed to get Penny back to the main hall and over to one of the tables, where she stared longingly into nothingness while Tyrion filled two tankards with ale.

He soon learned that Penny and her brother Oppo, known as Groat – *Penny and Groat, how quaint* – were travelling entertainers born and bred, and had performed everywhere from the squares of Oldtown to the courts of Pentos to mercenary camps in the Disputed Lands. They tumbled, danced, and jousted from the backs of a dog called Crunch and a sow named Pretty Pig. Penny was very worried about Pretty Pig, whom she had not seen since fleeing the Gate theatre yesterday. *If Pretty Pig was still in there when the fire went up, then Roast Pork would be a more apt name for him now,* Tyrion thought. “Jousting, you said? There were dwarf jousters in King’s Landing at my nephew’s wedding.”

“That was a long time ago. But we’ve been performing it in Braavos ever since, the exact same show. Master Forel said it would make things more authentic, but Bobono didn’t like it. Too many dwarves to steal his limelight, he said. He’s selfish.”
“If it means anything to you, I haven’t seen this Bobono about, so he’s probably dead.” That had been the wrong thing to say, and Tyrion realised it as soon as the words left his mouth. “No, sorry, I didn’t mean it... please don’t cry.” Even then, part of him that wanted to burst out laughing at the sheer absurdity of it all. How in seven hells did we end up here? See, you fool, this is what comes of wishing for adventures.

He was saved by Numbers’ return. “Ah, you are exactly what I was looking for,” Tyrion said, only half-sarcastically. “Did you find me some clothes?”

“Yes, my lord. Not just smallclothes, but there’s some other stuff too. Hose, some jerkins, a couple of doublets that might fit you.”

“Children’s clothes, no doubt. But they might fit, and they would be better than these sorry rags. Speaking of which...” He pointed across the table. “I think Penny is in need of some new things, too. Stockings, a new leather jerkin, that sort of thing. No gowns. I think we’ll need to run very soon.”

Penny’s eyes still glistened with tears. “We?”

“I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples, bastards and broken things,” Tyrion told her. “And little folk like us have to look out for each other.” No one else will.

“This is Numbers. He counts coins and patches my clothes, and he’s a good lad. He’ll find you some fresh garb and a place to sleep.”

Numbers chewed on his new responsibility. “Um... anything else, my lord?”

“Not now. But I think there is something you want to tell me.”

“I’ve just... had an idea. About how we can hold off their assault. You said... our strength lies in our ships, my lord...”

Tyrion nodded. “Yes, but what do you...?” And then it came to him, an instant before Numbers told him. He jumped to his feet. “I need to find Justin Massey. I need him to prove that this will work.”

“I-I saw him, my lord,” said Numbers. “Sitting alone at a bench over there.” He pointed vaguely into the throng. “Um... he looked drunk, so I wouldn’t try talking to him now.”

“On the contrary, this is the best time to try talking to him. Men are vulnerable when they are drunk.” And I should know.

“Well, there is no time to waste.” Tyrion tipped back the last of his ale, waved a hasty goodbye to Penny and a slightly confused-looking Numbers, and waddled across the hall, searching for a sight of Massey through the throng.

It took ten minutes’ searching before Tyrion came across him, sitting alone beside a window, his face glowing ruddy by the silver moonlight. Close by a harpist was playing a merry love song, but Ser Justin looked anything but merry. “You are a hard man to find,” Tyrion said, inviting himself to sit opposite. “I must confess myself a little surprised. I thought your king would have sent you with an escort, to make you seem more impressive...”

Ser Justin gave him a wordless, hateful look.

“...unless, of course, you did have an escort, but they were sellswords, and they all fled when they realised how pointless your task was.” He let out a bitter little laugh. “As it happens, I am currently in a very similar situation.”

“What do you want, Imp?” The last word was utterly venomous. If Justin Massey could spit poison, I would be rolling around in my death throes by now. But as it happens, all he can spit is anger, and
“I have a proposition for you,” Tyrion said, and ploughed on before Ser Justin could object. “Before he died, Ferrego Antaryon promised to bankroll me with two million golden dragons. I can see your eyes widening already, Massey; you’re a good man, I’m sure, and you love the colour of money. Who doesn’t? So. Two million golden dragons. I’ll let you have half of it, as a gesture of good faith. A million golden dragons. With that kind of money, you could buy thousands of mercenaries to join King Stannis’s cause.”

Massey chewed his lip. “And why would you do that?”

*Because Ferrego promised me six million dragons, not two, and because none of it will matter if we all die tomorrow, so what have I got to lose?* “Because I am a Lannister. I pay my debts.”

Ser Justin started. “King Stannis would not—”

“**Must** you delude yourself with such fictions, Massey?” asked Tyrion acidly. “A pile of sheep dung is more likely to ascend the Iron Throne than your Stannis Baratheon. Nonetheless, I will let you keep to your pointless beliefs, rather than start another argument between us. Frankly, I couldn’t give two shits who sits the damn thing in the end. Melt it down, I say, and we’d all be so much better for it. You’ll come with me to King’s Landing, eat Daenerys’s bread and salt and then you’ll be free to leave the city and ride to your king, and a million dragons richer for it.” He could see the knight mellowing already, much to his surprise. *That was easy.* “But all that will come later. Right now, we need to work together to defeat Tormo Fregar, and restore some semblance of peace to Braavos. But I will need your support to convince the others of my plan.”

“And what plan is that?” Ser Justin snapped, with no shortage of scorn in his voice.

“A vast fleet is approaching our shores. Our army will not withstand their attack for long, and our fleet is little good for anything other than firewood. *Firewood.*” When the realisation finally bloomed in Massey’s eyes, Tyrion could not help but grin. “So, what am I planning? I think you already know.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun with this one. It has been very refreshing to write another Tyrion chapter - it feels like ages since he last had a POV - and this one is a chapter I've been looking forward to for a very long time. That being said, I had to make quite a few cuts to get it down to a manageable size, because the pacing was all over the place.

Really, this is two chapters sandwiched together - one taking place at the theatre and a second showing the aftermath, and that was what I originally planned, but there are such strong thematic links across the two 'halves' of this chapter that it seemed a waste not to shove them together.

Tyrion is, at least symbolically, retaking the mantle of Hand of the King in this chapter, and his planned defense of Braavos, as you've probably worked out by now, will be to some extent inspired by his defense of King's Landing at the Battle of the Blackwater.

On *The Bloody Hand*: I think watching a play about his own tenure as Hand of the King is exactly what Tyrion would do. For the record, the players are not aware that he
was in the audience. The language and structure of the play itself has some Shakespearean influence, though the verse doesn't have a meter or any real sort of pattern; the line lengths and intonations are all over the place, especially in Tyrion's soliloquy thing - in short, I intentionally wrote it to be very discordant, to the extent where it's quite irritating to read.

The messed-up meter and balance of language continues even after Tyrion and Numbers stop watching - look at the scene where the fire takes place... you'll notice that it's a lot of random elipses.... and random half-finished sentences, and random repetitive structures... very hard to understand...

(Alternative theory: ^ I'm just making excuses for my weird writing.)
Also, Stannis's name is literally 'Mannis' in this play. Which is fun.

On Penny: I know that she is a very divisive character in the fandom, but she is joining Tyrion's fellowship, and she'll be sticking around for a while. I'm not her biggest fan, but it's an opportunity I didn't want to waste. Those of you who remember all the way back to A COAT OF GOLD may recall that Tyrion has been working at the theatre as far back as Arya's first POV chapter in that story.

I've left some things deliberately unclear to preserve a fog of war. Is Illyrio dead, and was he really on Ferrego's side, as he claimed back in Tyrion VI? Was Bronn in on the plot? And what is the role of the Iron Bank and the Faceless Men in all of this?

We won't be returning to Braavos immediately in the next chapter, but we have 2 more Arya chapters and at least 1 Tyrion chapter to conclude this part of the arc. The next Tyrion chapter will see the return of at least one familiar face... and a conversation which I have wanted to write for a VERY long time...

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SOME GENERAL NOTES:

The Braavos plotline has more material to cover than I'd planned, while other storylines have a lot less. As such, you should be prepared to see certain characters more infrequently from now until the end of the story. Chapter count has changed again; I think we need about 122 chapters to close up the story, and then the sequel will comprise ~75 chapters, though it's still early days to say for certain.
The Ghost of Harrenhal

Chapter Summary

The white cloak cannot be used to hide a man’s failings, for attempting to do so only reveals how false the rest of him is.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year to everyone, and I hope you all had a great Christmas/holiday season!

The wait between chapters has been longer than I intended, but I fear it's going to continue going forwards. The next chapter comes right off the back of this one (with a different POV), but it's also very long, and chapters 70-80 are generally the longest chapters in the story. One of them is running up towards 8000 words, and it's only about 60% finished, so that's going to be a big one.

It's time to reiterate that I do NOT own A Song of Ice and Fire, nor the television series Game of Thrones, which are the property of George R.R. Martin and HBO respectively.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JAIME

Jaime kept one hand on the wall as they climbed, feeling moss beneath his frozen fingers. From somewhere above came the slow steady drip of raindrops on stone, but all he saw was blackness. Through it he saw the whispery outlines of vague grey shapes that might have been anything at all.

The shapes twisted and rippled as he watched, and made themselves familiar. You are no son of mine, his father hissed, slinking away. You poor stupid blind crippled fool, another whispered in Cersei’s voice. And a gargoyle fashioned itself in Tyrion’s image and stared down at him from a crenel, watching with one green and one black eye. Tysha, it said, and, the things we do for love.

They went along a dusky walkway and up another flight of steps, spiralling round and round. Then through a garden of weirwood trees, all whispering fly, fly, fly at him in disembodied voices. And then there was light; soft, warm, amber light, the colour of gentle sunsets and sweet peach wine and a mother’s smile. The glow was almost enough to send him to sleep… by the time they reached the top of the stairs, Jaime felt drowsier than ever. “Does he want him tonight?” a man asked. “He won’t be
much use like this.”

“It can wait till the morrow, the king says,” came the reply.

Aegon, he thought, they are taking me to King Aegon. He was aware of purple eyes staring at him. “Ser?” a boy’s voice asked. “Are you alright?”

Jaime glanced into the eyes. Arthur Dayne had those eyes, this is his nephew, his name… his name… “Leave it till the morrow, then,” he heard, far away. Ned, he wanted to say, as they led him away. I remember now, his name is Ned.

There was a guard outside his chamber. Not that Jaime was in any fit state to fight, or run, or do anything other than fall down onto his pallet, close his eyes, and descend into a smooth, silky slumber.

He dreamed he was on a rainy mountaintop. The sky bled black tears, plastering down his hair and soaking him to the skin. Stormclouds boiled and boomed the gods’ displeasure. Kingslayer, a voice said.

Jaime drew a ruby-encrusted sword from his belt with his right hand, flesh and blood. Is this Oathkeeper? It had the familiar red tinge, but it was brighter, and hot to the touch. He remembered Dawn, wielded by Ser Arthur Dayne.

You have no rights to remember that, a voice said. And the Sword of the Morning who stood before him, with Dawn glowing like a firebrand.

“Ser Arthur,” Jaime said. “I—”

You have no leave to speak in my presence, Kingslayer, Ser Arthur said. You broke your oaths and betrayed your king. Now the gods will judge you guilty.

“I demand a trial by combat,” he replied, not knowing why.

To your peril, answered Ser Arthur, and drew his sword.

The fight was brief and violent and wordless. Jaime recalled every skill he knew, but Ser Arthur Dayne had taught him half of those, and was better, faster, stronger in everything he did. It ended with him lying flat on his back on the stony mountaintop, with blood and fire on his lips. The Sword of the Morning stood over him, looking down with an expression that was almost pity. You wanted to be me, he said, but somewhere along the road you lost your way, and became the Smiling Knight.


I want that sword of yours, he remembered the Smiling Knight saying.

You shall have it, said Ser Arthur.

“Ser!” a voice called, faint and faraway. “Ser, ser, ser!”

When the blade came down he woke up, and again he was looking into Arthur Dayne’s eyes. Jaime blinked erratically, over and over and over. “N-Ned?”

“You were crying out in your sleep, ser,” the boy told him.

Groggily, Jaime struggled out of bed and fell into a chair beside the window. “What time is it?”
“Morning, ser.”

He turned his head and saw yellowish light peeking through a gap in the drapes. “You’re up early. Most squires I know would sleep in till noon if they were allowed.”

“I’m not like most squires,” Edric said. “If I’m going to be Sword of the Morning someday—”

“—better to rise with the morning sun, and live up to the name.” Jaime nodded. “Why are you here? I thought you served the king now.”

“I do. But he wanted me to attend to you before the wedding. I don’t mind. It’s better than being an errand-boy.”

“The wedding?”

“Oh, yes. It’s today, ser. Princess Myrcella and Lord Robert—”

Jaime nearly choked on that. “She’s getting married today?”

“Yes, ser. It was meant to be later, but they moved it forwards, to before the king leaves.” Clearly Edric did not know what to make of the bewildered expression on Jaime’s face. “You should probably have a bath, ser,” he said at last. “I’ll send them up with the water.”

A pair of heavy-bosomed matrons brought Jaime’s tub, and pails of water scented with lavender and lemongrass. He must have spent the better part of an hour in there, thinking about his impending fate. Clearly King Aegon had something other than a headsman’s block in mind for him… but he wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing.

By the time he climbed from the tub, pink and scrubbed, and donned plain clothes of undyed wool, Ned Dayne was back with his breakfast. “The king wants to see you,” he said as he set down a plate of fried bread and bacon. “As soon as you’re ready.”

“You can sit.” Jaime gestured to the chair opposite him, “as long as you don’t go asking me countless questions about Ser Arthur Dayne or his brave Sworn Brothers. I’ve spent enough time thinking about them on my own.”

Edric chewed his lip. “Can we at least talk about Prince Rhaegar?”

Jaime brandished his knife. “I’m warning you.” He speared a bit of blood sausage and chewed it down with a swallow of wine. “Don’t make me regret letting you stay.”

“I won’t.” The squire had that unnervingly bright, easy smile of his. “Can we—”

“Let’s talk about you.” Jaime reached for the wine flagon. “I hardly know you, Edric Dayne, even if I’ve told you everything there is to know about me. You never did tell me how the lord of Starfall ended up with the Brotherhood without Banners—”

“I was Lord Beric’s squire—”

“Yes, but Beric Dondarrion? Why him, of all people?”

He shrugged. “That was who my Aunt Allyria married. I think they met at a ball in the Stormlands, or something.”

Jaime recalled Brienne telling him about a ball in the Stormlands, where she’d met Renly Baratheon. And there lies another one of my ghosts to face. Brienne the Beauty. He cleared his throat. “Was
your aunt Allyria younger than Lady Ashara?"

“Aye. My father was born first, Lord Alester. Then Ser Arthur, then Ashara, and aunt Allyria is the youngest.”

“Your grandsire certainly liked names starting with ‘A’,” Jaime said, “A lot of the old Lannister lords had a similar custom: Tywin, Tytos, Tyland, Tywald, and so forth. Oh, and Tyrion too.” *Ghost and ghosts and ghosts.*

“We’re different, though, ser. Edric and Jaime. They don’t fit with the traditions.”

“No, I suppose not. Perhaps we’re both blessed with a special purpose.” It was only half-mocking.

“I don’t know what that is, though.”

“Well, I know where you should start. Someone needs to make you a knight, before anything else. Mark my words, you’ll be a ‘ser’ before your next nameday, or else I’m even more of a fool than I thought. And I’ll lose all my respect for the Westerosi ideas of chivalry if they pass up on the opportunity to knight you. How well do you fight, Edric Dayne?”

“Well enough, I suppose. I placed second at the Hand’s tourney in King’s Landing. Lord Stark’s tourney, that is.”

“No one ever remembers who came second in a tourney. My father told me that history is written by the victors, Edric. Or else we’d know Rhaegar and Robert for what they really were, one a flawed but brilliant prince, the other a brutal and drunken sot.”

Ned’s solemn purple eyes met Jaime’s own. “That battle changed *everything*, didn’t it?”

“Most battles do, for one man or another.” Flashes of the fight with the Kingswood Brotherhood came and went before Jaime’s eyes.

*I want that sword of yours.* And of the Whispering Wood, and cutting through the ring of frenzied Northmen to find the Young Wolf in the middle. And of the skirmish they’d met on the road to King’s Landing, where cousin Cleos had lost his horse and Jaime had taken up his sword, and of the Bloody Mummers and the silvery *arakh* slashing down. *Kinglalyzer, you are my captifth.*

*Even the smallest battles matter to someone,* he thought, *for better or for worse.*

“I have had quite enough of philosophy for one day,” Jaime announced. “And I don’t mean to waste any more time with it. Take me to your king, Edric Dayne.”

“You’ll have to get dressed first, ser. For the wedding.”

“How unfortunate. I fear I left all my better garb in King’s Landing.”

“Lord Baelish has offered you the use of his own wardrobe, my lord.”

“How kind of him. But Baelish is shorter than I am, and considerably more slippery. I don’t want to wear anything that’s had his slimy skin in it.”

Edric either did not hear him or chose not to. The boy returned bearing black woollen hose and a similarly dark doublet, decorated with golden studs and golden vines on the collar. Jaime did not fail to notice the golden Lannister lion badge on his left side, nor the embroidered lions on his collar. *They have been expecting me for some time, if the garment is anything to judge by.* “Speaking of Baelish, I imagine his wardrobe must be quite something. Given that this is Harrenhal.”
The Dayne boy nodded. “Everything here looks as though it was made for giants. We’re holding the wedding feast in the Small Hall, but its bigger than the Great Hall at Starfall. Nearly three times as big, I reckon.”

“My maester always said that Harrenhal was the only castle in the Seven Kingdoms that was bigger than Casterly Rock. Though its lords were never quite so fearsome, I’ll say that.”

“What about Mad Danelle Lothston?” Ned asked. “She used to bathe in the blood of her enemies.”

“Perchance you’ve heard ‘The Rains of Castamere’, Edric? My father would have made Mad Danelle weep. No, this Lady Lothston sounds like Vargo Hoat, though I’ll wager she didn’t have the Goat’s lisp.” You thlew my bear! The mere thought of that was enough to make Jaime start laughing all over again.

“Ser? Have I done something wrong?”

“No, not you. It’s just that Harrenhal seems to come up so often in my travels. This is the third time I’ve been here in as many years. It may be that you’ve heard the story about the bear pit? That was Vargo Hoat too.” Jaime smiled. “I should like to see the bear pit again, if I can.”

“Perhaps. It might be that King Aegon has granted you freedom of the castle. And it’s a very big castle. I wouldn’t go exploring it, mind. You might get lost and never find your way back.”

“What’s life without a little adventure?” asked Jaime. He went towards the door.

“Ser,” Edric called back, “you’ll need your hand. Your golden hand, I mean.”

And here I was thinking I was finally free of it. Jaime affixed it roughly to his stump, binding it with the straps. He thought of Ilyn Payne, grinning at him emptily from his pockmarked face. What happened to you, Ser Ilyn? Did you become a broken man like Meryn Trant, or did they murder you at the Tumblestone when I killed my father? Or are you still alive in the Riverlands somewhere, a ghost running around with no tongue and a great big longsword?

Jaime resolved to let Ilyn Payne be the least of his worries. A ghost with no tongue and a great big longsword might be amusing, besides.

The morning sun was so bright it hurt his eyes. Snowflakes dusted the ground, and the drifts came up to his ankles as they crossed the courtyard. “Ned Stark always said that winter was coming,” Jaime muttered sourly, “and he was right. Of course he was. How honourable of him, to warn us about it years in advance. Even dead Starks need their bloody honour.”

“Ser?” Edric Dayne asked. “Are you talking to me, or—?”

“To myself. It’s all a man can do to keep himself sane nowadays.”

In the next yard, they passed a couple of young Vale knights hammering at each other with tourney swords, and a third riding full pelt at the quintain. “No amount of fighting in the yard will prepare you for a real battle,” said Jaime, “everything you know fades clean away, and you’re lucky if you can remember how to hold the sword.” He laughed hoarsely at his own words.

“That’s Ser Lyn Corbray.” Edric pointed out one of the knights. “He wields Lady Forlorn; it’s Valyrian steel.”

“And Valyrian steel is only as good as the man who wields it.”
“I’ve heard that before,” said Edric.

Jaime winked. “There’s only so many lessons a man can teach.” They ducked through a stable, where two score grooms were busy scrubbing down their masters’ mounts. The air stank of horseflesh and hay. “That’s a lot of horses,” Jaime said, “are you going somewhere?”

“King’s Landing,” replied Edric. “We’re leaving tomorrow, before noon. Well, we’re going to Storm’s End first, so that the king can marry Princess Arianne, then to King’s Landing.”

“Wonderful. Tell your king that I think it is a waste of time to free me from my cell if he just means to have my head cut off on Baelor’s steps.” Though that would lend everything a certain irony, if my head rolled so near to Ned Stark’s.

“Tell him yourself, ser. We’re nearly here.” They climbed a flight of stone stairs beneath the gaze of a hunchbacked gargoyle, went past a couple of knights in Kingsguard cloaks, and then they were outside the king’s door.

“Send them in,” a voice called.

The solar was cavernous, as expected, but possessed a certain morbid grandeur. A huge chunk of the stone wall was completely blown out, and had been covered with flapping sheets of beige tarpaulin. The king stood by one of the huge arched windows near the hearth, clad in firelight and midnight velvet.

“Your Grace,” said Edric, and bowed. Jaime remained standing.

King Aegon ignored his discourtesy, and him altogether, at first. “A little privacy if you would, Edric. You can make yourself useful by finding my cloth-of-silver cape, the one slashed with purple. And then finish with the horses, and get yourself ready for the celebration.”

“At once, Your Grace.” The boy went out.

“He is a good squire,” Jaime commented, “better than most I’ve had. And a far better squire than I ever was. Likely he will be a better knight, too.”

“You were the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, Ser Jaime,” Aegon said. “Even if the circumstances were dubious, that is still a great honour.”

An honour I never deserved. “We are supposed to be enemies, Your Grace.”

“That does not mean I cannot recognise your talents. There are few living knights as storied as you, Ser Jaime.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sure my name will live in the history books forever.” Jaime felt strangely irritated. “Call me Kingslayer, Your Grace. Everybody else does.”

“You don’t deny it?” Aegon sounded surprised. “Most men would.”

“Why try and hide a truth that everyone already knows? I killed a king. Eddard Stark saw me sitting on the Iron Throne in my golden armour, with blood on my longsword and Aerys’s corpse lying broken at the foot of the steps. And Ned Stark would surely never lie.”

“I never knew Lord Stark. Jon Connington always called him the Usurper’s dog, along with your lord father and Jon Arryn. But I have learned that things are not always as they seem.”
Any fool with half a brain could have told me that, Jaime thought. Gods be good, he is a child. The Targaryens had never been known for their quick wits, but he had expected more. “No, they aren’t,” he said, “but I did kill a king. That’s exactly as it seems.”


Seven hells. Couldn’t you just have my head off and be done with it? But Jaime told him. He told him about how King Aerys had cooked Lord Rickard Stark alive in his armour while his son Brandon strangled himself to death trying to save him, about Rhaella sobbing in pain from the scratches Aerys’s nails left on her back, and him saying “we should protect her,” and Ser Jon Darry replying, “but not from him.” He told him about the way Lord Qarlton Chelsted had ended in a conflagration of green flame and the last words Prince Rhaegar had said to him, about Rossart the pyromancer and the wildfire caches under King’s Landing, about his chasing the pyromancers through the sewers and his climbing the steps of the Iron Throne with the longsword in hand, how Aerys screamed “BURN THEM ALL!” as Jaime shoved the sword through his back, about blood and shitwater streaming down the steps of Aegon the Conqueror’s chair. About how he’d glimpsed Varys fleeing the castle with a babe in arms and had said nothing, about the boy babe his father had laid down before Robert on the Iron Throne, with his head smashed in so bloodily that there was nothing left to recognise.

All the while the boy who should be dead stood by the window, lost in his story, the true parts and the not-quite-lies both, nodding his head as though he’d known all along. “Well,” he said when Jaime was finished, “that’s… that’s different to what Lord Jon told me.” He looked mystified, as though the world’s greatest secrets had been revealed to him. “So that’s why… I knew he was mad, but…”

“Aerys was not the first of the Targaryen kings to be afflicted with madness,” Jaime replied, “nor do I think he will be the last.”

“Hmm,” said Aegon. “King Jaehaerys once said—”

“—that madness and greatness are two sides of the same coin, yes. Perhaps it is so, but madness and greatness are very different in their outlook. You have to be careful with old sayings like those.”

Once again, he thought of Ser Arthur Dayne and the Smiling Knight, facing each other among the smoky grasses and splintered black trees of the kingswood. Were they really so different? Jaime wondered. Were there boys of the Kingswood Brotherhood not unlike myself, who grew up and saw the Smiling Knight as their hero?

He remembered something else, Ser Barristan Selmy’s words this time. The white cloak cannot be used to hide a man’s failings, for attempting to do so only reveals how false the rest of him is. Jaime wondered what the Sword of the Morning’s failings had been. He must have had them, else Dawn would never have failed him. The ancestral longsword of the Daynes would never fail a true knight, it was said. So Ser Arthur had his failings, though the white cloak hid them well enough.

He wasn’t sure what to make of that. Which only proved how confusing the old sayings could be.

Somewhere up in a tower, a bell was ringing out the hour in a loud, sonorous echo that sent grey dust whispering down from the rafters. “An hour till noon,” said Aegon, “an hour till the wedding. You will be there, won’t you?”

“Do I have a choice?” Jaime tugged at the sleeve of his doublet. “Well, I suppose you gave me these clothes for a reason.”

The king shrugged. “I had thought you might do well to walk your niece down the aisle to her
husband-to-be.”

Jaime considered that. “Best not, I think. There are enough rumours about… about my relation to Myrcella. I see no need to add fuel to the fire.” *Unless, of course, that is what Aegon intends.*

“As you will.” The king waved a dismissive hand. “You spoke with Myrcella while you were in your cell. I trust you have considered my offer?” The eyebrows arched again.

“Well,” said Jaime, “I can hardly refuse you, if I want to keep my head. Those are the terms of the offer, aren’t they?”

“Indeed.” Aegon’s nod was a little uncertain. “Yes. If you go to Casterly Rock, and… convince your sister and your nephew to surrender and swear their fealty to me…”

Cersei will never agree to those terms, not in a thousand years. Jaime knew that at once. But this may be my only way to see her again. He needed her, to be close to her, to love her again, to… to…

He swallowed. “I suppose you’ll want me to leave soon.”

“On the morrow, perhaps, when I leave for King’s Landing? No one would notice you slipping out —”

“They almost certainly would. I prefer to be discreet about things, Your Grace. Tonight would suit me better, under the cover of darkness. Give me a swift horse, an escort of guardsmen, and some food for the road, and I will hasten to Casterly Rock as fast as I can.” *After all, where else would I go?*

“Very well.” Aegon’s willingness to agree to that spoke in testament to his uncertainty. *Not a good trait for a king,* Jaime mused. *Then again, he is not much of a king.* Kings were imposing, kings were absolute, kings were like Tywin Lannister. Jaime looked here and saw a boy with silver hair, purple eyes, and none of Rhaegar’s noble mysticism. “Well, I am done with you, Ser Jaime. I will see you in an hour.”

“With your permission, Your Grace, I should like to wander the walls awhile. Harrenhal holds a great many ghosts for me, and I need time to put them all to rest before I leave.” *Before I seek out even more ghosts in Casterly Rock.*

He did not conquer any of his ghosts, but he stood and watched them from a distance. He saw Edric Dayne going down to the stables and chancing upon Podrick Payne; the pair talked for a few minutes before going their separate ways. After that Jaime followed Pod along the ramparts, and found himself overlooking Robert Arryn and the Stark boy sparring under the gaze of Brynden Blackfish. The morning drew on, tired and weary. In the godswood, beneath the outstretched arms of the weirwood trees, they rustled the leaves and whispered “*The things I do for love,*” and made him feel even more alone than he already did.

As noon approached, a squire in a crimson cloak came and found him loitering behind the Hall of Hundred Hearths. “Princess Myrcella requests your presence in her chambers, Ser Jaime. Follow me, now.”

Dumbly, Jaime followed in the squire’s wake. The Kingspyre Tower was less foreboding than the Widow’s Tower, where Aegon had his seat. They had put tapestries up to muffle the chill of the stone, decorated with kings and knights, beasts of the sea and the air, and winged heroes riding on falcons. Streamers of sky-blue and cream coloured silk dangled down from the ceilings, and the shadows were lit by oil lanterns and hearth fires. Fresh herbs were scattered among the rushes, and
the room smelled sweet and dense.

At the door, he came across Ser Balon Swann, all in white enamel. “Lord Commander,” the knight said. That disarmed him. *It has been so long.*

“Ser Balon.” Jaime nodded back, and followed the squire inside. The solar was as big as King Aegon’s, though it was less drafty, filled with scarlet embers from the hearth and surrounding braziers. There were more tapestries here, in Lannister crimson rather than Arryn blue, though.

“Uncle.” Myrcella was surrounded by a flock of maids armed with hairbrushes and bits of jewellery. Her long golden hair was tucked into a golden hairnet, and folds of pale golden samite and red velvet threatened to swallow her. “You look… well.”

“I doubt that very much. I feel like a beggar, and probably smell like one too.”

“No man can ever make a Lannister look like a beggar,” said Myrcella, brushing down her gown. Jaime noted a wedding cloak slung over the back of one chair, crimson silk with golden lions sewn into the fabric. The cloak was new, rather than the threadbare thing that Cersei had wed her husband in, and Lady Joanna before her. Other than that, though, Myrcella did look eerily similar to her mother. “You look wonderful,” he said.

“Hmm. I did wonder if this was too much, but I must play my part in this… performance, whether I like it or not.” She offered him her arm. “Someone should get you a cloak, ser. When you walk me through the sept—”

Jaime winced. “King Aegon and I talked about this, Myrcella. I do not think it would be wise, I told him.”

“It wasn’t the king who asked. I did.”

“Myrcella—”

She waved a hand at the handmaids and attendants. “Leave us.” It was a few moments before they stirred into action, shuffling out in an awkward line.

“I know what you’ll say,” she said when they were alone. “That there are so many rumours about you and Mother that it would be unwise. But it would look just as strange if my uncle was here and chose not to walk with me.” Jaime tried to interject, but Myrcella waved him off. “For what it’s worth, King Robert was never a father to me. That was always you. Call yourself my uncle if you must, but I know. I know that you’re my father, and I’m glad of it.” Her eyes shone with the prospect of tears, but they did not come. *Cersei would never cry either,* he thought. “You wouldn’t lie to Mother… please… don’t lie to me.”

“I…” I am your father,* he wanted to say, but he could not, and dared not. “I… I’ll walk you down. After… after that, I have to go. Back to your mother and brother in Casterly Rock.”

Myrcella gave an odd, stiff little nod. “You accepted his offer, then?”

“I did.” *I’m going home.* He ought to feel something, but…

“The boy,” he said, “Robert Arryn. What do you think of him?”

She did not hesitate to say, “I hate him.” Then came a pause. “But… I must do my duty, for the greater good. And I will.”
“You don’t have to…”

“I do. And you know I have to. But if you want to do something for me today, on my wedding day, tell me the truth.”

That was hard. And the wait might have been harder still, but just then the bells started their angry ringing all over again, and the handmaidens came rushing back into the room. “My lady, there is only a quarter-hour left; you really must finish with your train, and your jewels, and—”

Jaime found himself being shouldered away from her. “I’ll meet you on the steps,” he called out as he retreated. “I will, I promise.” He would do that much for her. I owe it. And a Lannister always pays his debts.

As he was descending the stone steps of the Kingspyre Tower he heard his name called out. “Ser Jaime!” When he turned, his eyes fell upon Littlefinger, descending. The Lord of Harrenhal wore a shadowskin cloak slashed with blue velvet, and a silver chain around his pale throat. “I apologise for your poor hospitality. I did try to have you released, but King Aegon was rather insistent.”

And yet I don’t doubt for a second that you could have convinced him, if you had wanted to. “Not to worry, my lord. We must all bow before the will of kings.”

“Oh, I know. I hear that you will be returning to Casterly Rock after the wedding?”

“Did the king tell you that?”

Littlefinger smiled. “Well, I have my own ways of knowing. But I digress… if you are departing so soon, we must take the opportunity to talk while we can. At the wedding ceremony, mayhaps?”

“I am walking Princess Myrcella down the aisle,” Jaime told him.

“Oh, I nearly forgot. As her uncle…” Littlefinger’s pause was full of mocking. “…it seems only natural. Well, then we must speak now.” He snapped his fingers at his knights. “Ser Lothor, Ser Oswald, head down to the sept. I will follow as soon as I can. Have no fear, only a fool would try to kill me in the presence of Ser Jaime Lannister.”

“I fear that I would be somewhat lacking as a protector,” Jaime replied as Littlefinger led him down a cracked stone passageway filled with swaying wall lamps. “Given that I lack a hand, of course.”

“Oh, but surely a man is worth more than just his hand, no? You are a Lannister, and that name still carries power. A great deal of power.”

“Last I heard, you chose to turn away from that pact and join the Targaryens.”

“Come now, Ser Jaime. We both know that vows can be broken, when the hour is urgent.” Whatever smirk crossed his face was lost to the snowy sunlight that streamed down from above the yard, blinding them both. “The Targaryens seek to tear away every freedom my lord Arryn has enjoyed for the past few years. There is even talk of making Jon Connington the Warden of the East. Your lord father made me Lord of Harrenhal, and later Warden of the North. The Lannisters have been good to me… it seems only fair that I return the same courtesy.”

Why does he play this game? wondered Jaime. Seven hells, why do I play this game? Haven’t I had enough of lies for one lifetime?

Gargoyles watched them with cracked stone eyes as they descended the stone steps into the courtyard. The hem of Littlefinger’s cloak dragged through the half-melted snow, and frozen mud
crunched under his boots. Ahead of them a town of tents rose up, mildewy canvasses rife with the smells of sweat and beaten steel. “Sellswords,” Littlefinger said expansively, “I have twelve thousand all in all. The Snail Men, armed with their famous snail-shaped shields. The Long Lances, how they love their little jokes. The Company of the Shattered. The Mirror Shields. The Stormweatherers. And what’s left of the Mountain’s men, I admit it. Lord Tywin left me with Ser Bonifer Hasty and the Holy Hundred, but they went running for King’s Landing after the Tumblestone. Ser Bonifer pined for Princess Rhaella, you see, and love is enough to make even the holiest men lose their way, so he went to join Rhaella’s grandson. Anyhow, the Mountain’s Men came running back my way once Ser Bonifer fled.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know a fellow named Shitmouth, would you?” asked Jaime.

“I fear not. Their captain is… Rafford, I think. If we had longer I might have time to show you to each of the esteemed company commanders in turn, but we do not.”

They made a curious sea, traipsing towards the wedding in the sept. Some had come out in their finer clothes, silk and velvet and a few wide-brimmed hats; others donned their usual boiled leather, lobstered plate, and jerkins of black ringmail. And all carried weapons, daggers tucked into sleeves and dirks hidden beneath folds of cloth; one man had quite brazenly decided to take his warhammer to the celebration.

“Twelve thousand men,” Littlefinger went on as they drew nearer to the doors, “you should ask Cersei what she thinks of that, when you get back to the Rock. I hope we can keep up a healthy correspondence, Ser Jaime. And when we move forwards to seat Tommen back on the Iron Throne, remember…”

“…A Lannister always pays his debts,” said Jaime, already frowning at the prospect, and wondering whether he ought to believe a word of what Littlefinger had said.

“Well,” said Littlefinger, “this is where I leave you, ser. If you wait around here, the bride should be coming through soon.” Smirking, he mingled back into the crowd of sellswords and knights and lords climbing the stairs into the sept.

Jaime went into an antechamber off the main hall, and waited. The last guests were hurrying up the steps into the sept proper when the noon bells started ringing, and from the shadows of the cloister he could hear the septon starting his loud and echoing sermon.

“I didn’t expect to find you back here, Kingslayer.”

He knew that grey, disappointed voice only too well. “Nor you, Blackfish,” he said, turning. “Why are you skulking round in the back of the sept?”

“I might ask you the same questions.”

Ser Brynden pursed his lips. “Weddings… they hold a certain bitterness for me now. I’m sure you understand.”

*You are no son of mine,* his father said, and his voice echoed off the rafters. A sword twisted, and blood spilled forth, watering the soils. “Indeed, I do.”

Something rose in his throat. “I brought your niece to Harrenhal.”

“Not by choice. Brienne of Tarth brought my niece to Harrenhal, I’ll credit her with that.”

*Where is Brienne?* He expected that he’d see her dour face somewhere in the hall. Still, he’d thought
she might…

“She did. And she deserves a bloody knighthood, yes, far more than I do. If you’re going to bleat at me about oathbreaking, then I’ll spare you the effort.”

“We’re not so different, you know,” the Blackfish said. “Neither of us are what we were supposed to be.”

Jaime felt more than a little unnerved. “What do you mean?”

“I was supposed to be Hoster’s loyal brother, sworn to follow his every instruction without fail. But I doubt you could say that with a straight face. And you, well, you might have been lord of Casterly Rock, Kingslayer. But you gave it all up; I don’t know why, and I don’t care.”

In a different world…

For a moment, it was tempting to explain it all to Brynden Blackfish; his all-consuming love for Cersei, the wildfire plot, Aerys’s death, all of it. *But he would never believe me.* “We chose different sides, Blackfish. I don’t like you, and I never well. Perhaps I admire you, in some strange way… a grudging respect, you might call it.”

“How strange. I feel none of that for you, Kingslayer. Truth be told, I liked you more when you had two hands. Back then you were someone to be respected. Now you’re just boring.” He turned on his heel and strode off, but there was a wry smile there, as if the two of them were sharing some private joke and not merely trading insults.

Jaime looked down disdainfully at his golden hand. Aye, it had come in useful once or twice, such as in the fight against Shagwell, but most of the time it was a dead weight that served only to remind him of what he’d lost.

“Uncle.” And then Myrcella was at his side, gowned in her scarlet and gold, and she looked like Cersei, so much like Cersei, that for a moment he wondered if he’d somehow gone back to her wedding day and it was all a dream. *I’d tell her never to bother with Robert, and to have her children with me, children that we could truly love, from the moment they took their first breath. Not like whatever it is we have now.*

Jaime found himself staring into Myrcella’s green eyes, green as the endless fields of grass, green as the emeralds sparkling in his sister’s crown, green as—

Then the high harp began to play, and as he took her by the arm it was as though his limbs had a mind of their own, as though his thoughts were lagging behind the movements of his body. *I should tell her, he thought, I could tell her. I—*

And then they were out in the sept, and endless miles of carpet stretched before them, bordered on all sides by so many onlookers, swaying like blades of grass. Harrenhal’s sept was big enough for a couple of thousand, and to Jaime it seemed like the whole of the Seven Kingdoms was here, watching. The crowd was so vast that he barely recognised anyone in it, save for King Aegon up on the dais, and Brienne, standing a full head and shoulders above Podrick Payne. But his eyes must have been playing tricks on him too, for he looked and saw Aerys Targaryen, crowned and clothed in the flowing black robes he’d died in, whispering in the ear of his father, Lord Tywin Lannister, with the chain of golden hands glittering around his throat. And Rhaegar Targaryen, saying, “It does no good to speak of roads not taken, Jaime. We shall talk when I return.”

And Cersei, of course, Cersei most of all. Cersei letting go of his arm and climbing the stairs to meet
her groom on the steps, Cersei saying, “I am his, and he is mine, from this day until the end of my
days.” Cersei holding up her new husband’s hand, to the sound of cheers from all in the sept, Cersei
saying, “Thank you, ser,” as she passed him, and went back out, heralded by bells and pages
sprinkling rose petals everywhere.

Afterwards, there was the customary wedding feast in the Small Hall (which was also big enough to
seat a thousand, or more), but Jaime was far away. He said some words to Lady Sansa and her
brother Rickon, and when the boy scowled back furiously he smiled at the thought of himself being
that age.

Noon became afternoon, and afternoon became dusk. There was no abrupt realisation, no sudden
decision, but one moment he was in his seat, and the next he was not, and he was walking down the
hall, down from the dais and the lords seated there, down among the trestle tables. Once he stepped
into shadow and drew up the hood of his cloak, no one seemed to recognise him.

Tom o’Sevens was playing ‘The Seasons of My Love’ as he reached the door, crooning, “I loved a
maid as fair summer, with sunlight in her hair…”

At the threshold, he turned back and looked upon them all. There was Podrick Payne, clumsily
dancing with one of Aegon’s handmaidens. Sansa Stark, smiling as she talked with the Blackfish
over cups of honeyed wine. King Aegon sharing words with Ser Lyn Corbray, something about
having a practise in the tiltyard. And up on the dais, Myrcella, looking half-dazed. Looking half like
Cersei, and more than half like his daughter.

I’m the ghost here, he thought, the ghost of Harrenhal.

He never took a second look back.

It was starting to rain again, and the sellswords and soldiers were retreating from the feast tents, as
the great drums boomed through the dusk and horns heralded no one and nothing in particular. Great
grey clouds were gathering. Tonight would be a dark night.

King Aegon had told him to leave tonight, and Jaime was willing to wager that a horse would be
waiting for him in the stables if he needed it. But there was one last thing he needed to say goodbye
to.

Sometimes fate is a curious thing, and she loves to play her games. Outside the bear pit he found the
elusive Shitmouth, completely drunk out of his wits, playing a drinking game around the fire with a
group of similarly drunk guardsmen. “Fuck me,” he said when he saw Jaime, “fuck me with a
bloody spear! It’s the bleeding Kingslayer!” And he burst into rambunctious, choking laughter.

Jaime felt curiously lightheaded as the rain washed down across his face, blinding him to all but the
angry flickering light of Shitmouth’s fire. “I hear you serve Littlefinger now.”

Shitmouth shrugged. One of the others said, “M’lord Finger’s good to us. Better than ser ever was.
That’s Clegane, I mean.”

“Speaking of the Cleganess, you wouldn’t happen to know where the other one is? The Hound? As I
understand, he’s in one of these cages somewhere.”

“I don’t know,” said a sallow sandy-haired man, who looked to be their leader, “but yeah, he’s
somewhere around here. Why do you want him, ser?”

“Believe me, I don’t.” Jaime was content to let Sandor Clegane rot forever… though he did have a
strange sympathy for his particular predicament. We are not as different as I once thought. Both of us
are secure in the knowledge that we have no honour, and both of us have turned our cloaks against the Lannisters, one time or another.

“Ah,” said Shitmouth, “well, I’ll be seeing you around, ser. Or not, if you’re going somewhere.” He grinned, and turned back to the others. “Fuck me with a bloody spear.”

If there was a spear about, Jaime would have been sorely tempted to shove it up his arse, if only to get him to shut up. Instead he wandered past Shitmouth and his band of idiots and climbed the rain-slick steps up to the gallery that overlooked the bear pit.

Echoes of Vargo Hoat came back to him, hissing in that goatish tongue of his, and more echoes of Brienne, garbed in frilly pink silk with a wooden sword in hand. It had been raining back then as well, Jaime remembered, though it had been only a drizzle, not like this. The storm was picking up, and the wind howled through gaps in the pit wall. Thappireth, it seemed to be screaming. I want my thappireth, Kingtlayer. You promithed me thappireth.

“I thought I might find you here, Ser Jaime.”

“Brienne,” he said. “You look a far better sight than the last time we were here.” She was in a pale blue tunic, with some scrollwork on the buttons, though the cut defined what little she had of a womanly figure.

“Well.” The wench wrung her hands in that gangly, awkward fashion of hers. “Well, that isn’t hard, is it?”

“I suppose not.” Jaime smiled. “I thought I’d see you earlier today, but I never did.”

“There was no time to talk,” said Brienne. To talk privately, she meant. Together they moved forward to the rail, and glanced out over the muddy darkness of the bear pit.

“I wonder,” he said, “are we forever cursed to keep coming back to Harrenhal?”

“Perhaps.” Brienne’s homely face turned sad. “You’re leaving, though.”

“Will you miss me, wench?” He said it as a jape, but to Brienne it meant more, Jaime saw.

“I think I will,” she said softly. “But at the same time, I don’t think I’ve seen the last of you, ser.”

“Let’s not tempt fate, now.” He glanced up, meeting her bright blue eyes. Thappireth. “Call me soft, but I think I’ll miss you. All our time on the road… perhaps I lost my hand, but I found something else. Something… interesting.” Suddenly he laughed aloud. “Oh, this is absurd. Look at us, standing here and lamenting. When I’m lying on my deathbed, promise you’ll come to me, wench. I think that would make a fitting end.”

The rain had turned cold, the rivulets running wet down under his cloak. And so he spoke, and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere… Brienne was looking distant. “I learned something from you, I know.”

Jaime quirked an eyebrow.

“I learned about myself,” said Brienne. “That… it’s all right to be yourself, even if it means… forgive me, I must sound…”

“No…” He frowned. “I think I know what I mean, Brienne.” He pointed down into the bear pit. “I
saved you here at Harrenhal, yes… but you saved me, as well. More than once.”

Brienne’s eyes sparkled. “Oathkeeper,” she said abruptly, fumbling with her swordbelt. “I… my quest is over, ser. The sword… it’s yours, if you will have it.”

He did consider it a moment… but when he reached out to take the sword, the hand he reached with was forged of gold. And then he knew. “What good is a sword I cannot wield?” Jaime said. “No, it’s yours, Brienne. That sword is made to fit a knight’s hand, and you are certainly more knight than I.”

He moved his hand away.

“I’d best be off,” he said, after what seemed like an age. “Farewell, Brienne.”

For a moment, he could have sworn that Brienne was crying as she said, “Farewell, Jaime.” She held out her hand for him to shake. It did not seem like enough, after all they’d been through together… but what else would he do? Kiss her?

“All that time, Hoat wanted sapphires,” Jaime murmured, “but what a fool he was, Brienne. If only he’d had the sense to look into your eyes.”

Chapter End Notes

Put simply, this is one of the hardest chapters I’ve written, but also one of my favourites, behind “The Red Woman” and “The Broken Man”.

“All that time, Hoat wanted sapphires,” Jaime murmured, “but what a fool he was, Brienne. If only he’d had the sense to look into your eyes.”

That’s corny, but I love it. Mostly a spontaneous ending as well, and quite an abrupt one, as I think the idea of Jaime riding off into the night while Brienne stands watching him from an archway - will he look back or won't he? - is somewhat cliched. But the bear pit played its part in creating some nostalgia for the pair, and I think that was enough.

“Fuck me,” he said when he saw Jaime, “fuck me with a bloody spear! It’s the bleeding Kingslayer!”

Thitmouth ith a complethe joy to writhe. Ath ith Vargo Hoath, the Goath of Harrenhal. Tho they got their little cameoth.

I’m the ghost here, he thought, the ghost of Harrenhal.

He never took a second look back.

The main theme from this chapter is ghosts, of course, both in the context of letting go of the past and revelling in it. There’s the moment where Jaime stands on the battlements watching life go on in the castle below, just after his meeting with Aegon. There’s the way he looks at Myrcella, and sees Cersei, and to some extent wonders if history is repeating itself. And all the way through this chapter there’s the sense that Jaime isn’t quite there, and that he’s an observer rather than a participant. A ghost in his own world.
Anyway, now that Jaime's finally out of prison, he's converging on Hell (aka Casterly Rock), which is going to be a complete 180 in the nature of his storyline. It's not something I can explain until you see it, but some of my favourite chapters are coming up...

On a more general note, I'm not sure about KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE as a title for Part Three. I've got a couple of new ideas, my favourites being THE CHILDREN OF SUMMER and THE LAST NIGHT WATCHMAN, so feel free to comment on those or give some suggestions of your own.
Chapter Summary

“Everything. I want everything, my sweet Sansa, and you most of all.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SANSA

A deep and sonorous drumbeat echoed through the crowded hall.

“Whatever Rymund’s singing, it doesn’t sound like ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ anymore,” said Ser Brynden Tully. “And I’d be hard-pressed to call my nephew’s antics dancing.”

Sansa watched her uncle and Ser Marq Piper twirling serving-women back and forth with foppish grins on their faces. “Edmure’s a terrible dancer,” Sansa admitted, “but he reminds me of home. Everyone in King’s Landing was so prim and proper… and false. Not like here. Not like it was at Winterfell.”

The Blackfish nodded. “Cat and Lysa’s wedding wasn’t too different to this, you know. It was just after the Battle of the Bells. The histories will speak of the months between the Bells and the Trident as though nothing happened, but it was fighting all day, every day, across the Riverlands from Riverrun to Stoney Sept, from Saltpans in the north down to Duskendale on the Narrow Sea. The singers might not sing of those victories, but they happened, sure as sunrise.”

“And my mother was pregnant through all of it. With Robb.”

The Blackfish smiled sadly. “Yes, child. She was.”

And then it ended for him at the Twins, in blood and betrayal. It was strange, Sansa thought, how little she had thought about those who had fallen. Even when they were dying just across the Blackwater, I never stopped to think of them.

I sang for them. I sang “Gentle Mother, font of mercy, save our sons from war, we pray,” but I never really thought about the words.

Sansa looked to the Blackfish. “And when the war was over… what was that like?”

“War never really ends,” he replied. “The world gives us just enough time to bury our dead and say our prayers for them before it all starts again. And there are always those who lose everything but
themselves to the fighting. Broken men. That is no life at all.”

*Was that why he never married or had children?* Sansa wondered. *Was he afraid to lose them, and himself?* But before she could ask, the Blackfish was gone.

Sansa held her cup out for Podrick to refill it. “Where is Lady Brienne?” She could not see the big towheaded knight anywhere in the hall.

“With the king, my lady,” Pod replied. “Or with Ser Jaime. I don’t know.” His cheeks were flushed with wine.

“Do you know when they’ll be back?”

“No, my lady.” He swayed a little on his feet, then blurted, “I know how to dance, you know. If you were wondering. Bronn taught me. Lord Tyrion’s sellsword friend. Not lordly dancing, but… I thought… if you’d like…”

“I never danced with Tyrion,” Sansa murmured. “He never wanted to embarrass me.”

“Lord Tyrion was like that,” Pod agreed. “Good, I mean. And kind. To me, at least. No one else would have me as a squire. Except Lady Brienne.” He chewed his lip. “They’re not so different, you know. Lord Tyrion and Lady Brienne. I mean, they are different, but not that different from each other. I think.”

Meanwhile, Tom Sevenstrings was concluding the last sombre strings of ‘Autumn of My Day’, though Rymund the Rhymer’s tuneless rendition of ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ threatened to swallow it. “I don’t like the bawdy songs,” Podrick said, “they remind me of Ser Cedric. He wasn’t so good to me. Not like Lord Tyrion or Lady Brienne. The song about the bear’s meant to be happy, but I’ve had a bad time with it…”

“Life is not a song,” said Sansa. *And if it is, then it is ‘The Rains of Castamere’*. She wondered how her mother had felt as she heard those haunting chords and throbbing drums filling Lord Walder Frey’s hall.

By now Rymund had concluded his song, and Whitesmile Wat shortly thereafter, so all the singers came together to play ‘The Queen Took Off Her Sandal, The King Took Off His Crown’. *The bedding song.* There was no bedding, of course, with the groom being a child and his bride not much older, but the lords and ladies stood and clapped and called out drunken japes as Robert and Myrcella threaded their careful way up the hall beneath the wails of the onlookers.

“I don’t think I’d mind getting married.” Rickon appeared beside her clutching a slice of treacle tart. By the ruddy light of the sconces he looked even redder and drunker than Podrick Payne. “It doesn’t seem so bad. Though they need to find Shireen first, of course.”

There had been no news from Riverrun in nearly two weeks, though a few wayfarers brought mangled reports that the red woman had burned Queen Selyse’s tower to cinders. And the whereabouts of Princess Shireen and Ser Davos the Onion Knight remained a mystery. *We must see to that as well,* Sansa thought. *So many problems.* “You mustn’t drink too much,” she told Rickon, perhaps in vain. “Tomorrow we have to see Aegon off, and then—”

“I can drink loads, Sansa. All we had on Skagos was ale, and I was fine back then.”

“Back then you were Rickon the wildling. Here you are Rickon Stark of Winterfell. It will not do for you to go staggering all over the place.”
“Your sister is right, Lord Rickon.” Littlefinger had appeared as suddenly as a conjurer’s trick. “Though I do remember what it was like to be two-and-ten, and faced with an insurmountable ale-thirst.” He winked in Sansa’s direction. “Be thankful it is only drinking, for now. The worse lusts will come later.”

Rickon scowled. “I can still hear you, you know. Oh, and I’m not some lustful drunk.”

“Of course not. Why, you are the most courageous young lad I’ve ever met, Lord Rickon. Spare some ale for the rest of us, and someday we may all be as courageous as you.” He grinned.

Rickon brushed crumbs of treacle tart from his fingers and went away down the dais, still scowling at Littlefinger.

Lord Petyr’s smirk widened. “He reminds me of your mother almost as much as you do, Sansa. Fierce and unalteringly loyal. I hope that he proves a steadfast friend for our Sweetrobin in the years to come.” He took her arm. “Shall we talk on the terrace, mayhaps? The view is so beautiful.”

A black wind was blowing brisk and angry against their faces, setting the line of amethysts around Sansa’s throat to jangling like bells in the wind. “Are you cold, Sansa?” Littlefinger asked softly.

It was not the cold that was making her shiver. Lord Petyr’s hand felt wrong somehow, his fingers clinging coldly to hers. “No, my lord,” she managed. “I am fine.” Stiffly, she looked out over the southern ramparts. The moon was rising over the grey island that floated lost and lonely in the Gods’ Eye. The Isle of Faces, they called it. Old Nan said that the Green Men lived there.

Lord Petyr saw her looking. “Did you know that there are people who worship the moon, Sansa? Who could blame them? She is a beauty. And however fickle she may seem, fleeting from one kingdom to the next, she always returns in time. The Vale is especially blessed by her presence. It is said that you can see the moon from the Eyrie every day of the year. We shall have to test that theory.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lord Robert must take his bride back to his homeland.” The grey-green eyes twinkled. “So that she can establish her proper place in his household, rather than meddling in the affairs of the Vale. And there is still the matter of Lord Royce to be dealt with.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Soon. As will you, I’m sure.”

Sansa frowned. “What do you mean?”

He went on as though he had not heard her. “Our little Sweetrobin faces foes from within and without. Lady Waynwood is one – yes, you are shocked, and well within your rights to be, but Harry the Heir is that old woman’s ward, and with Harry as lord of the Vale—”

“But… I saw Harry; he was in the yard with Robert only this morning…”

Petyr shook his head. “Come now, you’re smarter than that. And Harrold Hardyng will be the least of our worries if Princess Myrcella decides she would sooner be a widow.”

“I warned her—”

“The girl is as mad as Cersei, and even less likely to heed your warnings.”
“Well,” Sansa said, “let’s hope it never comes to that.”

“Hope will only get you so far, Sansa,” Petyr replied softly. “Though it is often all we have.” His fingers splayed themselves over the edge of the merlon, twitching like the pale legs of a spider. *Those fingers have done so many things, so many dishonest things.* He’d laid them on Aunt Lysa’s chest, before…

Sansa took a look down. It was a long, long way to the ground below. She brought her gaze back up to the clouds. “It will snow again soon,” she said. “Aegon has chosen the right time to leave.”

Petyr scoffed. “His departure cannot come soon enough. Not only has Aegon’s host imposed a heavy burden on my larders and stores, but his meddling in politics and taxation has quite vexed your uncle Edmure. And Ser Lyn Corbray and the Knight of Ninestars often come to me with their complaints. Yes, Aegon has precious few friends in the Riverlands, despite what he might think.”

*And I could solve all of these problems, if I agreed to be his wife,* Sansa thought. Aegon would want an answer to his proposal before he left.

Petyr read her thoughts. “Have you given any more consideration to His Grace’s proposal?”

“I will refuse it.” Saying it aloud made it seem more reasonable, and more real.

“I pity you having to tell him,” he said, “our king is a dragon, after all, and fearsome when provoked.”

*He will not be fearsome with me,* Sansa hoped. *He is so desperate for my love that he will not dare to drive me away.* Sometimes, at night, she wondered if Aegon was the prince that Joffrey never had been, handsome and charming and brave. *Life is not a song, though.* And when she remembered the tale of her aunt Lyanna, and remembered her own years caged in King’s Landing, she became more and more certain of what she must do.

“It is the wise choice, though,” Lord Petyr said, “else you would be surrendering the sovereignty the North has worked so hard to protect.”

*He does not know,* she realised, *he knows the rest, but he does not know what Aegon promised me in return for marrying him.* “I will allow your brother to rule as Rickon Stark, King in the North,” he said. How would her brother and her uncle Edmure and all the rest react to the news if they ever found out?

“Anyhow…” Petyr glanced over the merlon. “We shall be leaving very soon, Sansa. I am not fond of ghosts. And I expect you shall be going on your own travels as well.”

“My lord?”

Lord Petyr smirked. “The little girl who was Sansa Stark would be content to sit back idly and let herself be a piece in the great game,” he said, “but I see no little girl before me now, but a maiden fair, tall and beautiful. I made you a part of this game, sweetling; it is time for you to put those skills to a test.”

“Where?”

“You mentioned Jeyne Westerling a while back. I hate to pry, but I have my suspicions. It seems strange that the rest of her family – so close to the Lannisters – should abandon her entirely. And if she has birthed your brother’s son, then why has she not hastened here to Harrenhal?”
“Then there is Riverrun. Someone needs to make sense of the garbled reports from the Baratheon camp. Castle Darry needs to be settled with its new lord, and something needs to be done about the Twins. Not forgetting the Bloody Mummers, or this woman Stoneheart and her outlaw band…”

“This is your chance, Sansa. You can play the game, or forever be a piece. The Lannisters and the Tyrells can pass you round as if they were trading goats, or you can make a stand for yourself. Winterfell is yours, Sansa – perhaps not in name, but certainly in everything else. Lord Robert Arryn is your cousin, Edmure Tully your uncle, and I your most stalwart friend. You do not need Aegon Targaryen to make you a queen, you already are one. Don’t you understand? I did all of this for you.”

Once, I might have believed that. “What do you want?”

Just then the rising moon caught Petyr in its silvery glare, and the mockingbird pin at his throat shone a thousand colours. “Well,” he said with a smirk, “that would be telling, now, wouldn’t it?”

It had grown very cold all of a sudden. “Shall we go inside?” Petyr asked, and before Sansa could reply he was ushering her back along the terrace and into the twilit gloom of the Small Hall. He found a flagon of Arbor gold on one of the benches and started to pour. “By now our little lord Robert will be quite lost in the intricacies of the bedding ceremony,” Petyr said, “or rather, he would, if there were any intricacies. He is only a boy, and not so robust as your brother. Even after his Regency ends, he will need many advisors to help him during his reign as Defender of the Vale.”

Sansa stared emptily into the depths of her cup, swilling the golden wine around. Suddenly she wanted nothing more than to be away from Petyr Baelish. “…I beg pardon, my lord,” she blurted out. “But all of this excitement is starting to tire me. I had best be off to bed.”

Sansa silently thanked the gods that she had gotten away cleanly… and then she silently cursed them when she turned straight into Edric Dayne, King Aegon’s squire. “My lady,” he said, sounding as surprised as she was. “The king would like to see you.”

Of course he does. Whatever mercy Edric’s arrival had brought vanished with those words.

“I heard that the king was with Jaime Lannister earlier,” she said, as they climbed the stairs.

Edric hesitated, before saying, “His Grace has seen fit to free Ser Jaime from his captivity, and has sent him back to Casterly Rock.”

“What happened to the rest of the Brotherhood?” It had been a while since she had last seen Gendry or Greenbeard or Swampy Meg.

“They… left, my lady.” He sounded strangely sad.

King Aegon was standing on a high balcony, overlooking the rest of the hall. When he saw her approaching her turned and bowed his head. “Lady Sansa. I trust that you are enjoying the festivities, my lady?”

“They are… exactly as I expected them to be, Your Grace. But yes, I am enjoying them. And I hope to enjoy the peace that they will bring.”

“Hmm,” said Aegon, “if I might be so brazen, this might not be the only wedding to bring peace in the Seven Kingdoms…”

He does not waste any time, at least. “Of course,” Sansa said, summoning her confidence. You are a wolf. Be brave. “There is your upcoming wedding to Princess Arianne Martell. I fear I cannot be
present, though. There are still a lot of things to be done in the south before we can head back to
Winterfell.” The mere mention of home made her feel strangely giddy, as though she were a little girl
all over again.

“My lady?” He was frowning. “You… my offer…”

“I cannot accept,” said Sansa. “You know I cannot.”

“You can.” He took a step forwards, and she could see that his hands were shaking. He is nervous,
she thought, and he is drunk too. “You must…” His voice cracked suddenly. “…please.”

“I can’t… I have to stay with Rickon…” Didn’t he realise this? It was obvious, she thought.

“I don’t care about Rickon!” His voice suddenly filled with anger. “I only care about… will you
allow me to be honest with you, my lady?”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

He bit his lip, searching for the right words. “I… I love you, Lady Sansa. I hardly know you, but I
do. And I think you must be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” It was jarring, really. In the
command tent he had seemed so confident of himself, but here… on this very different battlefield in
the shadow of Harrenhal’s walls, he was little more than a boy. “I have to marry Arianne now,
because I promised, but… I shouldn’t have said that. I mean, I’ve never even seen her. My father…
he and Lady Lyanna, they… I don’t know. I think I should go now, my lady.”

He looked like a boy of ten, blushing scarlet with the shame of it. And suddenly, all at once, without
reason, Sansa began to feel immeasurably angry. In herself, in him, in everyone. “We all have to do
things we don’t like,” she said bluntly, “and we all have to move on with our lives, despite our
hardships. I don’t know how you feel, but we have to—”

He stepped around the table, took her hand, and kissed her on the mouth.

Sansa was entirely blind to it. Willas’s kisses, Tyrion’s, Joffrey’s, the Hound’s, she had been
expecting those kisses, no matter how much they repulsed her. She could taste them, feel them,
quiver in fear at them or embrace them willingly, but this one was done out of sheer panic, and
frustration, and Aegon seemed to realise what he had done the second he did it. He stepped back,
eyes going wide with the shock, his hand still clasped in hers.

“My lady—” he began.

She struck him.

His cloak entangled around him, and he fell with a loud crash as Blackfyre slipped from its scabbard
and rattled against the floor. For one terrible moment, Sansa feared that he had cracked his head open
on the flagstones. She found herself hurrying to his side. “Your Grace?”

The king’s cheek was burning, with shame, then with anger, then his eyes flared as brightly as stars.
The Targaryen madness. His fingers clenched around her hand, tight and white under the knuckles.
“You… you…”

Aegon’s fingernails dug into her forearm, tighter and tighter. His eyes flashed in brief, absolute rage.
And Sansa knew that she had seen that look before.

In Joffrey’s eyes. She remembered… “Then go,” he said. “And don’t touch me.”
Sansa wrenched away, whirled, and ran. She could not say where she was running to, or even quite what she was running from, but down the steps she ran, down and down and down, down into the dark where no one would ever, ever find her. Only once the world was completely and utterly silent did Sansa rise unsteadily to her feet, breathing raggedly and heavily. Her dress was torn and soiled with muddy snow. *Why did you run?* she thought, *you are a wolf, he cannot hurt you. He might be a dragon, but he is one alone, and you are part of a pack, and—*

“Little bird?” That breathy rasp was unmistakeable. “You finally found me, then?”

Only then did she realise where she was. *The dungeons.* She did not think she had run so far. “Little bird?” the Hound’s voice said again, somewhere behind her.

Sansa squinted through the gloom. “Ser?”

“Ser?” He laughed. “How many times do I have to tell you—?”

“You’re not a knight.” Her heart was racing. *I should not be scared of him. He’s just a dog, a wild dog, and he’s behind bars anyway.* Sansa steeled herself, and convinced her breathing to slow.

“Where are your guards? I didn’t see any when I came down.”

“Up above, I don’t doubt.” She could see the gleam of his grin. “I reckon I could break out of here if I wanted to.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Where would I go?” Sandor asked, still smiling. “Back to the Lannisters? To find the bloody Brotherhood again? A man like me can’t just disappear, I learned that from the Quiet Isle. I have too many ghosts, little bird. Far too many.”

Sansa could not find the right words to reply to that. “We all have ghosts,” she managed eventually. “Anyway, you… you could serve us. The Starks.”

After a brief moment’s silence, Sandor burst out laughing. “That really would shove the stick up Cersei Lannister’s arse, wouldn’t it?” Then he became solemn. “It’s a kind offer, little bird – you always have been kind – but I’m done serving, I think.”

“Someone should set you free,” Sansa heard herself say, having no clue why she’d said it.

“Well,” said Sandor, “that someone would have to be you, little bird. Seeing as no one else is going to do it.”

“I… I… I’ve never broken anyone out of prison before.”

“There’s a first time for everything. I might say that you owe me, anyhow. For getting you away from the Tyrells.”

Sansa bleakly considered that. “Do… do you know where the keys are?”

“If I did, do you think I’d still be in here?”

“Yes. Even if you did know where the keys are, you can’t escape unless you have them.”

Sandor laughed. “Too smart for your own good, little bird. Maybe you’re more like your sister than I thought.” He came close to the bars, stinking of ale. “If *I* did escape, do you think anyone would
notice if I went up to the castle to find a cask of ale? I’m dying for a drink.”

“They’ll notice, yes. Especially since there’s a wedding going on.”

Sandor grunted. “Bloody weddings. I was at your uncle Edmure’s, you know. Your little sister went running off like some terrier. She would’ve gotten herself killed if I hadn’t dragged her away. Who’s getting married?”

“Lord Robert and Princess Myrcella.”


“The Arryn brat is my cousin,” said Sansa.

“That doesn’t make him any less of a brat. If she weren’t dead, I’d wager that he’d still be sucking the milk from Lysa Arryn’s teat.”

“But she’s dead. So he isn’t. And besides, he’s been fine, ever since Lord Petyr—”

“Littlefinger?” Sandor looked genuinely surprised. “Seven hells, girl, you aren’t messing around with Littlefinger? I could tell you things about that man that would make you piss yourself in fright—”

“He’s… he’s…”

“He’s the man who betrayed your father, if nothing else.”

Sansa felt as though she had been punched in the stomach. Once Sandor Clegane said those words, she knew at once that they were true. “But… but… my father… Littlefinger, he…”

“Oh, he paid off Janos Slynt’s gold-cloaked stooges and took your father captive right then and there, with a knife under his throat. I saw it with my own eyes. It was Littlefinger all along, little bird. He was never on your side, never playing for the Lannisters either, only for himself…”

Sansa scarcely heard him. It was as though she had been blind for years, and was only now seeing for the first time. Because what was it Aunt Lysa had said, right before she fell… before he pushed her… the memory she had long held back was feebly struggling to be let free, yearning to be remembered… tears, tears, tears. You told me to put those tears in Jon’s wine… Jon Arryn’s death, that was why her father had gone to King’s Landing in the first place… I wrote Catelyn and told her the Lannisters had killed my lord husband… her mother, her father, Robb… life is not a song, sweetling… “Little bird?” Sandor Clegane was saying, “are you alright, little bird?”

It was Littlefinger all along… and now he has Robert, and…

And that thought was what brought her back. “You…” she managed to say, “are you certain?”

Clegane’s voice came hoarse and throaty. “I’m certain. Anyone who was in that throne room will tell you what happened.”

“You have to help me,” Sansa blurted out. “You have to help me stop him, Sandor. We have to stop him before… before he gets what he wants.” And what does he want?

Everything, Petyr’s voice said in her mind. Everything, my sweet Sansa, and you most of all.

“Might be I will,” said the Hound, then held up his hands. “But I’d have to get out of here first.” He gave her a strange, not-quite-pleading look.
“I’ll… I’ll see what I can do,” Sansa said, clueless of what that might be. Her head was still swimming, and as she blundered away from the dimness of the Hound’s cell and up the stairs, the dream left her tipsy. In the courtyard, she heard a man’s voice say, “Pardon me, my lady… but you look in a bad way.”

She knew the knight who conducted her up the tall haunted staircases of the Kingspyre Tower, though she could not remember his name. In her chambers, she yielded herself to the embrace of her bedcovers, tucked away beneath the eaves while the wind mingled with the wailing of spirits of the dead and forgotten kings whose ghosts roamed inside Harrenhal’s walls.

And then she was waking in her own bed, alone among the cries of roosters. The flagstones were cold against her bare feet when she stepped down, while the rushes tickled her soles. Then she knelt before the grate, attempting to somehow kindle a fire with her bare hands, full well knowing the impossibility of that task.

Very soon Maddy and Gretchen manifested themselves, accompanied by a tub of steaming bathwater. Maddy helped Sansa to undo the awkward ties of her gown and Gretchen passed her the scrubbing-brush once she had immersed themselves. From there the two ladies resorted to gossip. “…Of course, there were no sounds of pleasure heard from the little lord’s chamber, he is much too young for that sort of thing,” said Maddy, “but Allam reports that he sent in more wine than he thought it was possible for two to drink.”

The memory of yesterday’s revelation was slowly coming back to Sansa. Littlefinger already used wine to poison Joffrey… “Did this wine come from the castle cellars, or from the Lord Protector’s stores?”

Maddy shrugged. “You’d have to ask Allam, my lady, though I’ll reckon Lord Petyr would be more cautious about opening his special stash.” She winked. “Have you ever seen those stores, Gretchen? Golden wines, mostly, from over in Andalos—”

“Where’s Andalos?” Gretchen asked. “Nevermind that. I suppose it was Lady Arryn who was drinking most of it.”

“Lady Arryn?” It was a moment before Sansa understood. “Oh, Princess Myrcella… yes, her mother has always been fond of wine.”

“That’s not what I meant, my lady. Don’t tell anyone… but Lord Arryn will hardly be the most amorous of husbands, not for some time. The common rumour is that the girl has taken a paramour of sorts, from among her own retinue.”

“Seven Above, Gretchen,” said Maddy, “Surely not; she’s barely a woman… and surely she is wiser than that.”

“Well, I wager we’ll know the truth of it soon enough.” Gretchen rubbed a sweet-smelling oil into Sansa’s auburn hair, massaging it with her fingers. “Come now, my lady. We wouldn’t want you to miss breakfast.”

They dressed her in Tully blue velvet, with the silver-and-amber wolf pendant resting over her breasts. I must not forget who I am.

On the stairs, Brienne of Tarth fell in beside her. “How fares my brother?” Sansa asked. “I went up early last night.”

“Fine enough, though he and Podrick both had a little too much to drink, if you ask me.” At
Brienne’s side Podrick Payne flushed scarlet. There were dark circles under his eyes.

“Did… did Littlefinger talk to him at any point?”

“Lord Baelish?” Brienne scowled. “I do not think so, my lady. Would you like me to keep a closer watch, or…?”

“It’s nothing,” she lied. “I was just… wondering.”

As they crossed the gallery above the yard, Sansa chanced a look over the northern rampart, out towards the Tower of Ghosts where King Aegon held court. They were taking down the great black-and-red dragon banners, and she could see tents coming down in a mass of poles and canvas, while wagons packed up their things and squires led their masters’ horses out into the courtyard.

“Lady Sansa.” Ser Harrold Hardyng’s sky-blue cloak was trimmed with ermine, and his messy blond hair beamed as brightly as his smile in the light of dawn. “I see that I am not the only person to come up here and look out over the ramparts of a morning.”

Something told Sansa that he had, in fact, been waiting for her. “I don’t,” she said, “not usually. I’m on my way to breakfast, actually.”

“And I. It seems I find myself in good company.” Still smiling, he offered her his arm. “May I?”

Sansa took it, if only to stop Littlefinger or Aegon from appearing to escort her instead. “You must admit,” Ser Harrold said as they walked, “this is passing strange. In another life, we might have done this as man and wife.”

And Littlefinger would have been the puppet-master, watching over all of us.

Harry’s smile was making her uncomfortable. “What do you want?”

He had the grace to look hurt. “The pleasure of your company, Lady Sansa.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

Ser Harrold laughed. It was a loud, hearty sound. “My lady has a barbed tongue. I think I preferred you when you were Alayne.”

“Alayne was a stupid girl with stupid dreams.”

“On the contrary, my lady, I found her rather alluring.”

Then you are stupid as well, Sansa thought. Harry the Heir was hardly known for his wits… then again, perhaps it would not be so bad to have a stupid, sweet husband after all.

“You made a very convincing mummer, Lady Sansa,” said Ser Harrold. “I had no idea that it was really you. I hope you will forgive some of my earlier actions and the things I said. Back when I thought you were a bastard… but you’re a lady now.”

“I never knew that an apology could be so beautiful,” Sansa said sardonically.

Harry laughed. “Well, I’m just being cautious. You have half the North behind you, so I don’t want to insult you.”

Sansa stopped suddenly, about forty feet from the doors of the Small Hall and conveniently out of earshot of the guards on duty. Brienne kept her distance, too. A gentle breeze passed over their heads, ruffling Ser Harrold’s cloak. Sansa stood near as tall as he did, and did not have to look up
into those cheery blue eyes. I can trust him, she decided, if only because he is too stupid to betray me. And Littlefinger would never make the heir to the Vale – the most obvious suspect should Lord Robert mysteriously die – a part of his plot.

“Ser Harrold,” she said. “I see you for what you are. The heir to the Vale… handsome, knightly, brave, everything that a great lord should be, everything that my cousin Robert is not… yet. And ambitious… oh, ambitious indeed.”

He scowled. “What is my lady implying?”

“You know exactly what I’m implying. Robert has enemies all around him. Some of them sit at his right hand and share his counsel, all the while plotting behind his back. And if he should die… you would be lord of the Vale.”

“Robert is my cousin, and I mean him no ill will.” His cheeks were colouring pink. “I’m teaching him archery, for the love of the Seven. Why would I do that if I wanted to…” He dropped his voice. “…to kill him?”

“I’m not accusing you. But I can’t help but wonder if anyone else has talked to you about this matter. Or if anyone has suggested anything to you.”

“I don’t… no, they haven’t.” Either Harrold Hardyng was an even better mummer than he’d said she was, or he was being completely truthful. “Why?” he blurted. “Who… who would want to hurt Robert?”

“I don’t know,” Sansa lied. “But we have to be careful. Now more than ever, with Princess Myrcella and—”

“She doesn’t like him very much,” said Ser Harrold. “At least, it doesn’t seem that way…” He shrugged. “I’ll be careful.”

Sansa nearly laughed. Why, he is almost as naive as I was. Arm in arm, they crossed the threshold of the Small Hall. “You’ll be on the dais, I suppose,” Harry said, “whereas I’ve been consigned to some distant corner of the room. Which should give me a good view of some dusty gargoyles, if nothing else.” He left her there.

They had cleared away last night’s decorations and laid out fresh tablecloths. The golden drapes and streamers had come down and forlorn blue ones went up in their place, blazoned with the moon-and-falcon of House Arryn. Here and there the walls were festooned with Stark and Tully banners, too.

“Good morrow, my lady.” Littlefinger had been slinking somewhere, but now he came slithering up behind her, looking even more wormish than normal. “I hope you slept well.”

“I… I had a… a normal sleep, my lord.” Her tongue felt funny in her mouth. “I beg your pardon. That’s my brother over there.” Rickon and Ser Brynden could not have timed their arrival better.

Sansa managed to extricate herself from Littlefinger and came to her brother’s side, mussing his hair a little. “Brienne tells me that you stayed up most of the night.”

Rickon blinked up at her blearily. “I’m fine, Sansa,” he said slowly, “Really, I am.”

“What happened yesterday?”

“The… the wedding.”
“Whose?”

“Um.” He glanced up at the walls. “Lord… um…” His eyes brightened a little. “Oh, cousin Robert married the Lannister.” Contempt filled his voice.

“Are you sure?”

He pointed to a spot behind her. “Well, they’re standing over there.”

So they were. The bride and groom came out hand-in-hand, though neither of them looked particularly pleased about it. Robert was wearing a doublet quartered in his House colours, blue and white, while Myrcella remained defiant in a pale red that was plainly meant to evoke thoughts of House Lannister.

A smattering of somewhat lethargic clapping filled the room as they entered, along with a few muted cheers. At the high table, Lord Petyr Baelish got to his feet, holding his silver wine-cup. Ser Lothor Brune passed Robert and Myrcella their own goblets. “A toast,” Littlefinger called out, “the songs have been sung, the feast has been finished off, the proper ceremonies have been observed! And now, when Lord Robert goes home to the Vale to confront his less loyal bannermen, he will have his new wife at his side. May she give him wise counsel, strong sons and beautiful daughters. To Lord and Lady Arryn!”

All the while his eyes never left Sansa.

“To Lord and Lady Arryn!” chorused the hall.

Then it was all japes and follies, dancers and singers and musicians (Rymund the Rhymer still seemed drunk from last night). Sansa partook in none of it, but sat at her table, alone despite being surrounded by hundreds. She had the seat of honour to Robert’s right, and despite her cousin’s many attempts to engage her in conversation all she saw was Littlefinger, smirking at her. He knows something that I do not. For a moment, she had feared it might be the wine, but Robert was drinking it down like pomegranate juice and had suffered no ill effects.

Eventually Littlefinger stood up again. “Perchance some of you are wondering on what I said about Lord Robert’s duties,” he announced, “now, I will not bore you with the details, but the Lords Regent of the Vale have decided that it is of paramount importance that Lord Arryn returns to the Gates of the Moon, not only to take his new bride home, but to confront Lord Royce and Lord Redfort and those who still in rebellion against the true Warden of the East.”

“A noble cause,” said Lord Edmure Tully. “It seems like we are all abandoning poor Harrenhal to loneliness, though.” That brought a round of uneasy laughter. “As the Arryns go one way, so too will the Tullys go another. I mean to march home to Riverrun. Stannis Baratheon’s men have abandoned the castle – and their king too, it would seem – and it is my duty to reclaim the Riverlands. We will be gone within a few days.”

*What are you doing?* Sansa’s throat felt dry. *What are you doing, uncle? You’re leaving Robert with Littlefinger. You’re leaving your nephew in the care of a snake…*

All at once she understood why Littlefinger was smiling so much. *Once he reaches the Vale, no one will be able to touch him. Whatever plans he has will proceed unhindered…*

“Don’t let me rush you,” he was saying to Edmure. “We have more than enough provisions for your host.”

“I would not like to impose.” Their courtesies went back and forth until both of them decided to sit
and Sansa was left sitting there aghast. She was about to stand up and approach her uncle when
Littlefinger nudged her arm and said “Lady Sansa, you have a visitor, it seems.” He pointed across
the hall, and with mounting dread she caught sight of Edric Dayne, watching intently.

“His Grace should have had the good grace to wait until you had finished,” Lord Petyr murmured.
“We can send him away, if you’d like.” His hand brushed hers, and it was cold and horrible and…

“No.” Sansa swallowed. “I’ll go and see what he wants.” She spent the long walk across the hall
wondering whether Aegon was worse than Littlefinger.

“My lady.” Ned gave his customary bow. Today he wore the slashed black-and-purple raiment of
Lord Dayne of Starfall, rather than that of Edric the squire. She noticed that there were no guards
with him. “If I might have a word?”

Sansa could not bear the awkward courtesies. “What does the king want?”

“The king, my lady? Well, yes, there’s a message for you, but… well, I wanted to talk to you myself,
actually.”

“Oh.” She felt a little embarrassed, but mostly relieved. “Well, then. What do you want to say?”

“It’s just…” Ned frowned. “I sound like a child, I know, but I don’t really want to be his squire.”

“But… he’s your king. Don’t you want—?”

“I have to go back to Starfall soon, to rule, I know that. But if I go with King Aegon to the capital,
I’ll just be another boy lord. They can force me to marry, to go places I don’t want to go… when I
was with Lord Beric, I was his squire, yes, but I was free, in a way. And I just thought… well, I
don’t really know why I came to you. Maybe it’s because you seem so certain of yourself. Assured, I
mean.”

Sansa nearly laughed at the irony. “The truth is, I’m far less certain than you seem to think. But
remember, Ned, you’re the lord of Starfall. My father spoke of your house almost with reverence,
sometimes.”

“I would have liked to have met him. I saw him, at the Hand’s tourney. And you. You looked…
um… very… nice.”

“You remind me of my brother Bran,” said Sansa. “He’s about your age, I think. And he always
wanted to be a knight, like you.” She paused. “I can’t give you any advice, not really, but sometimes
things don’t turn out as we expect. Lastly… well, there’s always a place for you at Winterfell, if you
need it.”

Ned’s face flushed a little pink. “I don’t have any sisters, you know. But if I did, I’d hope they were
like you and Arya.” There was a long pause, then he bent to kiss her hand, as lords and ladies did.

Sansa let him do that, then stepped forwards and hugged him instead. Edric flinched a little, then put
his arms tentatively around her. After a while he scurried back, uncertain. Then he said, “Oh. The
message. I almost forgot. King Aegon says he’s… he’s sorry for what happened yesterday, and—”

She did not need to hear the rest of it. The fact that Aegon had sent Edric to carry the message for
him told Sansa all she needed to know.

When he had gone, Sansa turned around and found Rickon waiting for her. “How long have you
been standing there?” she asked him.
“Only a short while. Was it from King Aegon?”

Sansa said nothing.

“He’s a coward,” said Rickon, “that’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it?”

It was. *No true king would ever act like that. But life is not a song, and none of these kings deserve their crowns.* “How did you know?” asked Sansa.

Rickon smiled. “I’m your brother, I’m supposed to know these things. And there’s something else, I know. You’re worried.”

“I’m always worried.”

“Yes, but today you’re especially worried. What is it?” He was earnest and insistent.

Together their eyes fell upon Littlefinger, talking in a hushed voice with their cousin Robert. “He’s going to try and hurt him, I know,” said Rickon. “But it’s obvious what you have to do.” At Sansa’s raised eyebrow he continued. “You have to hurt him first, Sansa. You have to be strong, and fierce, like a wolf.”

Edric Dayne had called her assured, and Harrold Hardyng had said ‘you have half the North behind you.’ It was true Sansa supposed. *I can be strong,* she decided, *and I can be fierce.*

The decision was unexpectedly clear. It was time to play the great game.

Sansa reached out and ruffled Rickon’s hair, brushing dust from the tangled auburn strands. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“Well,” said Rickon, “if there was a fight between a direwolf and a mockingbird, I know who I’d bet on.”

Chapter End Notes

In the immortal words of George R.R. Martin:

The last one was a bitch. This one was three bitches and a bastard.

Please excuse my vulgarity. But this chapter means that I’ve finally solved the 'Harrenhal knot'; that is, the way in which massive numbers of characters simultaneously converge on Harrenhal. Now that I’m FINALLY 'over the hill', things are going to start falling into place a lot easier, I hope.

Sansa's confrontation with Aegon is written as a deliberate anticlimax to this storyline, and his choice not to talk to her on the following morning shows that this is well and truly over. And with the knowledge that Petyr betrayed her father (which, admittedly, the Hound told her at quite a convenient time - though I think he thought she knew), Sansa is now striking out on her own.

It's time for Dark Sansa.
“I remember as though it were yesterday.” Lord Jon Connington smiled at the memory. “And I am not like to forget it anytime soon. Golden streamers flying and bells ringing in all seven towers. The great procession from Visenya’s Hill all the way back to the Red Keep. Prince Rhaegar was well loved, of course, and he had never looked more splendid, with the quiet breeze ruffling his silvery hair, and his eyes sparkling even brighter than the gemstones on his doublet…”

“And what of the bride?” Arianne asked.

He scowled a little. “Elia… yes, she was very beautiful too.” It was the blandest compliment he could have spoken. For him it was Rhaegar, and it was only ever Rhaegar. Arianne did not want to pry, but she was certain Lord Jon’s feelings for the Prince of Dragonstone went further than friendship. That is a scandal waiting to happen, and the Hand of the King cannot afford that, especially right now.

“I think I prefer the idea of a pavilion,” Arianne said. “The Great Sept is surrounded by sparrows, they say, and we wouldn’t want them to disturb the proceedings, would we? A ceremony conducted in the open sunlight – House Martell’s sigil, after all, and—”

“Hmm,” said Lord Connington. “But it would not stop the sparrows, you know.”

“No. But I think it shows a certain honesty. King’s Landing is full of lies, and it smells of nightsoil. Not something I want to put up with on my wedding day.”

Lord Connington nodded. “You’ll have to see how amenable King Aegon is to the idea.”

“Well, you know him better than I do. What do you think he will say?”

“He likes the outdoors. That’s where he’s spent most of his life, be it working in the rigging of the Shy Maid or riding across the plains of the Disputed Lands with the sellsword companies. And I
suppose King’s Landing holds little for him save for bad memories.”

Connington went on, “...much like his father. Prince Rhaegar spent the better part of the tourney of Harrenhal in the alone godsmoor, playing his harp. In the vastness of the castle it was barely a whisper, but it was always there. And then there was the joust. I went down in the second round when Ser Oswell Whent unhorsed me, but Rhaegar... he was magnificent those couple of days. Fierce as a dragon at times, and as graceful as a swan at others.”

There was no grace in the way he abandoned Princess Elia and Princess Rhaenys to their fate in the capital, thought Arianne. But she did not want to argue that, not with Lord Jon Connington, who saw his silver prince as nothing short of perfect. Love blinds us all. Though Arianne had never truly loved, and did not truly know.

“My lord.” Jon Connington’s red-haired squire approached the table. “My lady. Ser Harry Strickland and two of his companions are without, seeking words with you.”

Arianne rose. “I should leave.” It had been a long day, and tomorrow would be even longer.

“There is no need,” said Connington. “I will not keep my plans from the future queen. Come, let us greet our guests.”

Ser Harry Strickland and two of his captains were in the solar. “I am Lysono Maar, my lady,” said the flamboyant of the pair. Arianne had known Lyseni before; they liked to dress in bright colours and they had a frighteningly inflated opinion of themselves. Lysono Maar had the silver-gold hair and amethyst eyes of the Valyrian dragonlords, as well as more amethysts on his rings and in his earlobes. He had foregone the Golden Company’s usual dyed ringmail and golden cloak for a cloak of thick red wool, worn over a bright blue tunic. This one is not a fighter so much as he is a talker, Arianne mused. Indeed, Lysono Maar was only too eager to exchange a stream of courtesies with her. “How has my lady found Storm’s End?” and “I have not visited Dorne in a while,” and “that gown brings out your figure beautifully, my lady,” and so forth.

The other man was less talkative. Ser Franklyn Flowers was bastard-born, and had the look of one who had fought to uphold his bastard honour his entire life. He had a broad bull’s chest, and his muscled arms were a canvas of scar tissue. He ducked his head, murmured a greeting, and fell silent.

Connington’s squire returned with cups and a flagon of wine. “Can I get you anything else?” his lordship asked, as Lysono Maar poured the wine with great carefulness.

“A roast chicken, if you have one anywhere,” said Franklyn Flowers. “Harry’s been starving me all this time.”

“We were waiting outside for all of five minutes,” replied the captain-general. “It would be rude if you were still eating when we went up.”

“A man must eat,” muttered Flowers. His eyes were small and dark.

Lord Connington sent his squire off to find the promised roast chicken, and turned the captains’ attention to the map he had on his table. The broad sheet of vellum was strewn with blocks of carved wood. The largest cluster was all roses and suns, and belonged scant half a day’s ride south and west of Storm’s End. “You timed your arrival well,” Connington said, “This time on the morrow, Prince Oberyn’s host will be here, like as not.”

“How many men?” asked Lysono Maar.

“Twenty-five thousand, our scouts report. Ten thousand Dornish.”
Franklyn Flowers did not look pleased. “Damned Dornishmen. Can’t we do this without them?”

“The princess is Dornish, must I remind you?” said Ser Harry Strickland with one raised eyebrow.

“Sorry, princess.” Ser Franklyn Flowers was having difficulty looking at her. “I’ve had a bad time with Dornishmen, is all.”

“Just as we tend to have a bad time with Reachmen,” Arianne replied. “Nonetheless, we’re in this together now.” And if it goes wrong, we will all burn together, too.

Lord Connington was growing restless. “What do you have to tell me?” he asked Strickland.

The captain-general frowned. “Nothing too good. But nothing too bad either. The Evenstar of Tarth sent as few men as he could, as did Lord Estermont. We had more luck with the Bar Emmons and the Velaryons. Boy lords are not hard to frighten.”

“How many?”

“Seven thousand, all in all.”

Connington shook his head. “That is not enough,” he said. “Daenerys has forty thousand Dothraki screamers sitting outside the walls of King’s Landing, and near as many on Dragonstone and up on Crackclaw Point.”

“Not to mention three dragons,” Lysono Maar said. “Three dragons were enough to take all of Westeros, in Aegon the Conqueror’s day.”

“Three full-grown dragons,” replied Lord Connington. “Daenerys’s are mere infants, by comparison. Aegon has his own hopes for them…” He left this vague, “…but if it should come to it, a few well-placed ballistae bolts should bring them down.”

Franklyn Flowers snorted. “You make it sound so easy. Men will not simply stand in rank and file while dragonfire rains upon them.”

“True. But if it all goes well, two of Daenerys’s dragons will be gone before she can call upon them…” His eyes met Ser Harry Strickland’s, and Arianne knew this was some secret shared between the two of them.

“Lord Penrose wondered why all the oaths seemed to point to Aegon and not to Daenerys,” said Lysono Maar. “But I succeeded in convincing him in the end. There were problems in Haystack Hall, too, but it was Lord Selwyn himself who posed the biggest hurdle of all. Of course, some men are convinced with words, others with actions—”

Arianne sensed the Lyseni was going to launch into another rambling explanation, but Lord Connington cut him off. “I don’t need to hear how you succeeded,” he said, “only that you did.” He turned to the other knight. “And how did you fare, Ser Franklyn?”

“I sent Marq Mandrake in to do most of the talking,” the big knight said, “he’s better at it than I am, and he likes it, too. And he’s prettier than me, too. Myself, I stayed with the host and tried to look threatening.” He shrugged. “Wasn’t too hard.”

“I hope you took good care of my elephants,” Strickland muttered.

“Course I did.” He smiled at Arianne. “They’re not as frightening as you think.”
“I wish we could say the same for dragons,” Lysono Maar said.

Ser Harry took another careful swallow of wine, and pointed at the map, following the trail of the kingsroad between Storm’s End and King’s Landing. “Two weeks, I’d say. Though if the rain and the snow get any worse, it will slow us up. If not, we should reach King’s Landing around the same time as King Aegon. If we leave within a few days—”

“You are full of if’s, captain-general,” said Ser Franklyn Flowers. “Is there anything we know for certain?”

“We will march when Prince Oberyn gets here,” Strickland replied. “We will see what he says, and if he wants us to take a couple of days scouting—”

“He won’t,” Arianne said with certainty, “my uncle is not likely to rest any longer than he needs to. Which will not be long at all. In a couple of days, we will be on the road.” The road to King’s Landing, and to my husband.

For a long moment no words were spoken. The mood in the room was quiet and considered, at odds with the rising wind over Shipbreaker Bay. “The hour grows late,” Lord Connington said suddenly. “We should all go to bed and talk again when we are refreshed in the morning.”

“As you say, my lord,” said Strickland. “Though if we might have a few words, I would appreciate that. About the elephants...”

“Very well.” As Arianne followed Lysono Maar and Franklyn Flowers towards the door, the sense that secrets were being kept from her even now was unsettling.

Elephants, she thought, what about his elephants?

It was a strange and almost fey night. The stars were silver crystals glimmering among moody blue-black clouds, and the air was rife with the smell of salt wind. This was a night for stories, a night for dragons and griffins and Children of the Forest come out from their secret hiding-places and greet the world of men.

Storm’s End is a place for secrets, too. The walls were seventy feet thick in places, which Elia Sand had pronounced more than wide enough to hide all manner of secret passages and tunnels. “This place is old,” she’d said, “and old places have the most secrets of all.”

“Like Sunspear,” Arianne replied. She and Tyene had discovered most of its secrets back when they were girls, though she wagered there were places unexplored even now. The Water Gardens was less surprising; her ancestor Prince Maron had built it from an elegant, simple design, and in ten years spent there Arianne had found no evidence of passageways.

“Princess,” said a voice.

In the darkness all Arianne could see were his purple eyes, but she knew Ser Gerold Dayne’s voice only too well. “Another late night, is it?” His words had a sneering quality to it. This is about Ser Daemon, she knew.

“Another? I will not back down. Pray pardon, ser. I fear I misunderstand you.”

Ser Gerold remained evasive. “Come, my lady,” he said, “it is late, and you should not be walking around alone. I will take you to your chambers.”

It was a long, chilly climb to her bedchamber. She and Darkstar did not speak until they were almost at the door. “You would do well to remain vigilant in King’s Landing,” he said, in scarce more than
a whisper. “Secrets and rumours are thrown around so easily in the capital. I would hate for you to become a subject of one.”

Arianne drew herself up, but he still stood a head taller than her. She swallowed. “Are you threatening me, ser?”

“I would never dare,” said Ser Gerold. His smirk returned as he said, “but I cannot say the same for everyone.”

_I have had enough of this._ “What do you want? I cannot remember why I thought it was a good idea to bring you with me, ser.” She sighed. “Now, I have a message for my father and I need a man to send it. Would you—”

“All in good time,” Ser Gerold interrupted, and Arianne’s voice dwindled. “You will know what I want, in time.” He melted back into the night, leaving her there.

She fumbled her way through the door into the dimly lit solar, and closed it firmly behind her. For a few moments she stood, breathing heavily, her hands pressed against the warm wood.

“Arianne,” said Tyene Sand. “Are you alright?”

“Yes.” It was important to walk the line between nervousness and suspicious overconfidence. “I’m fine. I met Ser Gerold on the stairs, that’s all.”

Spotted Sylva nodded. “Well, that explains you looking unsettled.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“No, but we know you too well,” said Sylva. “Come now, tell us what happened.”

So she told them.

“This is not good, Ari,” Tyene said afterward, “if Aegon should come to learn of your... involvement... with Ser Daemon – even if it was only the once – you are opening yourself to a scandal. And after that, he may not want to marry you.”

*Well, Arianne thought, that makes two of us._ “It is what it is,” she said.

“Yes,” Tyene replied, “but that means nothing good for you. If... if Ser Daemon is asked...”

“He will stay silent,” she said. “We both went away with regrets, and he will not want to call any attention back to it.”

“Men can be spiteful.”

“Not Daemon.” She doubted he would betray her... though perhaps her rememberances were tainted by the boy he had been, so bold in his pursuasion of her and yet so shy beneath the covers the first time they’d fucked. Afterwards, they’d lay together in contented silence, as a lone candle flickered beside their bed, kissing and touching with nervous desire. “No, not Daemon.” *He values what we had too much.*

“I think you are placing too much trust in our Ser Daemon,” said Sylva. “He has always been sly.”

Doubtless she too was thinking of the night when they were both sixteen, when they had both stolen into Ser Daemon’s chamber in the Water Gardens and shared him between them.

“Nonetheless,” the Santagar girl went on, “he does not concern me nearly so much as Darkstar.
What does he want, Arianne?” Her voice echoed in the shadowy chamber.

“I don’t know. But I expect we’ll find out soon enough,” Arianne stretched her arms and sighed. “Nonetheless, I am growing weary of all this talk of Daemon and Darkstar. Let us sleep.”

Sylva and Tyene helped her out of her gown and into her night-shift. “You know,” Tyene said, as she followed Arianne into the four-poster bed, “if Ser Gerold is bothering you—”

“No, we can’t poison him,” said Sylva on her other side, “honestly, Tyene, I thought you were smarter than that.”

Tyene shrugged and shifted across the bed, pressing her feet against Arianne’s and playing with the toes. “I am. Just a thought.”

“Your thoughts are dangerous,” Sylva murmured, “you weren’t planning to poison me, were you?”

“If I was, do you think I’d tell you?”

Arianne sighed. “Will both of you be quiet?” Her thoughts were turbulent, and she did not want to deal with the constant muttering of her companions.

Sleep is a curious thing. One never remembers falling asleep, nor do they remember the way in which they wake up, or how far they have moved in the night, or everything they dreamed of. Thus Arianne’s first coherent thoughts did not come until the next morning, as she lay back on her bath with the warm waters lapping around her. Tyene sat on the window-seat, pretending to read a book of goodly devotion. “Lavender oil or violets?” Sylva asked.

Arianne looked up. “What?”

“Lavender oil or violets? You want to look your best for your uncle’s arrival, don’t you.”

“Hmm, lavender. But not too much. It shouldn’t be overpoweringly strong.” Arianne sank into the bathwater and let the warm waters close over her head. When she came up again her hair was wet through and the rivulets came streaming over her limbs, the droplets slipping through the gaps in her fingers and toes.

“The Seven-Pointed Star cautions against indulgence,” Tyene said, “many times, in fact. And you’ve been indulging yourself in that bath for far too long, Ari. Let us have our turn.”

Sighing, Arianne stepped out onto the mats, where Sylva helped her scrub down with rough towels. Donning a shift and binding her hair, she went over to the window and rubbed condensation off the frosted panes. “Snow,” she murmured, her breath misting on the glass.

“Snow,” agreed Tyene. “If you look hard enough, you might be able to make out—”

“—my uncle’s army,” Arianne finished. From the high window, she could see quite a way into the grey mist, and her eyes caught upon the faint fluttering of banners. Only a few, though. “Is that it?”

“Of course not,” Tyene said. “That’s probably just the scouts.”

“Well, we should be ready to greet them. I would not want them carrying messages to my uncle about us looking so bedraggled.”

“How could you ever look bedraggled, Ari?” her cousin replied with a laugh. “If anything, it only brings out your beauty.”
“You are a better liar than that.” But Arianne was laughing too as she picked out her gown from the bedside. She chose red, to match the Dornish sun and the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen, though she hid it beneath her cloak.

A brisk wind was knifing at them as they made their way down the steps. On the landings, Golden Company men stood looking out over the swirling gulf of Shipbreaker Bay. Arianne spied Laswell Peake and Marq Mandrake out on the ramparts, teaching recruits how to use the wall-mounted mangonels. Outside the Great Hall she came upon Ser Daemon Sand laughing with Black Balaq, who led the Company’s archers. When he saw her, a long, uneasy look passed between them, and his eyes did not leave Arianne until she went round the corner and into the hall.

Lord Connington’s seat on the dais was empty. “His lordship has gone out to walk the walls and see to the scouts,” Ser Harry Strickland told her.

“I thought you would have gone with him.”

“How did you come to command the Golden Company?” she asked him.


Arianne smiled. “It can’t have been that bad. They made you their captain-general.”

“Yes,” he said, strained, “and that may have been the most unfortunate event of all. It was a three-way voting race between myself, a friend of mine and an opponent with whom we both had... various fundamental differences. Our opponent was winning in the voting rounds and was not far from being named captain-general, so I agreed to drop out in the hope of shifting most of my votes to him. But he suddenly died of the grey plague a day before the voting, so his votes went to me before I could do anything about it, and here I stand.”

Arianne pondered that. “Hmm. Sometimes we end up in places we don’t want to be in,” she said, more to herself than anything. “How do you cope with that?”

“After a while, I stopped noticing. One day pretty much blends into the next and then the next, in a vague whirl of golden cloaks and steel and blood. Until we got the news from Magister Illyrio, and after that it would have been against the company’s principles not to... anyhow...”

Arianne understood hardly any of that. “My uncle was in a sellsword company, you know?”

Strickland nodded. “We fought together at the siege of, hmm, somewhere or another.”

“I know he fought near Volantis. A city on the Rhoyne, mayhaps; Selhorys or Ghoyan Drohe or—”

“That might have been it, though I can never remember. They do like to quarrel in the east.”

“It is no different in the west,” Arianne said. By now she was looking round for Sylva or Tyene to rescue her from this tedious conversation. Instead her eyes fell upon Elia Sand, breathless and red, her long braid tangled with pine needles and bits of gorse. “You have to come with me, Arianne,” her cousin blurted out.
“Come with you where? And why do you look like you’ve been wrestling with a bear?”

“I was following Lord Connington. I was bored and it looked interesting.” She grinned. “We rode all the way out of camp and down to... anyhow... then Father saw me and told me to go and fetch you instead of snooping—”

“Your father? Elia, you’re not making any s—”

Her cousin tugged suddenly on her arm. “Father’s here, he’s here, come and see, come on!” And Arianne was being yanked away from the table without half a chance to look back. Harry Strickland, Ser Daemon Sand, and all the rest disappeared behind her as she struggled to keep up with Elia’s pace. Arianne raised the hood of her cloak as they went out into the snow, flakes whirling around her head. “What’s with all the running, Arianne?” Drey Dalt called after her as she ran, but before she could answer he was gone behind her.

All the while wondering if this was some jape, she chased Elia down steps slippery with black ice, through tunnels barely wide enough to fit through, across yards and tent-grounds ringing to the tumultuous hammering of steel. They came to a cone-shaped white pavilion; Elia burst through the doors caught one breath and announced “I brought her! Here she is!” as Arianne wandered, slightly dazed, into the tent.

And she saw that Elia had not been lying.

Prince Oberyn was wearing his ever-present smirk. “You look rather flustered, niece. Why, Lord Willas can’t keep his eyes off of you.”

It had been long years since Arianne had last seen Willas Tyrell. Back then he had been a boy of fifteen, with an easy smile and a way with words, and a fine jouster too. But that had been before the fall. Now they said that he was bookish, and the easy smile of his boyish face was gone, replaced by a man’s hard hawkish eyes. “Princess Arianne.” He stooped to kiss her hand, and she did not fail to notice how he had to reach for his cane to steady himself afterwards.

Arianne turned to her uncle. “I did not think you would be here so soon,”

“We rode with the scouts,” explained Prince Oberyn. “And I wanted to be the first to set eyes on Storm’s End. She is a remarkable castle with a remarkable history. Never broken by siege... until last year, when Lord Connington here came down with the Golden Company and took it from the defenders under the cover of night—”

“That was King Aegon’s plan,” said the griffin lord, and Arianne knew at once that he was again trying to inflate his king’s reputation, for her sake.

“A fine plan, I’m sure,” Prince Oberyn said. “But I’m sure your knowledge of the castle and the surrounding lands must have been invaluable, my lord. But I digress, we are here now, and ready.”

“Who commands the host now that you’re here?” Arianne asked.

“Lord Yronwood and Lady Blackmont. Good soldiers both, and they understand the stakes of this. Both have already lost sons and daughters to the fighting. Your brother’s friend Cletus was among those killed at Highgarden.”

“Quentyn—”

“—lost an eye, as I’m sure he’s told you. It serves to make him look quite fearsome, but I don’t think he has it in his heart to be ruthless.” He gave her a pointed look, as though to say, and do you? “The
battle itself was a bloody affair, but it did what he had hoped it would. Randyll Tarly is broken and in retreat, and Lord Willas seems to have an absurd amount of confidence that he will accept our offer.”

The lord of Highgarden shrugged. “If he has any sense of self-preservation, he will.”

“I do so hope the Lannisters continue in their defiance,” Prince Oberyn said, “though the Imp and Princess Myrcella did amuse me... the others, less so. Casterly Rock will hold against an army of tens of thousands, but not against dragons.”

“We have no dragons,” said Arianne.

Oberyn smirked. “Yet.”

Jon Connington frowned at him. “This is irrelevant. We will get to that hurdle when it comes. Until then, King’s Landing is our only focus.”

“What is there to worry about?” Prince Oberyn stretched out his arms as though yawning. “Sixty thousand men, a great marriage alliance, and five hundred ships. And that’s only if things go wrong. I will leave you to stare at a map, Lord Connington. I wish to talk to my niece.” He took Arianne by the shoulder, and steered her from the tent into the shadow of a tall wooden guard post.

“Where’s Elia?” he asked, when they stood alone. “I hardly noticed her scurrying out. In which case, I don’t think we have long before Tyene and all the others get here.” He frowned. “You do realise what all this means, Arianne, don’t you?”

“Another Dance of the Dragons,” she replied, “but we have no dragons on our side.”

“History would seem to count that against us,” Prince Oberyn said, “but dragons can be... unpredictable. And Daenerys can only ride one. Some may tend towards a different master.”

“Aegon...”

He nodded. “That is the heart of it.” Oberyn dropped his voice a little, though the general rumble of the yard was surely loud enough to disguise their words. “Lord Connington is lying to you,” he said, “though I don’t doubt you’ve realised that already. He loved Prince Rhaegar dearly and his sole ambition now is to stand by his son. In which case, you should know... this Aegon may not be all you have heard.”

“You think he has...” She hesitated to say it. “...the Targaryen madness?”

“Oh, no, the boy is sane.” Prince Oberyn smiled. “But in this great conspiracy of ours, there are so many players, and it unsettles me when I do not know all of their names. Even once this is over, you will need to be on your guard against enemies from all corners of the realm, and beyond... but enough of that, here comes Tyene.”

Arianne stood and watched as Tyene and Daemon Sand and Sylva, most of her escort, came crowding around her uncle. She was forgotten in the chaos of greetings, and managed to find her way across the yard to where Willas Tyrell was waiting, a strained smile on his face.

“Did you abandon Lord Connington to his maps?” Arianne asked.

“He seemed only too happy to be left alone. Besides, matters of war are my brother Garlan’s domain.” For a couple of moments there was an awkward, brittle silence. “It has been a long time,” Willas said.
“We were children,” she reminded him.

“You were an unusually beautiful one, my lady, if I say so myself.”

“It wasn’t that. We were both quite drunk.”

He grinned. “The blackberry wine. I remember. That was strong.”

“It was a long time ago,” Arianne said matter-of-factly. “Back then I had a thing for Reach boys, and all their courtesies, which everyone in Dorne was sorely lacking in.”

Willas’s expression turned cool. “You were playing your father’s game,” he said, “and I was playing my grandmother’s. We were puppets on strings, Arianne.”

“But now we’re playing for ourselves,” she replied. Truthfully, she could not say whether that was better or worse.

Chapter End Notes

It’s been a while; this chapter has taken a while. However, I’ve made quite a lot of preparations for the upcoming instalments, including a big battle chapter that’s going to be the first to contain multiple POVs in the same chapter.

Not a lot to say about this one. It might read like filler, but I liked it, and I hope you did too.
The first horn blast broke the silence of night, sharp and sudden as the blade of a knife. *They are coming*, Jon thought, lurching to his feet. *They are coming*. His scar burned with sudden cold as the second blast sounded. Moments later came the third. *They are coming*.

It was no easy thing to sleep in boots and mail and leather, as this restless night had proved, but Jon did not want to waste time putting them on when every second was so priceless. All he had to do was throw his cloak over his shoulders and pick up his scabbard before scrambling out into the night.

His Sworn Brothers were busy taking up swords and bows and torches. “Evening, my lord.” Dolorous Edd rubbed sleep from his eyes, sighing. “It’s a bloody cold night.”

“And like to get even colder,” Jon’s breath misted in the air. He stepped away from the crowd, put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. “Ghost, to me!” The white wolf bounded out of nowhere, and in his wake came Val, her ash-blond braid flapping back and forth. “I had hoped they’d give us a day’s rest, Lord Snow,” she said to him.

“You were wrong,” Jon replied. *You know nothing.* “They’ll never rest.”

“Well… let’s hope they do sometime, else we’ll be here forever, won’t we?” Val laughed humourlessly. Jon did not.

Grenn came puffing up the hill, having run from the sentry watchtowers on the camp perimeter. “They’re on the eastern side, Jon – *m’lord*, I mean. Same as usual.”

“There’s nothing usual about any of this,” muttered Dolorous Edd.
“There’s no point all of us standing about here,” Jon said to Grenn, “pick out ten, twelve men, and form an advance guard. You do the same, Bernarr, and you, Jack.”


“What, are you expecting he’ll have some great plan?” Val snorted. “No, it’ll be the same as it always is. Us against them. Kill or be killed.”

Val spoke the truth. Whatever careful strategies Mance’s war council designed always fell apart when the battle reached its bloodiest. Then it was just fire and steel and dragonglass, man against wight and wight against man.

“And you, Lord Snow?” Val asked, “where will you be?”

A lord should never ask his men to do anything for him which he would not do for them, Lord Eddard Stark had once said, fighting and dying most of all. In that respect, Jon ought to be out fighting with Grenn and the rest… but amid the quarrelsome chieftains of the free folk and the suspicious Northern lords there were very few men who could command the respect of the Watch, the wildlings and the Northerners. And even fewer who are both a son of Eddard Stark and the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. “I have to command,” said Jon, resigning himself to the same duty he’d held since the nightly battles began, “but I’ll do it from up on the palisade.” He would not send his men out to die from some faraway hiding-place. When it came to it he would gladly join the fighting hand-to-hand, as Donal Noye had when Mag the Mighty had threatened to breach the gate under the Wall.

That seemed a thousand years ago now. Noye was dead, and the Old Bear; and Qhorin Halfhand, who had commanded the rangers in the Skirling Pass; and Ser Thoren Smallwood, who had been second-in-command at the Fist of the First Men; even Ser Alliser Thorne, who had met his end at Hardhome. I am the sword in the darkness, Jon thought. I am the watcher on the walls. I am all there is. Clenching his fingers, he turned to the brothers standing before him between the night-black tents. “Men of the Watch!” he called, “you know what’s out there. You’ve fought them, you’ve killed them, and you’ve lost brothers to them. I don’t need to tell you what to do. You know what to do.” He took a breath. “So let’s go and kill the bastards!”

Between them Iron Emmett and Tumberjon managed to rouse something vaguely resembling a cheer. “You make it sound so heroic,” Dolorous Edd mumbled over the dying roar.

Jon frowned. “Fighting?”

“No,” said Edd, solemn as ever, “dying.”

Let’s hope we never find out, Jon thought, knowing it to be futile. Men would die tonight, as they had on all nights before. He thought of Tom Barleycorn, laughing one night and dead come morning, of Fulk the Flea, his body riddled with arrows, of Cugen the steward and Alf the builder, and all the rest, who had died at the Fist of the First Men and on the collapsing stair at Castle Black, in the gate beneath the Wall holding off the giant, of Ygritte, dying in his arms... you know nothing, Jon Snow...

And suddenly the watchtower was before him, all piled wood and snow, and he clutched the ice-slick rungs of the ladder in his gloved hands. Pyp went before him with a torch, calling, “Make way! Make way for the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch!” Hands reached down and hauled him up, then shoved him roughly away to make room for the next man. The air stank of frozen sweat. Droplets of ice stung at his eyes. “You’ll be wanting this, m’lord!” Dolorous Edd shoved a longbow
into his hands. Jon gave the string a tug; it made a brittle, reassuring twang. He nodded to the nearest opening. “Let’s go out, then.”

The stout wooden watchtower would afford them the best views, but there was not enough room from them all here, so Jon shouted for Ulmer of the Kingswood to keep the command here and stormed out onto the walk that lined the palisade fences. Below, Grenn and Asher Forrester were leading their men down into the ice-walled passages that snaked between the lines of the living and the dead, fiery torches and silvery swords bobbing as they moved.

Where the palisade bulged a bit, wide enough for them to stand, he stopped and rested a hand against the top of the wooden crenel. Around him were Edd and Satin, and further down he saw Val and Aly Mormont going to their own positions. The snow had piled up around the foot of the wall, steeply banked on their side, a sharp wall on the other. “Give me some light!” Jon shouted to everyone and no one, “I want to see what we’re fighting against!”

Edd shuttled that command down their line, and the arrows sailed out sporadically, trailing orange flames. Where they struck the snow they guttered out with a hiss, but they briefly gave Jon a couple hundred yards of visibility. No wights, yet. He took up an arrow and nocked it to his own bowstring. “Ready yourselves!” he shouted, “when they come, there won’t be time to hesitate!”

He thought of Tormund with his screamers in the forest, ready to light fires if it came to that, and Mance back at Craster’s longhall on the hill, worrying over everything. “Satin,” he called out, “send word back to Mance that I have the wall, and that we have the Forresters down below.” He looked down their line of trenches; saw banners flying with chained giants on them. “Mors Umber, too, I think!” Crowfood commanded more archers.

“My lord, I’ll stay, I’ll fight,” Satin protested.

Jon shook his head. “Go!” he called hoarsely. Though he looked hardly pleased, Satin did not stay to argue.

Down below a bloody bastard drum was banging. His ears stung. Then horns and horns and horns. “HERE THEY COME!” shouted Alysane Mormont, the She-Bear.

“NIGHT’S WATCH!” Jon summoned the loudest voice he could, “NOCK YOUR ARROWS, DRAW, LOOSE!” As he said so he released his own and a hundred echoing hisses answered. Roughly half the flaming points melted into the night, the others met dead flesh or cloth and flared up violently. Jon did not waste time hesitating. “NOCK!” he ordered again, “DRAW! LOOSE!”

No point in that, he considered, as his second shaft spiralled into the darkness. Such ordered volleys might have made the wildlings break and flee, but the wights were not plagued by such mortal things as terror. “FIRE AT WILL!” Jon bellowed. He went along the walk telling them all, screaming it into the night. Every blinking flame lit the battle below the palisade. Asher and Grenn’s swordsman had clashed with the wights, and by the brief flashes of light he caught the shine of steel and the black glimmer of blood. A group of wildlings had broken away from further along the palisade and were joining the fight; men of the Watch fought back to back with the old foes against an enemy far greater. It was almost enough to make Jon smile. Instead he grimaced. This will go on till dawn. He steadied himself against the rampart and lifted his bow again, letting the cold string kiss his nose. It was arrow after arrow after arrow; he tore off his frozen gloves after a while and by the time he put the bow down again his fingers were red and raw and crusted with blood.

One of the watchtowers was afire, Jon saw. He could not say how that had come about. The trenches were stopped up with grey and black bodies, most of them the bony corpses of wights, though their own numbers were severely dented too. Looking down he glimpsed Ghost, howling as
he tore one of the dead men’s arms off at the shoulder. Everything was steel and moonlight. The arrows still came, but it was with less enthusiasm now. *We need to push them back, and give ourselves time to recover.* “We need to make a sortie,” he said to himself.

“Pyp!” he called over the howling din. “You have the wall!” He could not say whether his words went heard, but by then Jon was already jumping from his position into the snow below. The drums kept beating their black beat, and he staggered on restlessly.

“We need to push them back, and give ourselves time to recover.”

“Come on!” There was no time to wait. Arrows rained above their heads, each of them kissed by fire. He could hear a giant roaring nearby; Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun, most like. “We need more men!”

Val pointed to the unseemly rabble gathered all around them. “You have them!” Satin was back at his side, with the She-Bear and Black Jack Bulwer, axes in hand. He saw the scale-and-leather armour of the mountain clansmen, and a few Thenns here and there, Hornfoot men and southern swords, his Watch brothers... another commander might have made a speech, but there was no point in it, Jon knew. *It is kill or be killed, Jon knew, we have no heroic motivation save for that.* Briefly he wondered how Robb would have done it. *He would not have done as I have, and sent us all into the valley of death... but Robb is not here, and this is all we can do.*

The She-Bear spoke for him. “**NIGHT’S WATCH! WILDLINGS! NORTHMEN! FORWARD!**” And the rabble shifted around him, and they were off, listening to their own drumbeats, singing their own marching songs, all drowned out in the forward tide of movement. Ghost raced ahead, a white blur, snow and stone between his feet, the wind wailing through his fur. The snow turned to ice and then to frosty mud, and all they had for light were their own flaming arrows and the faint crescent of the moon. Jon unslung Longclaw from over his left shoulder. “**NOW!**” someone screamed, and he plunged ahead, careening into one wight, knocking him into the snow; he raised his sword and hacked down, down, down, screaming a wordless cry. Then Grenn had his arm and hauled him up again and onwards they went, into thinning mist. Wun Wun roared as he swung at a crowd of wights, scattering them to the skies.

It seemed that all of the north was behind him, in front of him, all around him. Val shouted something in his ear but he did not hear it. Brown Bernarr broke one of their foes up with his warhammer on his left, Aly Mormont charged one of them down with her shield on his right. He heard the rush of blood in Ghost’s ears as he tore one of the dead men to shreds of bone and rotted flesh and ruined wool, and felt the *ba-dum, ba-dum* of his feverish heartbeat as he brought Longclaw round and sent bits of frozen brain spinning through the night.

A skinchanger’s boar plunged ahead of the throng, scything his tusks left and right. An undead bear came barreling through the grey mists, feathered with fire arrows, its dead eyes ablaze with blue fire. Jon raised Longclaw in ready salute, but then another arrow struck the beast clean through the skull and it crashed to earth. Wun Wun reached down and smacked it full in the face with his huge club, sending the bear’s corpse whistling back into the lines of their enemy. Everything became a wash of grey and black and white, dead and living, warm blood and cold blood, and snow stretching as far as the eye could see. At one point he thought he saw icy eyes watching him from atop a faraway hill, but then a wight was approaching on his left and he had to turn to fend its attack away.

This was no poetry, no honourable duel. No, this was bloody madness. Minutes passed like seconds, hours like minutes. Back and forth, back and forth, all the while arrows coming down like burning rain, the piles of bodies building up and up and up till they were rock formations in themselves, grisly
monuments to the fallen. Sometimes he was alone, sometimes he found his way back to Grenn and Val and Alysane and they fought on together.

Only the recitation of his Night’s Watch oath kept Jon sane throughout. “Night gathers, and now my watch begins,” he said under his breath, as he stomped the skull of a wight that was clambering back to its feet. “It shall not end until my death.” He struck down a child-wight, not caring what it had once been. “I shall hold no lands, take no wife, father no children.” He took up a flaming torch and tossed it into a throng of undead clustered around Devyn Sealskinner’s corpse, and the smoke of burning bones rose and mingled with the darkness of night. “I shall live and die at my post.” He ducked down beneath a shield, avoiding a hail of arrows from his own side. “I am the sword in the darkness, I am the watcher on the walls, I am the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honour to the Night’s Watch, for this night, and all the nights to come!” The world smelled of snow and smoke and blood, but Jon barely noticed it.

Afterward, he would wonder if it had been a dream after all. The night was still dark, but the moon gave it new life as they traipsed back through the lines of their fallen, leaning heavily on spears and sword-hilts. Back at the perimeter fence he found Grenn and Pyp staring out mournfully over the haze of drifting grey smoke, along with a dozen other brothers. Dolorous Edd Tollett looked more dour than ever. Sweet Donnel was singing in the slow, wavering tones of a mourning song.

“Who?” Jon asked, already resigned to dire news.

Pyp shook his head. “We don’t know. But Brown Bernarr hasn’t come back, nor Tumberjon, nor Old Henly nor Bearded Ben nor Satin.”

Satin. That hit Jon like a hammer blow. He should have stayed with Mance. He was half a boy.

But then he thought, as was I, and let out a dark sigh. “Who else?”

They told him. Not just the wildlings, but the rest too. “Dannel and Al, good men both,” Grenn said. “Crowfood died,” Aly Mormont told him, “left his archers and said he was going to kill a giant. He had a good death.” Then it was Young Halleck. “We lost both Harles, and a good number of our lot. There was more than there was normally.”

More bodies to burn, Jon thought. “They came to us from King’s Landing and White Harbor,” he said, “from Lannisport and Oldtown and Gulltown, from the Last Hearth and Flint’s Finger and Barrowton. From all corners of the Seven Kingdoms, and beyond. From the Frostfangs and the Bay of Ice and Hardhome on Storrold’s Point. They fought long and brave, and by their sacrifice so many of us have lived to see another day. But now their fire has gone out. And now their watch is ended.”

“And now their watch is ended,” came the solemn chorus.

One by one they went away, leaving Jon became more and more alone. He tasted bitter black ash in the back of his throat, and it stung, it stung like the ice-cold tears he could never bring himself to cry. The Old Bear would have understood their sacrifice, and he would have loved them for it. But he never would have felt this sorrow for them. For a long time, he stood and simply watched, as the snow drifted down mournfully through the predawn gloom.

“Lord Snow,” he heard Val say. Her hand came to rest softly on the wooden rampart beside his. He could feel the impossible heat of her skin against his frozen fingers. “Mance will be wanting to talk with everyone. Though I’m sure he’ll understand if you want...”

Kill the boy. “I am the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch,” he told her, “I am not allowed to want anything.” He left her there.
It was a long, hard walk back through melting snow to the longhall. Smoke drifted in over the wooden barricades and through the trench tunnels, ensnaring him in its pale grey fingers. I am become a ghost, Jon thought. Meanwhile Ghost himself had disappeared into the trees after the fight; he did not have the heart to look for him.

Others came looking for him, though. “Jon Snow!” It was Tormund Giantsbane’s voice, hearty and booming as always. There were deep dents in his breastplate and his massive grey beard was spoiled with moss and blood. “Don’t you go running off on me, Lord Crow.”

In spite of everything, Jon had to smile. Some things never seem to change, and Tormund is one of them. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“Aye, you wouldn’t. A good fight, was it? You look like you’ve been right in the thick of it.”

“I was.”

“Someday you might be as good with a sword as I am, Jon Snow. Har!” he exclaimed uproariously, then turned somber. “But you lost good men too, I expect.”

“Aye.”

Tormund clapped him on the back. “We’ll drink to their memories later, if I see you.”

And what good will that do? Jon thought. “We can’t keep going on like this forever, Tormund. Seven days and... already... it won’t be enough.”

The wildling’s smile wavered. “No, it won’t. I’ve told Mance, but... I don’t understand what he’s thinking, half the time.” He laid a weathered hand on Jon’s shoulder. “But he’s gotten us this far.”

“He has. But this far isn’t the Wall.” This isn’t far enough.

“By the old gods,” said Tormund. “On a cloudless day you could see the Wall from Craster’s Keep, all your pretty ice sparkling in the sun. Now... I tell you true, Lord Snow... I wonder if we’ll ever see the sky again.”

The longhall was a stout, bleak, timbered building atop the hillrise, surrounded by a high pine palisade. Craster had kept it full of his wives, busy milking cows and feeding pigs and tending what few hardy roots endured this far north. Now it was full of what horses they had, shaggy garrons all; of healers, binding up cuts and sawing off half-eaten limbs; of wildlings huddled around cookpots and fires; of Night’s Watch and Northmen sharpening their knives with flint and steel. A crowd of giants had gathered here too. “Snow,” Wun Wun grunted when he saw them, before turning back contentedly to his fellows.

Jon stepped around his tree-trunk legs and passed beneath the low arch of the longhall, Tormund following. As they walked the slow thrum of Mance Rayder’s lute and the sad murmur of his voice filled the dim grey day:

Ooooooh, I am the last of the giants,

my people are gone from the earth.

The last of the great mountain giants,
who ruled all the world at my birth.

Oh the smallfolk have stolen my forests,
they’ve stolen my rivers and hills.
And the’ve built a great wall through my valleys,
and fished all the fish from my rills.

In stone halls they burn their great fires,
in stone halls they forge their sharp spears.
Whilst I walk alone in the mountains,
with no true companion but tears.

They hunt me with dogs in the daylight,
they hunt me with torches by night.
For these men who are small can never stand tall,
whilst giants still walk in the light.

Oooooooh, I am the LAST of the giants,
so learn well the words of my song.
For when I am gone the singing will fade,
and the silence shall last long and long.

For a long time the King-beyond-the-Wall did not stir to greet them. When he did his eyes shone sharp and bright. “My friends,” he said, “come and sit.”

“A fine song, Mance,” Tormund offered.

“One we’ve sung many a time. But the music sounds best when times are saddest. ‘The Last of the Giants’ isn’t really a song of companionship, Tormund. There is no feeling quite so terrible and indescribable as loneliness.” His eyes found Jon, and lingered there. You know nothing, Jon Snow.

Suddenly Mance smiled. “But the white walkers are lonelier than we are, I’ll bet.”

“Oh, aye,” said Tormund Giantsbane. “Probably freezing their balls off out there.” Jon cast a glance through the window, where he had pointed. The wind was rising, ominous. “Got anything to warm
us up?” Tormund asked.

“I keep my treasures in here,” Mance said, kicking a wooden chest at his feet. “But I suppose there’s no time like the present.” Inside were the Valyrian sword Dark Sister, a few treasures, a small seven-stringed lyre, and a couple of skins of wine. Most of it was empty. Mance drew forth one of the wineskins. “This is vile,” he warned, passing it to Tormund, “but it warms you right up.”

Tormund took a sip. “It’s not so—it... oh, gods... good gods, Mance, what did they put in here? Dragonsbreath?”

“Dragonsbreath,” Mance affirmed.

“We should just throw this on the wights!” Tormund exclaimed. “Har! What I wouldn’t give to have a dragon out here!”

“The dragons are gone from the North,” Mance said solemnly. “But we thought the same of the Others, once... there are stories, though; ice dragons in the Lands of Always Winter, dragons under—"

“I do hope you haven’t started anything without me.” Ramsay Bolton’s icy tone cut the mood like a knife. He might have brought two hundred men to Craster’s Keep, but all were hated... though not nearly so much as their master. “This is supposed to be a council of the Northern lords, is it not? All the Northern lords?” He smirked at Jon. “You don’t need to wait upon me, Lord Snow. You may sit.”

“I’d sooner stand, Lord Bolton.”


“Nothing too disastrous. You’ll want numbers, I expect. Ten dead, four wounded. And I burned the bodies, yes.” He nodded to the wineskin still clutched in Tormund’s hand. “Would you mind if imposed..."

“Here.” The wildling shoved the skin roughly into Ramsay’s arms. His pale grey eyes flashed as they found Jon. “Won’t you share a drink with me, Lord Snow.”

“No, thank you,” Jon returned coolly. He would sooner drink with the Others. “I wouldn’t want to dull my wits. There will be another fight on the morrow.”

“Of course. I’ve forgotten how honourable some Northmen can be. Drinking before a battle helps me forget the horrors during it.” He sipped from the wineskin. “It’s strange, don’t you think, Lord Snow? Of all the places in the world, we end up meeting here. Fate has bound us both together, both bastards, both living in the shadow of our fathers... and... well, we could very easily have ended up on opposite sides of a very different battle, Lord Snow.” The eyes flashed again.

Mance cut in. “If you have a point to make, then make it.” His jaw had set, hard as cold black iron.

“As you wish,” said Ramsay. “For seven nights now you have put my men on the right flank in the battle. Far away on the right, and far away from anyone who might help us should the fighting turn sour. Forgive me, but a suspicious man might think that you were leaving us out there as bait...” The biting smirk made his lips curl. “I only say this as a lord who cares deeply about his people. You say you guard the realms of men, Lord Snow, you and your brave black brothers. The Dreadfort lies within those realms.”

Jon’s fingers clenched, open and closed, open and closed. “Many of the Northmen have... quarrels
with you and your House, Lord Bolton.”

Ramsay ignored him. “Oh, certainly. We’ve had our differences in the past, but since we’re all on the same side now, what does it matter?”

*If we ever get back to Castle Black, I will have your head cut off and mounted above the gate*, Jon thought. “Old wounds take a long time to heal,” he said evenly. “You killed Asher Forrester’s brother. You starved Lady Hornwood to death. You burned Winterfell to ash. Your father killed my brother at the Red Wedding.”

Ramsay grinned. His teeth were eerily white. “And I killed my father. Surely that makes me the Young Wolf’s great avenger? Why, you should all revere me.”

“Do not mock me, Lord Bolton,” said Jon.

“Then do not mock me, Lord Snow,” said Ramsay.

“Enough,” said Mance Rayder. “If your discussion is over—”

“The discussion is just beginning, Mance,” said Tormund Giantsbane, nodding towards the door, where Asher Forrester and Big Bucket Wull were leading the other Northmen in. “You need me to bring out the maps?” the wildling asked.

“No need,” said Jon. “I’ll fetch them.” He needed to clear his head.

The maps were kept in a dusty cellar which smelled faintly of raw meat. As Jon unrolled the cowhide sheets and pulled them down, he became suddenly aware that he was not alone.

“Lord Snow,” said Aly Mormont, the She-Bear. “You’re not where I expected to find you. Down here with all the maps.”

Jon smiled weakly. “I had a friend, Sam. The maps were always his domain.”

“And for good reason, I can see.” She pointed. “You’re looking at that upside-down. The Wall’s down in the south, see.”

“They say it never snows down south,” Jon said curiously. “Down in Dorne, I mean.”

The She-Bear frowned. “I’d hate that. They’d probably expect me to be a proper lady and everything.”

“Let me take some of those for you.” She dragged the maps inelegantly from their shelves and bundled them up. “Aye, it’s cold down here. Are you afraid of the cold, Lord Snow?” she asked suddenly. “Of what lies out there?”

“I’d be a fool not to be. But my father once told me a man can only be brave when he’s afraid.”

“Wise words. My father taught me always to believe in the old gods. He wasn’t an especially pious man, but he knew his faith. But... I don’t think I believe in the weirwoods anymore.”

Jon thought back to Bloodraven’s cave, and everything he’d seen there. *A monster with a thousand eyes and one, swimming on a sea of blood.* “Well,” he said, “I’d sooner not rely on them alone, if nothing else.”

The sound of raised voices drifted through the hall. “Gared reports that they are amassing,” said Asher Forrester. “If we do not attack them, they will attack us.”
Ramsay refuted that. “We should defend what we have, rather than risk stretching ourselves too far.” Meanwhile Jon and Aly Mormont laid the maps down, putting candles at every corner.

Harrion Karstark agreed. “Here we have the Keep to fall back, and its palisades and gates to defend from.”

“That won’t matter,” said Big Bucket Wull. “You saw what they did to my walls—”

“Whether we defend or attack, it must be tomorrow.” Mance stood up tall and stretched his arms. “And together. We can have no more fighting amongst ourselves. Settle your quarrels when we are back at the Wall—"

*If we ever get back to the Wall,* went unsaid.

Jon himself was torn between Ramsay’s thinking and Big Bucket’s. *We cannot defend from Craster’s Keep forever. Sooner or later, we must make a break for the Wall. But are we winning while we stay here? If we keep fighting, will the wights retreat? Or will we keep battling here while the garden of bones grows and grows?*

A giant roared. Once, twice, then fell silent, almost at once.

The light guttered, and died. The candles, Mance’s lantern, the bright sun from beyond the window. All gone. A sudden pain lanced through Jon’s scar, and it burned. “Others,” he heard himself say, “They’re—” His fingers fumbled with Longclaw, slipping over the hilt. Aly Mormont found his arm and urged him forwards, following Mance towards the doors of the hall.

Everything was chaos. Silent chaos, as giants stampeded and men ran for the trees and wolves howled and white walkers moved effortlessly through the woods, all without sound. The camp was ablaze, and yet the air was white with frost and blowing snow and through it all the black wind wailed. “The horns?” Mance Rayder spoke very slowly in his disbelief. “The sentries?”

“They’re gone, Mance.” Tormund Giantsbane pulled his horn from his belt. “They’re dead.” He put the mouthpiece to his lips and blew three, loud, sharp blasts. “They’re gone, and we’re...”

“We have to go,” Jon heard himself say, and he could feel the frost on his lips. “Mance, we have to go.”

But for the longest time the wildling king stood there unblinking at the horror unfolding before them, brown eyes blinking small and confused out of a face that was slowly fading to grey ash. Then, with an almost imperceptible jerk of his head, he took the first steps down into the new-fallen snow, crunching the cold earth quietly beneath his feet, seeming as small and silent as any of them. And as Jon followed, he began to smell what Ghost smelled so often on dark nights like these, when the camp rang to the sounds of terror and horror: *fear.* Not Mance’s fear alone, but his own too, and Tormund Giantsbane’s, and Aly Mormont’s, and all of theirs, settling heavily in the lonely black air. The assurance that all men bled the same, for they all feared the same.

Their fingers were frozen at their swordbelts as they watched, deaf to the muted whimper of horns coming from all around them, blind to the advancing circle of wraiths clad in the frost-blue liveries of winter, unknowing of the gods’ mercy. The pale hands rose in chorus, and the very air bled in its terror.

And the dead rose.

They rose clawing at the earth above their graves, screaming and keening in their birth, their hands beating higher and higher, pulling him down, drowning him, and all he saw was blue eyes, so *blue...*
Kill the boy, he thought abruptly, and the trance was over.

It was no more impossible than anything else. The Night’s Watch were strewn all over the place, in discordant lines or no lines at all, but the fight was not so much crows and wildlings and Northmen against the wights as it was living against dead, and so they fought. The white walkers had come down among them. With swords of polished milkglass in their hands they met the men in the night wood, graceful and shimmering in their every attack. With fire and dragonglass and ironwood shields their foes fought.

Grenn was down behind his shield when Jon got to him. The Other he was fighting had a moment to look mildly confused when Longclaw burst through the back of his chest plate, and his blue blood began to leak out into the snow.

Then Grenn was pulling him along again, and he saw Ramsay’s man Sour Alyn being dragged down into the snow, and one of Morgan Liddle’s sons disappeared beneath the tide. Val collided with him out of nowhere, and both of them almost fell. “Mance!” he shouted at her, “Where’s Mance?”

“I don’t know!” A hand planted itself between his shoulderblades; he spun, slashed Longclaw, and took the wight’s arm off at the wrist, leaving it to writhe and shuffle through the snow. Trumpets blared and shouted and fought with each other, almost as violent as the fighting in the forest below.

“SHEilds!” came a distant cry.

Shields, Jon thought, why are we getting our shields out?

Then the fog rolled in and the wights buffeted them on all sides, and the wailing dead burst heavy and sudden through the darkness. Ramsay Bolton had his bow and was loosing flaming arrows left and right and everywhere; one almost took Jon’s eye out. A few of the wildlings had made a wall of shields, but they would not take the beating the wights were giving it for long, and already Jon could see cracks forming. “HOLD!” he yelled out, until his voice was hoarse, “HOLD THE LINE!”

As though that would actually help them.

They could have been a hundred or ten thousand for all he knew. But the wights were more, and their own dead were rising from the snow behind them and dragging them backwards, and the Others were coming over the top, climbing over the half-frozen bodies of wights that had built up like a wall. Everywhere Jon looked, all he saw was bodies. Asher Forrester was gone, and he could not see Ramsay or Grenn or anyone, and all that remained was this fight and the next and the next...

...and the smell of burning flesh filled the dawn air.

Jon had never smelled anything so beautiful. The fires were climbing over the top of the mountains of the dead, and ragged flesh and broken bones were burning black and smoky. And he knew where Tormund Giantsbane and Mance Rayder had gone, and what they had done.

The forest was on fire, from here to the horizon, and the ashes fell so thick that the snow melted clean away. The wights were cowering from it, and Jon forced his way back towards the burning treeline, fighting with blind anger, barely even aware of the sword in his hand. Then horses cut through the burning trees, charging headlong, glimmering as Stannis’s knights once had beneath the walls of Castle Black, distant aeons ago.

Only now it was Mance Rayder leading the way, holding Dark Sister high, and distant sunlight glinted off the point of his Valyrian blade, as he and his riders tore through the ranks of wights and
white walkers alike, swinging wildly with axes and swords and dragonglass knives.

“GO!” Mance shouted over the smoky din, over and over. “GO, GO, GET AWAY!” Then he wheeled his horse back around and charged once more into the darkness, and that was that.

“Jon!” Val was screaming, and he did not know how she was here, or why. “Jon, we have to leave!” Abruptly the longhall was burning up behind them, the wood was ablaze, and he was running again. Smoke burned in his eyes. His throat tasted of burning bile. Jon staggered and fell, but someone gave him a hand up. Aly Mormont was with him, and Val, and Asher, and then Asher was gone, and he could hear Tormund Giantsbane’s warhorn blowing, keening, lamenting...

“OTHERS!” Val screamed, wheeling about. Jon leapt to her side, blocking the blow that might have killed her with Longclaw’s edge. He swung the sword back, caught the white walker’s blade with a jarring great clang. Then Aly Mormont slammed her dragonglass dagger down sharply into the Other’s back, and Jon thrust Longclaw through his chest.

“COME ON!” Jon called at her, as he and Val went stumbling on.

But the She-Bear shook her head. And there was a smile on her face as she said, “Here I stand,” and turned to face their foes, mace and shield in hand.

Val took him by the hand, pulling him back, and they were running again, as Alysane Mormont faded into the fog and vanished from his sight forever. Ghost was by his side again, his eyes bright as blood as they ran.

Somewhere in the depths of the smoke-choked forest he caught a glimpse of Mance’s sword, glowing as though alive with fire. Lightbringer? he wondered for one mad moment, but then the night returned and all around him ravens were coming out of the trees, beating great black wings at the dead men, tearing with talons and beaks, screaming “Snow! Snow! Snow!” as the world darkened all around them...

Chapter End Notes

Seven hells, this one was HARD.

Like the previous chapter, I wrote a ridiculous amount for this POV and didn't even use half of it. Some of it will manifest itself in later Jon chapters, but for now I'm satisfied with this semi-ambiguous ending.

But then again, a lot of people hate cliffhangers, so I'll resolve this one for you: Jon and Val survive until the next chapter, at the very least. As does Ramsay (the two bastards haven't really interacted enough so far), as does Tormund Giantsbane, and a surprisingly large portion of the wildling/Northern/Night's Watch army.

I may put up some more chapter notes in time, but right now, this is all. So thanks for reading, and I'll be back soon with a Dany chapter which I'm really not looking forward to finishing...
A white book sat on a white table in a white room.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THE QUEENSGUARD

When they reined up before the high stone walls of the city, Edric Storm turned in the saddle and gave him a pointed look. “Ser?” he said, nodding. “That’s the Mud Gate, right there. Look.”

Ser Barristan Selmy replied with a rueful smile. “I am old, Edric, but not blind. I know this city like the backs of my hands.”

But the backs of his hands were wrinkled with new, strange ridges and hills, and while his eyes remained sharp as ever, the night had changed King’s Landing into something eerie. The once-familiar walls bristled with the vague grey silhouettes of spears and shields and crossbows. “Those are Unsullied,” Ser Barristan said. “You can tell from their helmets.” Conical spikes crowned the helms, gleaming faintly in the narrow eye of moonlight coming from the east.

“I don’t think there were quite so many guards here when my father was king,” Edric said. Every eye was upon them as they rode up. “But that was a long time ago.”

“I remember.” The boy had been about seven, and Barristan sixty if he was a day.

“Usually, Father came to Storm’s End instead. But that time, it was me and Uncle Renly who rode up to the city. The smallfolk were throwing roses at him in the streets and calling out Seven blessings.”

“Lord Renly was well loved by the smallfolk,” Ser Barristan said hollowly. On the day of Eddard Stark’s tourney he’d worn green enamelled plate, and a great set of antlers to mimic his brother’s. He was only half the fighter King Robert had been, but he was a showman through and through, and the crowds adored him. But that did not make him a king.

He eased up the tension on the horse’s reins. He thought, it is not my place – or any man’s – to make a king, or a queen, as history has taught us too many times. Ser Barristan Selmy was not a voracious reader, but he knew that understanding the past was the best way to preserve the future. As Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, he had made it his duty to learn about the lives of his predecessors. The White Book told him some, but for the rest he had to consult the Grand Maester’s archives, or the Red Keep’s library.
The office of the Lord Commander is one of service, Prince Aemon the Dragonknight was heard to say. One of humility and devotion. For such a man, pride is folly. The Seven-Pointed Star agreed: pride is a sin, it said. Once Ser Barristan Selmy might have taken the holy word as proof, but as a man grew older, so too did his skepticism grow...

The great wood-and-iron gates of the city were locked and barred. “There is a curfew in place from dawn till dusk,” a voice called down from the rampart above. “Come back on the morrow, and we will let you in.”

Ser Barristan was surprised. Such curfews were not unusual in villages and small towns, but in King’s Landing, where every night was as busy as the day preceding it, it was passing strange. “Hold a moment,” he called up at the disembodied figure on the ramparts. “I am Ser Barristan Selmy, the Lord Commander of the Queensguard and the Hand of the Queen. And this is my squire, Edric Storm. Her Grace will be expecting us.”

For a long moment there was no reply. Then: “Wait there, my lord. We’ll open the sally port for you.”

Ser Barristan heard boots scuffing against stone steps, and men calling out across the yard beyond the gate. Speaking in the Common Tongue, he realised. Some of these men must be City Watch, then, as well as the Unsullied. He wondered how well the different factions under Daenerys’s command had come together. Without that, her army is nothing, he thought, troubled.

They opened the sally port just wide enough for Ser Barristan and Edric to steer their horses through. Once they were inside the dusty yard he jumped down from his mount to let a stablehand lead it off by the bridle. “Take good care of her,” Selmy implored. “She has not had an easy journey.”

It had been nearly three weeks of travelling from Highgarden to King’s Landing. They departed on the day after Quentyn Martell’s marriage to Lady Margaery, when Prince Oberyn called the knight and his squire to his tent in the early hours of morning.

“There seems little point in having you follow us all the way to Storm’s End,” the Dornishman said. “I think it is time for you to return to King’s Landing.”

“I see,” said Selmy, strained. “Is there some message you need us to take for you?”

“Only that our loyalty to House Targaryen remains as fervent as ever,” replied Prince Oberyn. He almost sounded like he was telling the truth. In a way, he was. Your loyalty to House Targaryen may remain true, Ser Barristan thought, but your loyalty to Daenerys is more questionable. The many years he had spent in King’s Landing had given him a wisdom he was not entirely proud of. But it was a wisdom nonetheless, wisdom in the great game all men played. Something is afoot at Storm’s End, and they did not want me to see it. What unsettled him even more was how unbothered Prince Oberyn seemed about hiding it.

He would share those concerns with the queen once he reached the Red Keep. But first would come the ride through the city. “Ser Barristan,” he heard a voice say, and turned to see Grey Worm, captain of the Unsullied, striding down from the wallwalk. “This one was summoned to your arrival. Are you well, ser?”

The question took him aback. “I... as well as I can be,” the old knight said, smiling weakly.

“That is good.”

Selmy ducked his head. “I beg pardon for my hastiness, but I must have words with Her Grace—”
“This one has already sent a runner up to the Red Keep. Come, ser, this one will escort you.”

Already Grey Worm was leading him over to where the stablehands were saddling fresh horses. In all his tiredness, Selmy had to strain to get up onto the horse’s back. “Easy, now.” He took the reins lightly in his hands, then turned to find Edric. “You needn’t trouble yourself with riding all the way up to the castle if you don’t want to.” He thought it might be better to go in without Robert Baratheon’s bastard son to distract the queen.

But already the boy was climbing up onto his horse. “We’ve come all this way together, ser,” he said, “I’m not leaving you at the gates.”

So it was that the three of them set out from the Mud Gate, Grey Worm in the lead, Ser Barristan a short ways behind, Edric Storm at the rear. Up cobbled wynds they ventured, through back streets and out into wide boulevards watched by Unsullied patrols, between the dimly lit taverns and smithies and brothels, with their subtle lights swinging giddily from the eaves. “The city is quiet tonight,” Selmy observed.

“Quiet here,” said Grey Worm, “but on Visenya’s Hill, this one sees it differently.”

“Visenya’s Hill? The Sept of Baelor?”

Grey Worm nodded. “Sparrows. Septons. Like the Sons of the Harpy, only...”

Ser Barristan scowled. He had not been expecting this. “Have there been any murders?”

“No,” said Grey Worm, and the old knight nearly sighed with relief. “But the things they preach might be more dangerous, these ones all agree. Death to dragons... and to our queen.”

*Enemies within and without. And as Queen’s Hand, this will be my problem as well.* “This must be dealt with,” Ser Barristan said searchingly, hoping something would come to him. *And if not...*

He knew of Maegor the Cruel’s troubles with the Faith, and he knew how the king had dealt with them. *Fire and blood and death. It must not come to that. It must not.* Daenerys was given to her father’s sort of overt cruelty – thank the gods — but the forceful means they had used to quell the Harpy’s Sons back in Meereen could not be used here.

Grey Worm said, “The queen says a curfew should be imposed in the city, but the red men disagree. They want to speak their faith.”

“Red priests?” *Stranger and stranger.* Yes, there was Moqorro, who had sailed into Slaver’s Bay with Victarion Greyjoy, but he was only one man, and Grey Worm was making it sound like there were more... “How many red priests?”

“A dozen? Two dozen?” The Unsullied commander frowned. “This one does not know. They have come from Volantis.”

“Daenerys might have done better to leave the memory of Essos behind her,” Ser Barristan mused thoughtfully. There was no purpose in reminding the Seven Kingdoms of the queen’s foreignness.

“This one might say the same, but it is not his place.” Grey Worm was slowly shaking his head. “This one lives to serve, not to question.”

“But if you could...?”

Grey Worm’s eyes flitted from shadow to shadow, seeking out whisperers. *Varys’s little birds could be anywhere in this godsforsaken place,* Selmy had to remind himself. “These are not right lands for
Unsullied,” said Grey Worm. “We fight, not guard walls. We not like fighting, but it is better than this. And this one thinks... I think... it is the same for our queen, old ser. She is... a conqueror, not a ruler. Every day sitting on the seat of swords is not easy for her. And the same for her dragons. They grow restless. At night they return to the Dragonpit, but in the day they fly from... from... this one does not know the names of places, ser.”

Of course you don’t. Grey Worm was as misplaced here in King’s Landing as anyone else. It is Meereen all over again, Selmy thought. Only this time, we have nowhere else to go, and every reason to leave... “The road ahead will be long and difficult,” he murmured. Even more so than the road behind...

The castle walls were cloaked in night, though fires burned faintly in a few high towers. As they rode beneath the portcullis into the yard, Selmy glanced towards the White Sword Tower, which had been his home for so many years. I am back. I am home. But if it was so, then why did things feel so strange? Was it the Targaryen banners flying over the Red Keep that made everything seem so odd? Had he grown so accustomed to the years of Robert Baratheon that those old days now seemed a distant dream?

They dismounted at the drawbridge of Maegor’s Holdfast and went across the dry moat afoot. These stones are steeped in blood, Ser Barristan thought as they climbed the stairs and stalked down dark, damp hallways. The blood of so many. Elia, Rhaenys... all my failures... He had not been in King’s Landing when Tywin Lannister’s soldiers stormed the gates, but he still felt the loss of Rhaegar’s wife and child keenly. I will not lose your sister too, my prince, he thought, I swear it.

Selmy knew these passages only too well. “You are taking me to the Queen’s Ballroom,” he said to Grey Worm.

“That is so,” said the captain, “the queen is holding her court here.”

“Not in the throne room?”

“No, ser. She has not been there for days. She says the throne makes men afraid.”

That’s why it’s there. Ser Barristan knew only too well that a throne did not give you power... but it would give you the appearance of power, and in times like these that mattered as much as the power itself. Nonetheless, things were as they were, and Selmy resigned himself to following Grey Worm through the doors in silence.

Queen Daenerys sat a sturdy wooden chair on a slightly raised dais at one end of the Ballroom, dressed in a silvery-blue nightgown and a thick grey cloak. They were not alone. Ser Barristan saw the red priests Grey Worm had mentioned, and Archmaester Marwyn, and another man he took to be the Grand Maester; there were a few other courtiers too, a young man in Velaryon livery and an older lord in Celtigar colours...

...and at his queen’s side, Ser Jorah Mormont.

He could not have been more surprised if he’d tried. So much so that he barely blinked when the queen said her greetings, and it was a long moment before he could speak. “…Your Grace.” He knelt.

“Rise, Ser Barristan.” Daenerys’s voice echoed. “You will excuse my appearance. I fear you caught us unaware.”

“The fault is mine, Your Grace. I should have sent word of our arrival.”
“Why did you not, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Selmy frowned. “Our road from Highgarden was long and arduous, Your Grace. We had little time to stop at waycastles along the way to send messages. And... truth be told, I thought that Prince Oberyn would have informed you of our departure...”

“He has done nothing of the sort,” said Daenerys, her frown mirroring Ser Barristan’s. Clearly they were both thinking the same thing.

“Perhaps he forgot,” Selmy said mildly.

“I think not. Given how much he has already remember. The Red Viper remembered Aegon’s orders to march on Highgarden, and his brother’s orders to marry Prince Quentyn to Margaery Tyrell. But as for mine own, the Dornish have been less willing.” She made it sound like a proclamation before all the court.

“They let me leave freely, Your Grace.” He had his own suspicions about why, but he would not voice them with Jorah Mormont and these others watching. And Varys could be lurking anywhere...

“They kept you as their prisoner, Varys tells me.”

Of course he knew.

“Only for a short time. Prince Doran... he had his reasons, I am sure...”

Daenerys shook her head. “Even if he does, I am not inclined to hear them. I am no fool, Ser Barristan. I do not have friends among the Dornish.”

The frankness of her words surprised him somewhat. She is not even trying to make a peace as she did in Slaver’s Bay, he thought, for she knows that a war is coming in the end, sure as sunrise. And, Grey Worm had best see that those spears are sharpened.

“I see your squire is still with us,” said the queen, nodding in Edric’s general direction. “The Usurper’s bastard.”

Selmy urged the boy forwards with a nod of his head. There was a long pause in the room, as cold as the words of Tywin Lannister on that day at Duskendale: if you do not bring back King Aerys, I will storm the town and kill every man, woman and child inside its walls. None will survive, Ser Barristan. Especially not you and your king.

And I succeeded, he thought, yet Duskendale was my great failure all the same, and Aerys took up Tywin’s threat and had the Darklynsmassacred anyway. And how many others? Maegor’s Holdfast was only across the yard from the throne room, where the Mad King had ordered Rickard Stark cooked to death inside his armour, and his son Brandon strangled trying to save him. Where Aerys had sat in his final mad hours as Lannister forces stormed the walls of King’s Landing and Ser Gregor the Mountain murdered Princess Elia and her daughter Rhaenys. Where Ser Jaime Lannister had taken his golden longsword and thrust it into the Mad King’s back, and thereafter sat the Iron Throne with his sword covered in his king’s blood and waited for others to find him.

She has some of Aerys in her, Selmy thought as he watched the queen’s purple eyes, fixated on Edric Storm. The brazier light made them shine with an almost-familiar hunger. “Ser Barristan has already urged me to spare your life, back in Lys,” Queen Daenerys said. “And while I regret the fact somewhat, he was not at all wrong. The time may soon come when I need a Baratheon to rouse the Stormlands from their slumber.”

Edric’s jaw set like stone. His whole body tensed, his gloved fingers clenching, his brow furrowing. It was taking all his effort not to denounce the queen again, Ser Barristan knew. Then, at last, the boy
gave a small stiff nod— not a bow— and stepped back.

“I think you would do well from a few hours’ sleep.” Selmy laid a hand on his shoulder. “Go back to
the courtyard and tell them who you are, and they will have a room made ready for you.” The reply
was another stiff nod, then Edric turned, and went away.

The queen brought her attention back to Barristan. “He concerns me. But not nearly so much as
these matters in the south. Jon Connington, the Red Viper, and Lord Willas Tyrell are amassing an
army, I am told.”

“This has been foreseen,” added one of the red priests. “And their eyes are looking north. To King’s
Landing.”

The queen nodded. “I have taken certain precautions, ser. Have no fear. In a matter of days, Daario
Naharis and Brown Ben Plumm will be back in King’s Landing. They should reach the city just
before Aegon’s army.”

“This has been foreseen,” the red priest repeated. “And then the dragons dance, and our eyes will
open.”

Selmy shifted from one foot to the other. “Forgive me, my lord—”

“Benerro. And I am not a lord, only a humble servant of R’hllohr, the Lord of Light. As much a
servant as you, Barristan Selmy.” His words had a strange echoing quality to them. “We serve the
same cause.”

“I serve my queen,” the old knight asserted.

Benerro smiled back. “As do I. She is the Lord’s chosen, after all.”

*My service for her goes further than your gods.* Barristan Selmy had long ago learned to be careful
around fanatics, both those who worshipped foreign gods and those who preached the Faith of the
Seven. “I hope we can work together for the common good,” he said. Then to the queen: “I had
thought to find Captain Naharis in the city.” *Or in your chambers.* It was no secret that the queen
had more fondness for the sellsword than was perhaps proper.

“I sent him and Brown Ben afield,” Daenerys explained. “Along with the better part of our Dothraki
army. They ranged as far as the Westerlands border, between the Riverlands and the Reach. When
Aegon returns, I...” She paused. “...we will march. The Baratheons and the Lannisters must be dealt
with once and for all. Justice for my father.”

Her words were iron. Ser Barristan could not help but feel troubled. *How much of that does she truly
mean? How much does she truly understand?* “Will your sellswords be back soon, Your Grace?”

“It will not be long,” Daenerys promised. “Nonetheless, I think we should leave such matters for the
morrow. It is late, and I daresay we are all very tired, Ser Barristan.”

Selmy had said barely any of what he’d meant to say: about his mistrust of Jorah Mormont and
Daario Naharis both, and his distaste for the red priests and the dangers of these sparrows, but there
was no time, and while the old knight slept but little, he could see that the queen was irritated to have
been woken from her own rest. “A good idea, Your Grace,” he said. “Though if I may... I should
like to meet with you on the morrow, if I can.”

For the first time, Ser Jorah Mormont made to speak, but the queen waved him into silence. “Yes,”
she said, “the Queen and her Hand. Would it suit you if I came before breakfast, or would that be too
“It will suffice,” said Barristan. “Your Grace, I should guard you tonight—”

The queen gave him an almost piteous look. “Surely you must be tired from your journey, ser? No, go and have your rest. I will see you when tomorrow comes.” She was already glancing towards the door, eager to leave. “Serve me well, Ser Barristan,” she said, almost as an afterthought, and turned away, her cloak circling around her feet. The rest followed her out, while Selmy went his own separate way, across the flagstones, down the castle steps, across the drawbridge and then across the courtyard into the rain-sodden night.

Against the musky sky, a single square tower stretched high and higher and higher, white banners streaming from its balconies and windows. Selmy knew this place almost as well as he knew himself. They still called it the White Sword Tower, as though the true White Swords had not departed this place long ago. In time, the Kingsguard – the Queensguard, rather – might regain its honour, but Ser Barristan Selmy doubted that he would live long enough to see that. I lived through the best years of the Kingsguard, and the worst, he thought, and was unsure whether to count that as a blessing or a curse.

The walls were lined with white woollen hangings and the tables laid with white cloths, as chilly and pale as burial shrouds. The chamber echoed to the sound of Selmy’s footsteps, and only to his. The rest are here too, he thought, Ser Arthur and Ser Oswell, Ser Gerold and Ser Jonothor and Prince Lewyn, and all that came before them... but they are in a different world to mine. Their ghosts were here with him, in every neatly made bed and every unlit candle, every turn of the lonely stair and every footstep one man made on floors where seven had once walked.

At last he reached the Lord Commander’s chambers, at the top of the tower. The wind made a sound like chattering teeth. The drapes flapped in quiet greeting at Selmy’s arrival. Welcome home, Lord Commander, they said, though this did not feel like home and it never would again.

A white book sat on a white table in a white room. Above the hearth, a snow-white shield and two crossed swords hung lonely. Ser Barristan turned his eyes from the shield and back to the book. The Book of Brothers. He brushed a hand over the thick white leather, brushing away a cobweb, and gently flipped it open, rifling sheets of white vellum through his fingers till he reached his own page. In the top left-hand corner, they had inked the shield of House Selmy, three yellow cornstalks on a sober brown field. In the bottom right corner was the empty white shield of the Sworn Brothers of the Kingsguard.

He had read his page many times before when he had been Robert Baratheon’s Lord Commander, always wondering whether his life had actually amounted to anything. You should have died with them on the Trident, a small voice always said. On some days he agreed. But here I am. Selmy went through the words in silence. Then he found ink and quill in a drawer, lit a candle, and leant forward to continue his history:

...Followed a trail of whispers to Pentos upon his dismissal by King Joffrey Baratheon. Travelled with the pit fighter Belwas to Qarth at the behest of Magister Illyrio Mopatis. Joined Queen Daenerys Targaryen in her conquest of Astapor, Yunkai and Meereen. Slew Mero, the Titan’s Bastard, in single combat. Together with Ser Jorah Mormont led a party to infiltrate the sewers of Meereen. Pardoned for his service of Robert and Baratheon and named Lord Commander of the Queensguard in his 69th year. Ruled Meereen as Hand for a time in the absence of Queen Daenerys. Led the cavalry at the Siege of Meereen. Defended the city walls for two weeks of siege.
Saved by the arrival of the queen and her dragons. Sailed with Queen Daenerys towards Westeros, but parted ways at Lys to seek out Prince Doran Martell’s support. Failed in his diplomatic mission. Rode north to Highgarden with the Dornish army. Returned to King’s Landing at the close of his 70th year.

When he set the quill down it was plain to see that his handwriting had grown more spidery over the three years he had been away. *I am growing old,* he thought, passing a hand over the candle flame. His page was three quarters-full now. Few knights had ever filled theirs.

The White Book was still open before him. If he flipped the page one way, he would find Ser Gerold Hightower, and before him Ser Duncan the Tall, Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, Ser Criston Cole, Ser Rolland Darklyn...

*Their stories are old ink now,* Ser Barristan decided, *I must not fear the future.* He turned the page.

The knights here had served the Lannister kings Joffrey and Tommen. Selmy did not recognise some of the names: *Ser Balon Swann, Ser Osmund Kettleblack, Ser Loras Tyrell...* well, he knew *that* name, but the Knight of the Flowers’s inclusion surprised him. *The boy was a son of a great House, a famed jouster and fighter... surely he had life in him yet...*

*The son of a great House.* He turned a couple of pages, and found Ser Jaime Lannister.

For a moment he was certain that this was some mockery of the White Book, for the writing underneath his own resembled a child’s scrawl. But eventually he made out the words:

...*Defeated in the Whispering Wood by the Young Wolf Robb Stark during the War of the Five Kings. Held captive at Riverrun and ransomed for a promise unfulfilled. Captured again by the Brave Companions, and maimed at the word of Vargo Hoat their captain, losing his sword hand to the blade of Zollo the Fat. Returned safely to King’s Landing by Brienne, the Maid of Tarth.*

Now he understood why the letters looked so ill-formed. *Maimed, losing his sword hand.* Ser Barristan grimaced. The passage showed more frank honesty than he would have expected of Jaime Lannister, so he was inclined to think that this *was* a truthful accounting. *Perhaps the Kingslayer has changed,* he thought, somewhat unconvincingly. *As I have.*

Thunder burst through the ink-darkness beyond the tower windows. *I should be with the queen,* Ser Barristan thought, *not Jorah Mormont.* He had no clue how the exile knight had made his way back to Daenerys’s side, and doubted he would like that story. *If we have any wisdom – if she has any wisdom – she will send him away as soon as she can.*

*Problems and problems and problems. Dark days ahead.*

Selmy became aware of a sudden silence, a silence so complete that it was unnatural. Then came a tiny giggling noise, from the spiral stairs below. *Varys.* The old knight knew at once. *“How long have you been watching?”*

The eunuch emerged from the stairwell, powdered and laundered and smelling of lavender and silk. “Ser Barristan.” He gave a tiny little cough, as though offended, and clasped his hands. His plump shadow flitted across the back wall by the orange light of his lantern. “It is so good to see you again.***
“I wish I could say the same,” Selmy replied.

Varys tutted. “Hardly a courtesy, but you have never been one to mince your words, have you?”

“King’s Landing has enough dishonesty without my help. And if the Lord Commander of the Queensguard does not keep to truth and honour, then who will?”

The eunuch tittered irritably, and Ser Barristan was unpleasantly reminded of how much he hated that sound. “Well said, my lord. Indeed. We can only hope that our Lord Commander of the Kingsguard shares that value, too.”

“The Kingsguard? What do you mean?”

“Aegon and Daenerys have their own separate armies, sellswords, castles; why not a Kingsguard and a Queensguard? Neither have chosen their sworn men yet, but...” The eunuch broke off. “You seem hesitant, ser.”

“The last time the Kingsguard was split...”

“...was during the War of the Five Kings, and the Blackfyre Rebellion before that, and the Dance of Dragons before that...”

“Are you making some sort of threat, my lord?”

“Oh, no.” Varys backed away. “But it is a warning, my lord. One you would do well to remember. All around, our foes seek to divide us. The lines are being drawn at this very moment. But men divided among themselves are so much the weaker than when they stand as a whole.”

Selmy knew this only too well. Robert Baratheon had brought one of his few pearls of wisdom to this argument: *Which is the bigger number?* he would ask, holding up the five fingers of his right hand and his clenched left fist. *Five or one?*

*Only this time it is two or one.* “If you are saying what I think you are,” he told the eunuch, “then that is treason.”

“Perhaps it is,” said Varys. Now he was back in the shadow once more, and slowly descending the steps, “yet for every path taken, there is one which remains hidden. Once which remains unlit by the stars of the morning. One which hides away... a last word, Ser Barristan: King Aegon has a septa in his army. Her name is Lemore. If you talk to her, you may be able to resolve your predicament.”

*What predicament?* he meant to ask, but by then the eunuch was gone, and the White Sword Tower once more stilled to quietness.

Barristan Selmy did not sleep at all that night. The thought of Varys crawling around in the castle walls made him feel strangely sick, and his words unnerved him, even if nothing would come of them. *Something is afoot here.* It was King’s Landing, and Varys, so of course there was, but more than that...

When dawn broke at last, Selmy found himself no more settled. His mind had as many worries as the White Book on the table before him had names. The rain had died away in the slow hours before, but the world was still grey with fog outside his window. Ser Barristan went away to use the privy and to change into fresh white garb; when he returned to the Lord Commander’s chambers, he was not alone. Edric Storm was squinting around at the polished white shields, and rubbing his fingers absently over one of the empty suits of polished white plate. When Ser Barristan caught him looking he jumped back suddenly. “I was just... rubbing it down... thought I saw a mark, ser...”
“No need to make excuses,” Selmy said, “I had your curiosity, once.”

Edric paused a moment. “My father never brought me up here, that time when I came to King’s Landing. It was one place I wanted to see, but... that’s the White Book, isn’t it, over there?” He pointed, and Ser Barristan was glad to see that last night’s tense anger had given way to a new, strange innocence.

“The White Book? It is indeed.”

“How can I read it?”

Ser Barristan nodded.

Edric came forwards and flicked through the pages a bit. He read out parts of entries which Barristan already knew by heart, while the old knight smiled and nodded sagely. Soon there was a knock at the outer door, and the boy went down. It was some time before he came up again. Daenerys Targaryen was following behind... and Ser Jorah Mormont too. “Your Grace.” Selmy ducked his head. “Edric, give us the room.”

The implication was that Mormont would leave too, but the Northern knight was more stubborn. “I will stay here, Ser Barristan; I am the queen’s guard—”

“As am I.” Though his own words mattered not, a brief look passed between Daenerys and Ser Jorah, and by mutual consent the knight turned away and went down the stairs.

“I confess I have been in here precious little since my arrival in King’s Landing,” said the queen. “Which is not necessarily a bad thing. This is a tower for Queensguard and Kingsguard solely, I understand that. I would not encroach upon your—”

“Not at all,” said Selmy. “Prince Rhaegar made several visits here, both for training in his youth and thereafter. Had he been born a second son, he might have made another Prince Aemon the Dragonknight.” That was not entirely true; Rhaegar Targaryen might have had impressive skill with sword and lance, but his heart would never have been in it, and it was not his way to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors when he could forge his own path.

“When we were children, Viserys oft told me overblown stories of our ancestors and the men who served them... but with the Kingsguard, he kept to the truth, more or less.”

Selmy nodded. “Prince Viserys might have come here once or twice, too. Though he was but a child, of course.”

“Yes.” A spasmodic flicker of mourning passed over the queen’s face, then dissolved. “I hope you will forgive me if I behaved a little hastily yesterday, Ser Barristan.”

“Your Grace was not at fault. The hour was not ideal.”

“A queen cannot change her moods to suit the time of day.” Daenerys sighed. “I hate to presume, but I think I know the nature of your concerns already...”

She was urging him to speak, Barristan realised. He would have to be careful with this, yet firm too, else his words would fall short. “These are but an old man’s idle observations, but your court is growing remarkably similar to the one which challenged you in Meereen. The Sons of the Harpy taught us the costs of religion and culture, and what it means to damage them... and already I have seen a conflict of interests between the red priests and the sparrows in your streets. Your maesters remind me too much of Reznak mo Reznak, Hizdahr and the Green Grace, Varys is Skahaz mo
Kandaq come again, and Ser Jorah Mormont... Mormont is an anointed traitor, by Your Grace’s own words...”

“...and a pardoned one.” Daenerys sighed. “I did not know if you would come back, ser. Alive or dead, or at all. I needed someone to have at my side... and Ser Jorah was better than Ben Plumm or Daario Naharis or no one... yes, your grievances are reasonable, but you need to look past them, Ser Barristan. We have other enemies to fight.”

“I will.” And he would, for her sake, and hers alone. She is right.

“Varys, though... and some of the others...” The queen’s eyes showed the faint flicker of purple fire. *Madness and greatness, two sides of the same coin.* “I have my doubts, Ser Barristan. Reasonable ones. And I doubt my nephew most of all. That is everything I have to say. Will you break your fast with me now?”

Selmy chewed on that briefly. “Might I have a few moments first, Your Grace?”

Daenerys was quick to oblige. When she was gone, Ser Barristan paced to the window and looked out over the faint outline of the city, rising behind grey clouds. *A storm is coming.* He knew for certain now. *And the dragons will dance when it comes, sure as sunrise.*

As he passed the White Book his eyes landed on the page Edric Storm had left open, and the shield in the top left corner. *Ten black pellets on a scarlet field.* He knew those arms only too well. If he had been a more superstitious man, Selmy might have taken it as a sign. He was not, but even so...

*Ser Criston Cole,* he read. *Born to a steward of Lord Robar Dondarrion at Blackhaven, in the Dornish Marches, in the 82nd year after Aegon’s Landing.* Won his first tourney, *of pages and squires,* in his 15th year, *at Storm’s End.* Won the melee at the *tourney of Maidenpool to celebrate King Viserys’s ascension in his 21st year,* where he later took Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen’s favour during the *joust,* after unhorsing Prince Daemon Targaryen and the twins Ser Eryk and Ser Arryk Cargyle, *but lost to Lord Lymond Mallister in the final bout.* Named to the *Kingsguard in his 23rd year upon the death of Ser Ryam Redwyne.* Won the *melee at the wedding of Princess Rhaenyra and Ser Laenor Velaryon in his 32nd year,* where he wore Queen Alicent Hightower’s favour, *defeating Ser Harwin Strong in single combat.* Tutored Prince Aemond Targaryen throughout his youth. *Named Lord Commander of the Kingsguard in his 39th year.* At the *small council to decide the succession to King Viserys in 129AC,* he slit the throat of Lord Lymond Beesbury of Honeyholt, who supported Rhaenyra. *Led the supporters of Aegon II’s claim to the Iron Throne,* and crowned him in the *Red Keep.* Named Hand of the King in his 47th year, succeeding Ser Otto Hightower. *Defeated Rhaenyra’s forces twice in quick succession,* at the *battles of Duskendale and Rook’s Rest.* *Remained King’s Hand during the tenure of Prince Regent Aemond Targaryen.* Led an army to *retake Harrenhal from the greens,* but *ambushed by the Winter Wolves led by Lord Cregan Stark at the Gods’ Eye,* *during the Butcher’s Ball.* Killed by arrows while *leading the retreat from the ridge,* in the *130th year after Aegon’s Landing.*

Edric Storm had reappeared. “What are you reading, ser?” He squinted over Ser Barristan’s shoulder. “Ser Criston Cole? I... I know the name, but... was he a good knight?”

“For most of his life, yes. He was a skilled fighter with his morningstar, a champion of many a
tourney. But Ser Criston showed that even the best men can enter into the book of infamy.” He thumbed the White Book shut, thinking of Arthur Dayne and Jaime Lannister and lastly of himself. “They called him Kingmaker.”

Chapter End Notes

Another one of my favourite chapters, but for very different reasons to most. I'd forgotten how much of a pleasure it was to write and read Ser Barristan Selmy. This chapter is very heavily inspired by Jaime VIII from A STORM OF SWORDS, and by The Queen's Hand from A DANCE WITH DRAGONS. Several passages are taken directly from those works, including the entries in the White Book.

We didn't really see much of Daenerys, to be honest, but Barristan's reflections - particularly his final one on Ser Criston Cole - encapsulate the main themes of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS very well. So much so that I almost called this chapter 'The Sunset Kingdoms', but eventually saved that title for later. From a purely thematic perspective, this is one of the three most important chapters in the story so far, along with 'Sons of Someone Else' and 'The Ghost of Harrenhal', both of which I loved.

Next: it could be any of Arya, Daenerys or Tommen, but probably the former. The chapters are - albeit only very slightly - getting easier to write, now that I've planned everything out properly, even if the timelines are a bit shaky. We need an update from Samwell at some point too.

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The *Melevol* whistled through salty green seas, throwing up spray and black sand and barnacles in the wake of its hull. Every day Samwell Tarly stood at the rail to watch the sun rise, and every evening he did the same as it set. Every day the sun rose a little later, and every day it set a little earlier. That made no sense to Sam, given that they were travelling east, but he made no attempt to explain the strange Essosi weather. He had not studied at the Citadel long enough to guess.

Yet here I am, the closest thing to a maester for a thousand miles. Being so far from Westeros was a strange and sobering thought. If he wanted to return to the Wall, the journey would take him a year and a half, or more if his journey to Eastwatch was as troubled as the journey to the Jade Sea had been. They had come upon corsairs thrice, once near the Isle of Cedars, once in the Summer Sea, and once barely a dozen miles outside the walls of Qarth. Kinvara and Quaithe warded them off with their spells. Sam knocked one pirate out with his sword and tied him up below decks. Captain Myratis had their captives thrown into the sea.

“Qarth’s defenses are not what they once were,” Quaithe told him once the attack was dispelled. Her face was muffled behind her lacquered mask. The shadowbinder from Asshai had never revealed her face, and that was just another one of the mysteries in Sam’s life, of late. *Who is she? Why does she want to help us?*

“Qarth has fallen far since the greatest of days,” she continued. “Glass candles burn in the house of
Urrathon Night-walker, but no man can understand them now that the warlocks of the Undying are gone.” And she told Sam a story of how Daenerys Targaryen had ventured into the House of the Undying seeking wisdom from ancient, blue-lipped sorcerers, and had returned with the Palace of Dust reduced to just that. “The warlocks wanted vengeance on Daenerys, and their thirst made them weak. Pyat Pree led the attack, but he was taken by reavers in the Summer Sea and never seen again. Then Xaro Xhoan Daxos and the Thirteen tried the queen in Meereen. The Qartheen burned in their insolence, and Xaro lies dying in his palace, of melancholy and shame. I could have warned them of their failures, but they would not have listened. And all men must die.”

“Valar morghulis,” Sam said gloomily.

“Valar dohaeris,” replied Quaithe.

That was in the Braavosi language, and so Sam wondered if she had come from that city, before her life in Asshai and Qarth. Rather than question Quaithe herself, Sam had asked Kinvara. The red priestess only laughed. “It does not matter which wind brought Quaithe to us,” she said. “Know only this: her powers far exceed my own. And fear not, Samwell... you can ask her your questions, and you can expect an answer.”

Yes, thought Sam, but I may not like that answer.

The only questions he had were about the prince of the vulture, the lady of the phoenix, and the knights of the nightingale. “Look to your histories, Samwell,” Quaithe advised him when he asked. “I think you already know, in your heart.”

That was as vague as any of the red priests’ musings. After months travelling with Kinvara, Sam had gotten used to this sort of thing. He decided to let her prophecy resolve itself.

By the close of the next day, they had put another two hundred miles between themselves and Qarth. The speed of the ship was a source of constant confusion to Sam, but Kinvara would tell him nothing other than that the Lord worked in mysterious ways, and that he was with them now, taking them safely towards Asshai far faster than any normal ship would. Yet the obstacles of land and sea still blocked their way, and in the early hours of moonlight the Melevol came upon war galleys, near the island of Great Moraq.

The ships were Qartheen, to look at them: great hulking behemoths of painted timber with tall purple and orange sails, with glowing eyes for portholes and real jewel-studded crowns resting upon the brows of their figureheads. “They do not do things by half in Qarth,” said Sarella Sand, who was the first to spy them from the crow’s nest of the Melevol. “They do not do things by half in Qarth,” said Sarella Sand, who was the first to spy them from the crow’s nest of the Melevol.

“Qarth is the greatest city that ever was or ever will be,” Sam replied glibly.

“When what we saw of it, I beg to differ.” Sarella had not been impressed by anything during their brief stay in Qarth, the first of her complaints arising when the ship had barely entered the harbour. “It wasn’t much better than the shadow city in Sunspear. And certainly not a patch on Old Volantis.”

“It smelled better than Astapor,” Sam said. After their encounter with the stone men south of Valyria, they’d been forced to head towards Astapor to pick up new oarsmen.

“A camel’s cunt smells better than Astapor,” said Sarella. “Half the people we saw in Slaver’s Bay were dead, and the other half were dying on their feet.”

“...it’s called the Bay of Dragons now, actually.”

“The Bay of Corpses, more like.” She gestured at the crewmen on the lower deck. “I don’t know
what Captain Myratis was thinking. They’re ghouls. If they were my crew, I’d have thrown them overboard... and I doubt they’d object.”

“They should be thankful that they are not your crew, then,” jested Sam.

Sarella chuckled. “Very true. And what about you?”

“Me?”

“Would you serve willingly on a ship captained by Sarella Sand?”

Sam could help but grin. “No. I’d throw myself overboard.”

“You certainly know how to flatter a woman, don’t you?” She returned his grin. “Now, I think I should go and find some shoes. These Qartheen are turning towards us, and I don’t want to be mistaken for someone’s butt boy.” She went off at a run.

Sam found himself ruminating on Sarella’s words about flattery. But I do know how to flatter a woman, he thought. Well, if the things I said to Gilly can be considered flattery. He worried about Gilly, but for different reasons now. He was thousands of miles from her and he had not sent her a letter in months. She might think I’m dead. Or she might have found another man, a better man than me, one who doesn’t run off and leave her and her babe in the arms of my lord father. Lord Randyll had been preparing to fight the Targaryens when Sam left Oldtown, he recalled. He wondered how that had turned out.

Not that it mattered. Lord Randyll could be a pile of blackened bones by now and Sam wouldn’t care. “I wouldn’t,” he said aloud, “I really wouldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t what?” Mylo Myratis was sitting on the rail, dangling his skinny legs over the water.

“I wouldn’t much care if my father was roasted alive by dragons.”

The captain’s son grinned. “So you wouldn’t much give shit?”

Sam smiled. “I’ve told you not to swear,” he said, “but I’ve also told you that it’s ‘I don’t give a shit’, not just ‘I wouldn’t much give shit’.”

Mylo considered that thoughtfully. “Why roasted by dragons? Much worse ways to die.”

“Like what?”


“Kraken,” Sam said thoughtfully. A tall and twisted thing with a thousand eyes and one, wearing a crown of frozen thorns and jagged black ice. The visions were getting stranger and stranger as they approached Asshai. It was Euron Greyjoy, he was certain of it, with one eye burning icy blue under his patch. But I killed him. Didn’t I? A chill went through him. “Cold,” he told Mylo, “you can die of the cold. I nearly did, at the Fist of the First Men.” He thought of the Other, gliding towards him with its milkglass fingers outstretched, ice crystals appearing on its black breastplate.

“You cannot die of cold,” the boy said, “not here.” He patted the rail beside him. “Come and sit.”

“Why?”

A grin filled his face. “So I can push you into sea.”
“Now, Mylo, we must treat our guests better than that,” Captain Myratis appeared at Sam’s side, and laid a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Indeed, my boy, you must show them how such things are done.”

“What?” the boy said, then let out a startled yelp at his father’s push and disappeared over the rail. There was some splashing down below, and the men threw down ropes to help the boy up. The captain was laughing as he turned to face Sam. “I hope he was not bothering you, Master Samwell.”

“Well... not really. But... yes.”

“You Westerosi can never make up your mind,” he commented. “Not good, that. You saw what happened in Slaver’s Bay.”

Sam raised an eyebrow.

“The dragon queen took a middle course. She saved Meereen... and all but reduced Yunkai and Astapor to dust. She had reasons, yes, but you see what comes after. Some of my sailors call her Mother, and some call her Destroyer. A goddess or a demon. And I know which one will win out.”

Sam had heard all of this back in Astapor, and in Qarth too. Daenerys Targaryen had left Meereen in the hands of her seneschal, Reznak mo Reznak, but had given command of the shattered army to Skahaz mo Kandaq, the infamous Shavepate. Now Reznak and Skahaz were at each other’s throats. The Shavepate had laid siege to the city and the enormous refugee camps that surrounded it. The Wise Masters had briefly re-established themselves in Yunkai, but then the Shavepate had marched and sacked the city all over again, and had done the same to Astapor for good measure. Hundreds of thousands had been expelled from their homes and left beggars. There were no slaves and no masters now. Only those with the bloody flux and those without it. Reznak mo Reznak had given an order to have the afflicted massacred and their bodies burned to prevent the spread of the contagion. That had provoked the common people of Slaver’s Bay into an uprising, first against their leaders and then against each other, when the rebellion split up into several smaller groups. Fire and blood, Sam thought bitterly.

In time, they will all come to hate her, even those who were once her fiercest supporters. Only a naive fool would think that the situation could resolve itself another way.

And yet...

...Marwyn the Mage thought Daenerys would bring an age of promise. Mad and flawed he might have been, but the Mage was no man’s fool. Sam wondered if Marwyn had found his queen, and whether he had seen her as a liberator or a conqueror, a great hero or a great tyrant.

Then he thought of old Master Aemon lying in his bed on the Cinnamon Wind, and the last of the Targaryen fire burning in his eyes as he rasped his final musings of this girl who was the last descendant of his brother Aegon the Unlikely, and all the kings that had come before. And then of Xhondo, the great Summer Islander ship’s mate. Xhondo knows these dragons, he said as he pulled me from the water. Dragons. Euron Greyjoy and his brother tried to play with their magic, and Benerro and Kinvara prayed for their rise. Sam did not know how it would all end, but the dragons would surely play a part. They must.

He turned to see Kinvara standing on the deck between two of the Lord of Light’s red-cloaked warriors. Though they overtopped her by nearly a foot and cast long shadows over the gangway, the red priestess stood out boldly between them. “Quaithe is down below,” she told Sam. “She will join us shortly.” She nodded to the approaching Qartheen ships from down the strait. “They ships will not bother us. We serve the Lord of Light, as do they, and R’hllor’s name is known and respected here, east of the Jade Gates.”
East of the Jade Gates. Sam felt slightly dizzy, hearing the words aloud. *I have gone beyond the end of the world.* Most maester’s maps stretched only as far as Valyria, with precious few marking the coastline all the way to Qarth. Sam had found several in the Citadel’s library that showed Asshai and the fabled lands beyond, but none of them seemed to agree what was there, or where places were. The names of the continents and the empires had strange names that Sam could barely pronounce - *Sothoryos, Ulthos, Yin, Asabhad* - all with strange new histories he was eager to learn. They said that Asshai’s libraries were larger than the Citadel’s. *There is only one way to find out.*

“Your Lord is not the only god this far east,” he said to Kinvara.

“Of course not. But there is power in fire, and there is much fire in the east. Long after dragons fell in Valyria, and sorcery faded in the west, such arts continued under the Shadow.”

“What... what is the Shadow? Is it... is it...”

“A shadow. Yes. But you must remember, Samwell, that shadows are servants of light. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow.”

Sam scowled. “But isn’t the shadow itself... well, dark?”

Kinvara turned away, smiling at some secret only she understood, and looked out over the water. “They approach.”

“I could’ve sworn that was a Qartheen ship,” said Sarella Sand, reappearing at Sam’s side. “Wasn’t it?”

“Oh.” Sam squinted. Truth be told, the ship *did* look rather different. “What... what is it now?”

“They are glamoured,” said Kinvara. “They are... hiding from *something.*”

“How can someone glamour a whole ship?”

Kinvara stayed distant. “Not one person, no. Several. And this is wrong. We do not travel like this, with half a dozen priests to a ship, or more. Something is wrong here.”

Just then Quaithe emerged onto the deck. Sam could not really tell what she was thinking behind the mask, but he could see her eyes, and they looked concerned. “Red are the sails,” she said sonorously, “and red the men who stand beneath them.”

Rather than reply to those ominous words, they all waited in the dwindling twilight as the ship drew closer and closer. Where there had once been half a dozen ships, there was now only one. But Sam supposed that the red priests could masquerade themselves as a small fleet, to avoid the dangers of the high seas. Many a pirate would try to raid a solitary ship, but half a dozen were a fool’s target. Even so, this ship alone would make no easy conquest. It dwarfed the *Melevol* nearly five times over; the waves it sent up in its wake made the smaller ship rock feverishly. As it came alongside, Captain Myratis and his men made to form some sort of landing party, but Quaithe waved them back. “Let me lead the way.” Kinvara followed, and Sam close behind them.

A fog had settled suddenly, hiding the *Melevol* and the other ship inside of it. The red priests came out onto the deck as hibernating animals do when they poke their heads above the ground for the first time in spring; nervously, with slow, uneasy paces. Guardsmen wearing fiery hearts moved among them. Sam saw that the ship’s occupants were not just servants of the Lord’s Temple, but ordinary folk too, men and woman and children, dark and pale, fat and thin, all afraid.

“Hail,” called Kinvara in High Valyrian. “Glad tidings to you. May the Lord be in your hearts, and
may his light see you safely on your travels. I am Kinvara, a red priest of R’hlor, this is the Melevol, and we are headed to Asshai.”

She was met with silence.

Kinvara and Quaithe shared a look that could have meant anything. Kinvara repeated the words in the tongue of Old Volantis and some other Eastern language, and Quaithe said something in Qartheen and then in Ghiscari.

Sam was beginning to wonder whether the other ship was crewed by mutes when one of the priests on the other ship advanced through the fog. His pate was bald, but a thick grey beard stretched halfway down his chest. His robes were long and red, and the ends were frayed like wisps of smoke. “I am Vanas, a red priest of R’hlor,” he said, “this is the Perzyhontes Riña, and we are headed away from Asshai.”

“A rescue ship,” Quaithe surmised. “But what are you rescuing these people from?”

“The Long Night, my friends. We are rescuing them from the Long Night, and in the Lord’s name, I suggest that you come with us. No good will come to you by sailing east.”

“What is in the east that we should fear?” Sarella said, with a hint of pride in her voice. Pride and overconfidence are not so different, thought Sam worriedly.

Vanas’s voice echoed through the fog. “You would be better off not knowing, child.”

“I’m no child,” said Sarella.

“Oh, but you are.” The old man’s voice was sad, and Sam knew that it carried the weight of far more years than it seemed. The red priests could use glamours to make themselves look younger than they actually were. And it was not only Vanas, but Kinvara and Quaithe, too... they could all be dusty and wrinkled relics for all he knew. If they are, then we are certainly children in their eyes.

“Where are you going?” Sam asked. “Qarth? Meereen? Volantis?”

“As far as we can go.” The old priest sighed, and his eyes turned sad. “I was hoping for safety, but that is impossible. And even more so if you continue east.” Vanas sighed again. “But I know that you will not be deterred from your course. In that case, I will need to give you all the knowledge I can before we part ways again. Lady Kinvara, Lady Quaithe, captain, may I come aboard?”

Kinvara answered in place of Captain Myratis. “You may. Indeed, we need to talk.”

With that said, Vanas climbed up onto the rail... and crossed the ten-foot-wide gap between the Perzyhontes Riña and the Melevol as if it were nothing at all. He seemed to float for a few moments, unnatural in his gracefulness.

The old priest was on the Melevol for the better part of two hours, and he spent all of that time in the captain’s cabin with Quaithe and Kinvara. Sam offered to take in a platter of fish and fruit, but they stopped talking as soon as he entered, and to his eyes it looked like any other meeting. There were no magic ornaments laid out on the table, no mystical truths revealed to him. Vanas only smiled and nodded and thanked him politely – “My thanks, Samwell.” It was only afterwards, lying in his hammock in the cabin he shared with Sarella, that Sam realised he had never told the man his name.

“Are they still there?” Sam could not sleep. Instead he turned in his hammock to look out of the porthole window. The Perzyhontes Riña was still moored alongside them, bobbing off to starboard. “I can’t see into the cabin.”
“Go to sleep, Sam,” Sarella muttered. “He’ll be gone by morning, I promise you that.”

Her bluntness surprised him. “What’s happened to you, Sarella? What happened to your spirit of adventure?”

She gave a weak laugh. “It spent the better part of a year on a boat, that’s what happened to it. There’s only so much delight one can have in that.”

Sam could see where she was coming from. Yes, the journey had been spectacular in parts, and it was certainly an experience he would cherish when it was all over, yet some part of him was desperately yearning for it to end. There are thousands of leagues between here and the Wall, here and Oldtown, here and home. There are faces and voices I no longer remember, and fates that it is impossible for me to know. Back in Volantis he had heard men claiming that Jon Snow was dead, lost beyond the Wall; he was no closer to knowing if there was any truth in that. The Others could have swept down upon the Wall and overrun the Seven Kingdoms entirely, and it would be weeks and moons before I find out in faraway Asshai.

The world ahead of him seemed impossible. The world behind him seemed like someone else’s life entirely. Gilly... dear gods, what wouldn’t I give to see her again...

He closed his eyes thinking of her... and woke moments or hours later in sheer, unutterable blackness, yet knowing that now was the time. Slowly, Sam twisted himself out of the hammock, put his feet down softly on the boards, and moved towards the cabin door, creaking all the way.

Lantern light lit his path to Quaithe’s cabin. She was staring straight at him he came in, wearing an expectant look. “Samwell,” she said smoothly, “good morrow to you. I would ask you to keep quiet.” She placed a hand on the cabin wall. “The others are asleep.”

“Where’s Vanas?” Sam asked.

“The Perzyhotes Riña has departed,” said Quaithe. “And Vanas with it. You will want to know what he told me, I suppose?”

Sam nodded.

She studied him with her usual impassiveness. “You must understand, Samwell, that not everyone who joins the Lord’s temple becomes a priest. Some become warriors instead. And some, having been warriors, revert to priesthood in the hope of passing their lessons on. The man you met today was one such man. Now he calls himself Vanas, but there was a time when he lived by a different name, and that name is steeped in blood. The taking of a new name is a way of moving on... but also of obscuring the past, and the horrors one might have seen.

“Vanas was the priest on a small outlying island a hundred leagues from Asshai, but still inside its circle of influence. When the Stone Men came for him, he was forced to revert to his old ways to save his people. The effort... it almost burned him up inside. What we saw on the Perzyhotes Riña was the remains of the island folk. Vanas is taking them to somewhere safe, and there he will protect them. And when that is done, he will cease to be.”

“Cease to be?”

“Disappear. Fade away. Die. Some powers are best not revisited.” The eyes behind the mask took on a sad look. “It is what it is.”

“And what about you?” Sam heard himself ask. “What have you seen? Is... is there a reason why you... the mask...”
"Oh, no. I have my own reason for that. One you may soon learn."

Something told Sam that the subject was best left alone, for now. "The Stone Men?" he said. "How did they get out of Valyria?"

"His Grey Grace is growing bold, but he is only a servant of the greater evil ahead," said Quaithe, not really answering his question. "But it is the Others approaching Asshai that Vanas feared more."

"I— my lady? Others in Asshai? But how did they—?"

"Westeros is not alone in facing ancient foes. There are things in the Grey Waste beyond the Dothraki Sea that have not been seen in the world for thousands of years. We hardly remember them, but they remember us. I think your Others came first... but rest assured... if the Wall should fall, all of us will find ourselves in danger. The Five Forts defend Asshai against the coming darkness, for now, but even they cannot stand forever. Winter is coming."

Sam swallowed. "The... the end of the world."

"The end of the world as we know it, for certain. That is why they cannot be allowed to win. That is why I am helping you. Azor Ahai reborn is in Westeros, I know that, but he can save Essos, too. I have foreseen it, Samwell Tarly. And I know that you have crossed his path before, and will do so again."

"King Stannis?" Sam frowned. "But... the sword, it was cold, Maester Aemon said so." How long ago was that?

"The sword wielded by Stannis Baratheon was a piece of glamour and trickery, nothing more. The magic we seek is older. Dragons, perhaps..." She saw Sam’s quizzical look. "Yes, it could be dragons... Lightbringer took the form of a sword once, long ago, when Azor Ahai stood against the forces of night. But he has been reborn, and so has the Red Sword of Heroes. Dragons are fire made flesh, Samwell. Dragons are life, and love, and light."

"And dragons are in Westeros," said Sam. But she said I have crossed Azor Ahai’s path before... and I have never seen dragons... save for those in the library. But they were my dream, weren’t they? And the flaming sword..."

"That they are. Quaithe looked to the sky. "It grows late, Master Samwell. You should go back to sleep, and rest comfortably while you still can. The night is dark." The last was to herself.

"Perzyhontes Riña," said Sam suddenly, turning back to her at the rail. "What does it mean?"

"Valyrian is... a strange tongue... at the best of times," Quaithe replied. "Perzyhontes is fire bird, I suppose. Riña is a queen..."

"Or a lady," said Sam. "And fire bird... could that be a phoenix?"

"Hmm. I imagine Vanas named it to remind him of his rebirth." For once it seemed that Quaithe was smiling. Starlight burned in her eyes. "So yes, Samwell. It very well could be."

Chapter End Notes

A Star In Her Eye isn't one of my favourite chapters, but I think it is pretty well-written,
considering how many times I had to rewrite parts of this one before it was satisfying. The chapter title is stolen from an upcoming Doctor Who episode, but it's also a clue to a particular secret, which you'll probably be able to figure out if you're familiar with a few ASOIAF fan theories.

I understand that the Samwell storyline isn't among the more popular ones, but it is necessary to the story's resolution and it's interesting to get a look at what is happening in the far east, which is for the most part a mirroring of the situation faced by Jon Snow and co. in the north.

So while this chapter was a nightmare to write, it's not the only thing I've written during my hiatus. We're just starting on the final third of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS now, and as a general rule plotting and writing for this part is a lot easier than it was for earlier sections.

But then I have a sequel to write...
Hmm...
The Laughing Tree

Chapter Summary

“One hundred seventy leagues from the Wall to Winterfell. Five hundred miles as the raven flies.”

Chapter Notes

Accidentally double posted due to difficulties with AO3. This is the Bran chapter from 17/03/17.

BRAN

“There is no good news yet, my lord,” said Lord Harclay. “But we will keep looking. They cannot have gotten far.”

The Greatjon was less hopeful. “They don’t need to. Once they find their way to the sea, none of us will be able to stop them from getting back to their godforsaken islands. Has Lady Glover said nothing?”

“No,” Bran replied. “Not so much as an acknowledgement.”

“I wonder if the raven actually reached her at all,” the Greatjon said. “You should send another, my lord.”

“Perhaps. I might see Lady Glover on my way south. I’ll ask her then.” They would be passing through Ironrath, and that was not too far from Deepwood Motte.

“Words are wind, my lord,” said the Greatjon. “Give Crowfood something to do. He’d love nothing more than to chase down those bastards. We have hunting hounds—”

Lord Harclay thought otherwise. “The rain will have washed off their scent by now, if they ever had one. Let it be, my lord. We will find them, or we will not.”

Bran agreed, but the Greatjon kept scowling. “I hope we do. I have a few questions for the Greyjoys, aye. Though their heads will content me just the same.” His eyes met Bran’s, and hardened, just a little, as though he suspected... but how could he? “I will see you in the yard, my lord,” he said at last. The floorboards creaked at each heavy footfall as he left the room.
Lord Harclay remained. “Whatever did you do to make the Greatjon so wroth?” he asked.

“He doesn’t like being told what to do. Grey Wind had to bite two of his fingers off before he’d listen to Robb’s orders. And Robb wasn’t a cripple.”

“Oh, you’re a cripple, aye. But you’re a Stark of Winterfell, and I can tell that you’re the Ned’s son, through and through. Maybe more than the Young Wolf was.”

“How so?” asked Bran.

“Well, they called Ned ‘the Quiet Wolf’, didn’t they? I’m not sure if he was properly quiet, or just quiet compared to Lyanna and Brandon, and even Benjen, come to think of it. Either way, you’re more like your father than any of the them.”

He might have said more, but then they heard a calling of “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor,” from somewhere outside. When Meera and Hodor appeared in the doorway, Lord Harclay bade Bran farewell and went down in their place.

“We’re ready when you are,” Meera said. She opened the window and let the wind blow inside, tangling her dark curly hair. “Bran, are you sure about this?”

“As sure as I was the last time you asked me.” Bran tried to sound good-natured. “Winterfell needs a Stark.”

“The North needs a Stark, not just Winterfell. Half the North is here at the Wall—”

“—And we will need the other half to fight the enemy ahead. Manderly and Reed and Locke, the Flints of Flint’s Finger and Widow’s Watch, the Cerwyns and the Ryswells... Sansa and Rickon and their allies... we need them all. And I need to take my place in my father’s castle. I need to show that the North has a ruler again.”

Beyond the window, snowflakes were swirling down over Castle Black’s courtyard. Soon the kingsroad would be all but impassable again. It must be now. Winter is coming.

“It’s time,” Bran said.

Hodor was picking him up from his chair when Mully and Clydas suddenly burst into the room, the old steward frantically waving a letter in one hand. “My lord, it’s from your sister!”

“From Sansa?” Bran motioned for Hodor to set him back down. The direwolf seal had already been cracked, but Bran did not really care. A letter from Sansa! He directed a broad grin in Meera’s direction as he unfolded the paper:

Dear Bran,

Rickon and I were gladdened to receive your letter. It is good to know that you are safe. We pray for Jon’s safe return from beyond the Wall.

I would like to head back to Winterfell as soon as I can, but there are other matters to be dealt with; our cousin Robert is not entirely secure in the Vale, and there are still questions over the legitimacy of our house and our claims on the North.
I have half a mind to send our great-uncle Brynden ahead to meet you. The Blackfish is an able commander and a brilliant fighter, and loyal, too, which is more than I can say for many of those we find ourselves surrounded with. Uncle Brynden would be able to help you consolidate your hold and will counsel you on the perils you face. Alas, he has commitments to fulfil in the south first, as do we all...

Write to me soon.

Love,

Sansa

“What does it say?” Meera asked.

Bran was not sure whether to feel happy or solemn. “They’re in the Riverlands. But they’re not coming north. Not yet.” He looked to Clydas. “Thank you. I... I think we should be going now. Hodor, will you...?” He held out his arms.

The outside steps were damp with snow, and there was a low, reedy wind blowing along the Wall from the east, off the Shivering Sea. Bran, Hodor, Meera and the two Night’s Watchmen went down into the yard together. It was now pointless to bother shoveling snow out of the yards, so the drifts had piled up high on all sides, save for a melted and muddy path down the centre. A few archery posts remained, abandoned even by arrows. Only at the stables was there any commotion. Larence Hornwood and Talia Forrester were there, saddling up their horses, fixing straps and stirrups. Lyanna Mormont watched them displeasedly from an archway. Alys Karstark waited with her, and Theo Wull, Crowfood Umber, and a dozen others.

“Good morrow, Bran,” Larence called. “Should I get them to bring Whistler round for you?”

“Looks like they already have.” One of the Night’s Watch lads was leading his horse across the yard. Whistler went gingerly through the thick snow. She will have to get used to it on the road. So far Bran had only ridden her a couple of miles outside of Castle Black, and only then on days when the weather was kinder than this. He was beginning to wonder whether he should have broken her in more.

His saddle was an ugly contraption, with many straps and splints and buckles that would serve to keep him ahorse. It would have been easier to ride in a wagon, but Bran did not want to return to Winterfell looking any more crippled than he had to. Some might call it pride, but he was the lord of Winterfell, and surely entitled to a little.

And so Spare Boot had made him a saddle of his own design, and Hareth had taught him how to make Whistler respond to his calls, and Lyanna Mormont had shouted at him whenever he considered given up. Eventually he could ride well enough to venture outside Castle Black with Meera and Alys Karstark. One night, Crowfood Umber had the idea to teach Bran how to use a sword from horseback. That had proved mostly unsuccesful, but it was not impossible. Bran would keep trying.

The riding sessions were few and far between, though; Bran spent most of the past weeks at his lordly duties. He received wagonloads of food from Deepwood Motte and Torrhen’s Square and Eastwatch-by-the-Sea by way of Braavos. He looked through the ledgers and accounts Lord Wyman
Manderly had sent from Winterfell. In the evenings, he and Mully and Halder went to the top of the Wall and checked the catapults and ballistae and wooden mantlets, and then Bran waited alone in the purpled blackness, searching fruitlessly for the hint of a torch that would mark Jon’s return.

There were letters too, some from Maege Mormont and Ser Denys Mallister at the Shadow Tower, others from Cotter Pyke at Eastwatch; the latter sort reported that the Skagosi were gathering in the Bay of Seals with a dozen longships, just in sight of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. Clydas sent the ravens Bran had been writing for the southron lords, requesting that they send their reply by way of Winterfell. None had responded yet, though... and there was still nothing from beyond the Wall, not even a single scout. There were whispers that Jon and the rest of his ranging were all dead, and that all they could do was bar the gates through the Wall and plug the gaps with ice and stones. Instead Bran and Mully sent the builders to check that they were clear. *Even if Jon is coming, he may not return to Castle Black. We have to make sure he can find a way through...*

But Bran knew could not linger at the Wall forever. Castle Black was full of able men and women who could hold the night at bay till the Watch returned. They did not need a crippled boy. They did not need him.

Hodor and Mully helped him to mount onto Whistler’s back. The horse twitched in fright, until Bran reached out a hand and rubbed the nape of her neck, whereupon she quietened a little. “Easy, now.” Bran turned to Lyanna Mormont. “Has your mother sent anything else this way?”

“No yet. I daresay she will be back soon, but in the meantime, the Mormont men must learn to listen to their new lady.” She was not smiling one bit. “It seems we have similar challenges ahead, Lord Stark.”

“Yes.” But you aren’t a cripple. And they’ll listen to you.

“Don’t you doubt in yourself, now.” Bran saw that Meera was up on her horse. Hodor was struggling up onto his pony, and the rest of the escort were forming up. Their spear-points glittered in the chilly air. “Don’t you dare doubt in yourself, Brandon Stark,” said Lyanna. “Else you’ll have me to answer to.” She gave him the closest thing to a smile she was capable of – more of an amused scowl – then nodded and backed off.

The rest of them made their farewells there and then in the blowing snow. Mors Umber shook Bran’s hand so hard he seemed like to break it. Mully told him that he was welcome back at Castle Black anytime, and Bran promised to send more men to the Watch as soon as he got back to Winterfell. Alys Karstark leaned up on her tiptoes to kiss him lightly on the cheek, and Bran turned red all over, and he was still blushing as the horses turned towards the gate. Then Benjicot Branch, who led the escort, shouted a call of farewell, and the sentries in Castle Black’s towers nodded their heads in salute.

Brandon Stark held his head high as they rode out, and did not look back.

The first day on the road passed more easily than he had expected. Whistler might be young, but she was strong too, and responsive to Bran’s every command. The kingsroad was an easy road to follow, mostly flat and mostly straight, and largely clear of snow. And so they made good time; by the time they stopped for the night, Benjicot Branch reckoned that they had gone nineteen miles, which was especially good considering they had not set out until mid-morning. “One hundred seventy leagues from the Wall to Winterfell,” Benjicot remarked, as they set up their tents. “Five hundred miles as the raven flies.”

“How long will it take us?” Bran asked.
“Depends on the snow, my lord. Not more than three weeks or so, I should think.”

“We’ll be at Ironrath in a week,” Talia Forrester said. “That’s not far from the kingsroad at all. And I expect we’ll be wanting a break by then. A long ride can be dull.”

Not when you’re a cripple. Riding Whistler was the closest Bran would ever get to flying. It would have been foolish not to treasure every moment of it. Part of him wanted to go riding off now, just for the feeling of the wind in his hair and the ground racing away beneath him, but the sky was black and there were no stars, and the day’s ride had exhausted Whistler entirely. And so Hodor helped him down from his horse and set him beside the campfire.

There was plenty of ale to go around, and mulled wine with cinammon and cloves, and skewers of hot spiced goat. Bran sat with Hodor, Meera, Larence and Talia. His furs had the wet-snow smell to them, mingled with woodsmoke and sweat, but no one seemed to notice. Larence had an arm around Talia’s shoulders, and for once, she appeared to be fine with that.

“How about a ghost story?” Larence said when they had eaten their fill. “It’s a good night for a ghost story, I think.”

“I know the one about the Rat Cook,” said Bran.

“Everyone knows the one about the Rat Cook,” Meera replied. “In the Neck we have older stories. Darker stories.” She fed a stick into the fire; the ruddy coals ate it quickly.

“What story?”

“It’s a true story, not just one I made up. Though I suppose all stories are true, if you go back far enough. So. There once was a boy called Rickard. Some of the retellings call him Robin, or Ronnel, or another name, but my father always called him Rickard. That’s a northern name, but he was from the south. He might have been a Frey of the Crossing, my father says, or—”

“The hero is a Frey?” Larence asked incredulously.

“Yes, well, he’s hardly a hero,” said Meera. “And he hardly gets a hero’s fate. They were travelling north through the Neck, up towards White Harbor and then onto Winterfell. And Rickard’s father warned him: you must not leave the road, not ever, not even if it seems the only choice that remains to you. For if you do, the future that awaits you is full of bog devils, and the risen dead, and the thing that walk in the night...”

“What’s the thing that walks in the night?” Rickard asked. His father told him, ‘he has been walking for many years, and he will walk for many more, no doubt. Wherever he goes, a tree takes root, a terrible black oak with twisted branches and leaves as red as blood.’

“I suppose he wandered off the road, then?” asked Bran.

“More than that. He went willingly. Boys of a certain age are full of dangerous curiosity, and this Rickard was no different. So he left the path on a cold and foggy morning, just for a moment, just to see what lay hidden among the trees. But no sooner had he taken his first few steps away from the road that a terrible cold began to fill him up. He stepped back, and turned away, and looked for his father and the horses and their train of wagons... only they were gone, and the road was gone too, as though it had never been there at all.

“And he searched and searched and searched for the road, but he found nothing. Not a way back, nor any sign of those he had travelled with... but not the bog devils that his father had warned of either, nor the risen dead, who were but a fabled myth, it seemed, nor the thing that walked in the
night.

“Now, Rickard was no fool, not at all. He knew that he would find the road sooner or later, even if it took days or weeks or even longer. But there would be no point in walking paths he had already explored, so he gathered up a handful of acorns and began to drop them on the paths as he walked, one by one, so that he would know which way he had come...

“A hundred years later—"

“Hold on,” said Larence, as Bran asked, “What happened—?”

“You have no patience, do you?” Meera chided. “I’m getting to that. A hundred years later, Rickard’s sister’s granddaughter’s cousin’s brother-by-law’s grandson set out on a journey not too unlike Rickard’s. He did not know the story of his ancestor, but he was called Rickard too, and likewise his father warned him: you must not leave the road, not ever, not even if it seems the only choice that remains to you. For if you do, the future that awaits you is full of bog devils, and the risen dead, and the thing that walk in the night...”

She paused for a long moment, and another long moment, and another. “Is that it?” Larence said flatly. “I... I don’t understand it.”

Bran wasn’t sure he understood either, but Talia was nodding along, and he did not really want to seem stupid, so he smiled and nodded as well. “That was a good story, Meera.”

Larence grunted. “A good ghost story should at least have a ghost. Can we have a proper one, please?” When no one replied, he sighed and said, “Fine,” and started out himself. “Long ago, on the misty moors below Hornwood there lived an old woman...”

They talked until all the others had retreated from the fire, and Hodor was snoring noisily. Then Larence and Talia got up together, and set off back towards the tents. Bran and Meera were left alone. Her cool breath drifted towards him through the close air, and died away. For a long, long time, neither of them spoke. “What’s it like?” she asked after an age.

“What?”

“You... I shouldn’t ask...” It was most unlike Meera Reed to hesitate. A fact she seemed to realise as she pressed on. “Your legs.” The last was barely a whisper.

“I... well, at least they’re not cold, or anything.” He smiled a little.

Meera had shuffled up beside him. Bran could feel her warmth against his, in his shoulders and his arms, down to his waist... and no further. “But you must... don’t you ever get angry? Or upset? Or...?”

“I used to. Once.” Bran stared into the hot coals of the firepit. “But getting angry isn’t going to change anything. I know that. I’m... only... Bloodraven promised that I would fly, someday. And...”

“There are dragons in the world now,” Meera said, quietly. “Maybe you will.”

“Maybe. But... there are worse things to be than a cripple. I... I think... when I lost my legs, I learned to value what I had more. Arms and thoughts and...”

“A heart,” she said haltingly. “You have a good heart, Bran. That means a lot to me.”

“Oh.” He didn’t know how to reply to that. “Thank you. I... I should be getting off to bed now, I
think.” He turned to Hodor, and gave him a gentle poke in the ribs. “Hodor,” said Bran.

“Hodor,” muttered, stirring from sleep. “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor...”

That night he dreamed of Summer, as he had almost every night since the wolf had left the Wall. He dreamed that he was running. His heart thumped fast, and the rushing blood made a drumbeat in his ears, going ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum. His breaths were short and broken, his arms leaden, his skin clammy cold with sweat. The wind kissed his face and mussed his hair, and the ground fled beneath his feet. Leaves and black soil scattered across the hillside. You will never walk again, said a whisper on the wind, but you will fly. He shouldered aside brambles and thorns as he forged his path through the undergrowth.

He was close now. The woods were full of whispers, but he only sought one. It was one low rustling out of a thousand, nearly lost beneath the hiss of the wind and the rush of ice floes drifting down the river. And suddenly the trees turned to grey rock and then to nothing, and he found himself at the height of a stony precipice, looking out over the world.

It was like one of his father’s maps, only here the snow-capped mountains and misty valleys were real, and instead of ink on parchment they were grass and oak leaves and pale white funguses, and here and there the odd bits of old slate-coloured stone and weirwood bark. The North, he thought. I am seeing the North. All of my father’s kingdom.

No, said the wolf inside him. Your father, not mine.

Bran reached out. Summer—

No, the wolf replied. I am a beast, not some coat you can slip on and off as you please, man-child.

I’m Bran, I’m your... your friend, your brother, your—

You are the one who keeps me imprisoned by night, said the wolf, you are the one who holds me in his chains, who seeks to keep me from wolves and among men. I am no slave of yours...

Then the dream shattered into fragments of blood-tinted glass, and Bran was spinning through an inky sea, flying, falling onto the dark earth. Summer was gone, but he remained, standing there in the blackness, while the eye of the moon peeped through a slight gap in the clouds.

“Brandon,” said a voice.

He looked towards it, and saw the three-eyed crow. Or, rather, the man he had been once. Brynden Rivers, the sorcerer they called Bloodraven, him with a thousand eyes and one. With his snow-white hair and beard, dark purple eyes, and the raven-shaped birthmark on his cheek, he was unmistakeable. “How are you here?” asked Bran. His voice echoed.

“I might ask the same of you, Brandon.”

“I... I don’t know. I’m dreaming. But you’re dead. You can’t dream.”

Bloodraven’s eyes twinkled. “In the world of earth and iron, that may very well be true. But this is the world of dreams, as you said. It is as you make it.”

If that was true, I would bring back Mother and Father, and Robb, and bring everyone back to Winterfell, and the wolves too. I would ask for my legs back, and—

“And here you stand,” said Bloodraven, pointing at Bran’s feet. “Your dreams have given you that
much. Come, now. Time is running short, Bran. You cannot linger here forever.” He moved to one
side, and his raven-feather cloak swept aside with him, and then a tree stood directly before them, its
branches all twisted and bone-white. The face carved into its trunk was smiling, but it was a cold
smile, almost as though it were laughing at him, mocking him. Bran shivered.

“Look for me, beneath the tree.” It was Bloodraven’s voice, but the black-cloaked figure was gone,
and the words came from the mouth of the purple sky above.

Bran could see no way under the tree, but he approached it nonetheless with his hand outstretched.
But even as his fingers brushed against the bark he could feel himself being jerked suddenly
backwards, and his heart leapt into his mouth, and he awoke sweaty and cold beneath his blankets in
the tent he shared with Hodor and Meera. Through the narrow gap in the flap, he saw that it was
morning again. His fingers still tingled with how close he had come to the trunk...

...and oddly, so did his toes.

He dreamed a great many strange dreams over the next seven days. Every night he dreamed of
Summer, but sometimes he was outside the wolf’s skin, watching him as though he were some great
eye in the sky. And on the nights where he walked as Summer, the wolf fought with him, thrashing
and snarling in anger, and Bran woke trembling from the effort of his battle. Other times he dreamed
of the clearing, and Bloodraven, and the tree which — try as he might — he could never quite
manage to touch before he woke up.

He dreamed of the past, as well, and his ancestors, as they had been under the hill. He dreamed of
sacrifices made to the old gods before the heart tree at Winterfell, of bronze sickles flashing in the air
and bright blood staining the earth. He dreamed of his brother Robb, riding into battle on the back of
his direwolf, and later falling from his mount into a sea of swarming hands below. He dreamed of
Grey Wind’s head mounted on Robb’s body, as other wolves watched the carnage from across the
burning, bloody river. He dreamed of brown eyes and grey eyes turning to blue, and blue eyes
turning bluer still, crackling with frost.

On the morning of the seventh day he awoke from dark dreams, barely remembering where he was,
to skies bright with sunlight and snow. “I was in Summer again,” Bran said to the empty tent. Saying
it aloud helped him to remember. “And the crow. I was in the crow too.” It was not always the same
crow, and Bran was sure it had the normal two eyes instead of three. As for what a murder of crows
were doing out so far beyond the Wall, he could not say. It had been three days since they’d passed
the host heading south. Three days since he’d seen Jon and Ghost. Bran was certain they had
reached the Wall by now, or they were close at the very least. Or else they are all dead...

Hodor helped him to dress and took him out past the men and the horses, to a circle of tree stumps
just off the road, where Meera and Talia sat together. The Forrester girl raised her hand in greeting.
“Good morrow, Bran. And to you, Hodor.”

“Hodor,” said Hodor.

“We were looking for squirrels.” Meera gestured vaguely into the mossy reaches of the wolfswood.

“Squirrels? Hunting squirrels?”

“Not hunting them,” said Meera. “But it might have been a red one, and you don’t see them very
often.”

“I don’t think we’re going to have much luck finding it again,” said Talia. “But Larence thought
otherwise. So I sent him after it.”
Bran frowned, certain that he was missing something. “After a squirrel?”

“Yes. He was very intrigued.” Bran could see Meera cracking a smile too. “I think he means to bring it back for me as a trophy,” Talia said with a grin. “I can see him now, chasing it through the undergrowth, all elbows and knees...”

“Our brave knight on his noble quest,” said Meera. She took one look at Talia, and then they both burst into laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Bran asked.

It was odd to see Meera giggling like some stupid southern girl. “Oh, Bran, you can’t possibly understand.”

“Hodor?” said Hodor.

Bran felt as lost as Hodor did. “We should get some breakfast,” he muttered.

“A shame Larence won’t be joining us,” Meera muttered. When they had finished laughing at that, she reached into one of her saddlebags and pulled out half a loaf of bread, cheese wrapped in waxy brown paper, two blood sausages, and a small tin of blackberries that had gotten all mushy. “It’s not much, I know,” admitted Meera. “But it’ll serve till we get to Ironrath.”

“How far is it?” Bran asked Talia.

“A few miles.” She glanced down at her hands. “Ethan could have told you exactly. If the Red Wedding hadn’t happened and everything after that, he might have ended up looking after one of Father’s holdfasts. Or being a maester. That was what he wanted.”

Should I tell her what I saw in my dream? Bran considered. Jon and Ramsay Bolton, fighting on the same side? Should I tell her that House Forrester has lost another son in service of the Starks?

“It’s a beautiful day,” Talia said suddenly. “Brighter than it should be. There isn’t much snow, either.”

“My father always told me that days like these meant dark nights to come,” replied Meera.

Yes, thought Bran, and this coming night will be the darkest of all. He gazed out across the wolfswood and its copse of coloured trees. “That one looks like a heart tree.” He pointed. “Is there a heart tree at Ironrath?”

“Yes,” Talia said mildly. “Not a great big one, mind. Not like Winterfell’s.”

Bran nodded. “Well, of course. Winterfell’s godswood is the biggest godswood in all of Westeros.”

Meera shook her head. “It might be one of the oldest, but Harrenhal has a bigger godswood.”

“Why does Harrenhal have a godswood at all?” he blurted, strangely embarrassed. “Maester Luwin told me it was built by Harren the Black. The ironborn worship the Drowned God.” Bran remembered how Robb had mocked Theon with that, saying he worshipped ‘a damp squid demon’. But the old gods let Robb die, and the damp squid demon has kept Theon alive, however broken he might be.

“Lots of southern houses have their own godswoods,” Talia said. “Even if they don’t keep the old gods. My mother’s from the Reach, but they had a godswood.”
She was probably right, Bran thought; his mother had mentioned there being a godswood at Riverrun, and Princess Myrcella had talked about a godswood in King’s Landing, though she’d described it as more of a garden.

Then Meera spoke up. “That’s not why Harrenhal has a godswood, though. The First Men predated the Andals and the ironborn by thousands of years. The First Men and the Children of the Forest. They fought many of their wars in the Riverlands, against each other at first, and then together against the Andals. Some say that during the Andal invasion, the Children had a fortress near Harrenhal, on the Isle of Faces in the middle of the Gods’ Eye lake. That was where they started to gather magic for their spell—”

“How do you gather magic?” Bran asked.

Meera shrugged. “I don’t know, but I think... I think...” She trailed off emptily.

_Blood sacrifices_, he realised. _Like Jojen_. “I understand.”

“Their greenseers were raising the Hammer of the Waters,” she went on, “for they were trying to break the Arm of Dorne to separate Westeros and Essos, and stop the Andals from crossing into their lands. So the greenseers summoned all their power, and shattered the Arm into a thousand pieces. Some of the pieces sank into the sea, while others rose as the islands which men call the Stepstones.”


“That they did. But that was not the only time the Children of the Forest used the hammer of the waters. As the Andals were marching up the Trident, they gathered at Moat Cailin and tried to break the Neck, thereby splitting the North from the rest of Westeros. Only this time they failed, and instead the flat green lands became marshy bogs and crannogs, and all the roads to the North were drowned in mud and swampwater.”

“So there were Children of the Forest in Harrenhal?” Bran asked. “And they let Harren the Black build his castle there? Why didn’t they just... use the hammer of the waters and drown him?”

“Because Harren got to them first. The ironborn sailed out across the lake and fought a bloody battle against the Children, and they were all killed. Then Harren cut down the weirwoods on the island and used them to make timbers for his hall, and imprisoned the godswood inside his stone walls. But the old gods would have their vengeance, and sure enough, they did. Dragons came to Harrenhal, and burned Harren and all his sons alive. Their vengeance was given in fire, but it was the wrath of ice, too. Harrenhal is the crossroads of ice and fire, my father said. When he went there—”

“Meera,” said Bran suddenly, remembering another story, and something he’d seen in the three-eyed crow’s cave. “Was my aunt Lyanna really the knight of the laughing tree?”

But before she could answer Benjicot Branch was striding towards them shouting. “My lord! Lord Brandon! Begging your pardons, but we’re ready to leave... unless you want to wait—”

Bran swallowed down a heel of bread. “No, we’ll go now.” It was best to ride while the weather was still good. He wanted to reach Ironrath _tonight_. “You can finish the story later,” he said to Meera.

Hodor carried Bran back to his horse and helped him to mount. Bran could scarcely wait. Even after a hard week on the road, the prospect of a new day’s riding never failed to excite him.

When the horn blew, Bran did not waste a second. He murmured a command to Whistler and jerked the reins a little, bringing her up first to a canter, then to a trot. Then Meera and Talia disappeared.
behind him, and Hodor on his mule too, and he was away, and the wind was whistling in the way which gave his horse her name. Faster and faster they went, down the stretch of cobbled road, passing into patches of dark forest where the overhanging leaves blotted out the sun entirely and then back out onto the frosty, lonely road over the moors. He chanced a look back; the guardsmen were far behind him, but they were catching up. Go on! he wanted to shout at Whistler. Go on, faster, faster! He ducked beneath a low branch, and the spray from her hooves splashed all over his cloak. Faster!

Then he was no longer on the horse; he was the horse. He could feel his muscles burning, and the sweat on his flanks smelled of horse and hay... and faintly of fear. Why am I running? Why is he making me run?

He does not like this, Bran thought. I should stop—

Whistler reared up so suddenly that it was a wonder Bran managed to stay on his back. His fingers caught the reins hard, the leather biting into his skin. “I’m sorry,” he said, a little breathless and more than a little guilty. “I just wanted to go quickly.” He should not have done that, he knew. Hullen would have been enraged to see him driving the poor beast on like that.

“Bran!” He could hear Larence’s voice getting louder as he cantered down the road. “Bran, hold up!” His friend was smiling a broad, cheery grin. “You almost had me there. I wouldn’t have been expecting it if you didn’t do the same thing every day.”

That only made Bran feel even more guilty. He patted Whistler’s flank, but she shied from his touch. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

Larence kept smiling. “You’re fast when you want to be, you know.”

I used to be fast at running too, and swimming, and climbing. That most of all. He bit his lip. “I thought you were hunting a squirrel,” he said to Larence. “Talia told me—”

Larence reddened. “It wasn’t really... I thought she might like... it wasn’t squirrels I went looking for.”

Bran remained confused. “What was it, then?”

“Flowers.”

“Flowers?”

“I thought Talia might... she might like them. We’re close to Ironrath now, so I thought... maybe... as a sort of welcoming gift. She might think I... nevermind. It was stupid.”

“So you told them that you were looking for squirrels?”

“Did they laugh at me?” He brushed his hair out of his eyes. “It was pretty stupid, wasn’t it? But back when I was a bastard... at Deepwood Motte... some of the girls... they liked that, I think. At least they seemed to.”

They liked the look of you, that’s what they liked. His friend was certainly easy on the eyes, big and broad, with dark brown hair and a sturdy jaw, eyes grey as the timeless sky, always laughing at his own jokes.

“What?”
“I’m not telling you again,” Larence said. “But I’m sure you’ll find out soon enough, if you can pluck up the courage...”

“The courage to do what?”

Larence raised an eyebrow and grinned. “She thinks the same, you know.”

“Talia?”

“What? No, Meera. Is... is she first...?”

“The first what?”

“The first girl you—”

“What? No, I don’t like girls.” He shook his head. “I mean, yes, I do. I do. Only not her. I don’t know. Maybe.” His cheeks were turning red. “It’s the cold,” he said, suddenly aware. “Or the wind. That’s what’s making them red.”

“Bran, we’re under the trees. There isn’t a wind.” Larence snorted. “Dear gods, you’re about as subtle as Hodor.”

“Says the person who just went chasing after flowers.”

“You’re chasing after flowers as well,” came the cross reply. “Flowers from Greywater Watch.”

“Shut up or I’ll punch you.”

Larence went on. “Oh, and what an unexpected beauty she is. Less on the surface than some other flowers, aye, but you could drown yourself in her eyes, and besides, in the dark, all women—”

“I said shut up!” Bran made to hit him, but Larence caught the hand in his strong grip and pushed him away. “It was only a joke.”

“It wasn’t funny.”

“Everyone makes these sorts of jokes, Bran. You can’t hide away from them just because you’re the lord of Winterfell.”

“I’m a cripple,” he spat back. “I don’t even know if I can... if I can...” His voice faltered.

They rode in silence for a short ways.

“Bran,” said Larence, “can you... can you get... when you see... someone... does it ever...” He cleared his throat.

“I’m not impotent. The fall broke my legs, not my...”

“And can you... if you... um... when you want to... um...?”

Neither of them wanted to look the other in the eye. “I... I’ve never really tried.” Though sometimes when he woke up from his wolf dreams, after a particularly exhilarating run or a particularly fierce fight, he felt a little... uneasy... down there. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “When a man and a woman... lie together...”

“When they fuck,” said Larence.
“Yes. When... when they fuck, they need to move their bodies... their legs... you have to... I think... I don’t know...”

“Not always. That isn’t the only way. You... if you lie down, she can...”

“...she can be...”

“...on top...”

“...or she can use...”

“... her mouth,” said Larence. “Can we talk about anything else? How are you finding your...” He glanced at Whistler. “...your riding?”

“It... it’s fine. It’s a lot easier without Lyanna Mormont shouting at me.”

“She certainly scared you back into doing it properly.”

“I wasn’t scared,” Bran insisted. Larence laughed. “Yes, you were, along with the rest of us. If she wanted, that girl could make even the Greatjon Umber piss his breeches. I think in the end he stayed at the Wall because he was more afraid of her than the white walkers.”

“I think all those screaming ravens might have had something to do with it, too” said Bran. Stay, stay, stay, they’d cawed, as he fainted on the floor of the Shieldhall. You will never walk again, but you will fly.

Up on the grey moor it began to rain. Bran pulled up the hood of his cloak, gathering the fur around his ears. Whistler’s hooves made a regular splash of damp mud on his boots. Larence tried to start another conversation, but very quickly his words died away under the roar of the rain. By noon, grey clouds had swallowed the sun, and they returned to the main column, and all there was to do was listen to the steady plodding of hoofbeats, over and over and over.

Hours passed. Bran saw deer and foxes leaping through the woods beside them. More hours passed. A black flock of ravens stalked them through the trees. Still more hours passed. There was a moment when he thought he saw Summer, stalking them through the trees, but it was another wolf. Bran reached out with his mind and touched the wolf lightly, and turned and met his own boy’s eyes, bright and glassy and white.

It was evening by the time they reached Ironrath, in the heart of the wolfswood. Black ironwood trees grew tall and thick around the castle, the branches of the nearest trees reaching out over the stone walls. Other than that, it was so dark that Bran could barely make out the keep. All he noticed were the snowflakes kept falling on his brow, onto Whistler’s flanks and then into the outstretched arms of Hodor, waiting to carry him across the courtyard.

Larence, Talia and Meera waited on a wooden landing, along with an older woman who must be Talia’s mother, Lady Elissa Forrester, and a boy of about Rickon’s age. “Lord Stark,” Talia said rigidly as Bran and Hodor came up the stairs. “In the name of my brother Lord Rodrik, I welcome you to Ironrath.” Servants came forward with platters of bread and salt. “We offer you our hospitality and our oath of fealty.”

Bran tried to look serious, but his smile seeped through. “That’s alright, Talia. And you don’t have to do the whole ‘my lord’ thing, if you don’t like.”
“Is it true that you went a thousand miles beyond the Wall?” asked Talia’s brother.

“A hundred, maybe,” said Bran. “But not a thousand.”

“Did you see my brother?”

“Your brother?”

“Asher, I mean. Oh, I’m Ryon, by the way. The youngest one. I know Rickon. Your brother.”

Bran nodded. He could already see something of his wild little brother in the Forrester boy. I should write another letter to Rickon, he thought. I should do it tonight. “How was he?”

“He was alright. I think.” Ryon caught his sister’s glare. “Sorry, I should say ‘my lord’ and everything, shouldn’t I?”

Bran shrugged. “Only if you want to. We’re all friends here.”

“I wish that was true across all of the North,” Lady Elissa said. “You are not without enemies, Lord Stark, but we should not talk of such things over supper.” She led the way inside the keep, followed by her children, then Larence, Meera, and Bran on Hodor’s back.

Inside, it was warm and homely. The plain stone walls were lined with sombre tapestries and Stark and Forrester hangings. The table was sturdy ironwood with candles burning in the centre. For the first time Bran considered how well-provisioned Ironrath was to defend itself against the Others. They do not like ironwood; they would have a hard time forcing their way through here. Perhaps he ought to discuss with Lady Elissa the prospect of sending ironwood supplies to Castle Black. As a vassal of Winterfell, the Forresters would be honour-bound to obey, but all but forcing them into the trade would not bode well for their friendship. As Lady Elissa had said, it was probably best left until after supper.

Bran had the seat of honour at the far end of the table, beneath a mural of an ironwood tree. Talia and her mother sat to his left, Larence and Meera to his right. It was a little awkward being squeezed between the betrothed pair; Larence kept making eyes at Talia across the table, and leaned across Bran more than once to fill her wine-cup. Meera looked mildly amused by it all.

Between cups of hippocras and hot spiced wine, they supped on beef-and-ale pie with bacon and baby onions, buttered pease, and mounds and mountains of mashed turnips. There was lamb sausage as well, with sage and rosemary, and venison sauced with cloves and mulberries. Bran ate wolfishly; years had quite literally passed since he’d eaten this well. “Your cooks have done well,” he told Lady Elissa. “This is better than anything I had out beyond the Wall, for certain. And all we had at Castle Black was porridge and stew.”

“The last harvest was not easy,” Lady Elissa murmured, a little distantly. “With so many smallfolk lost to war, it was left to the very old and the very young to reap the corn, and what they did reap was brittle and not nearly enough. And a goodly portion of what little we did have went to the Boltons.”

“Do you eat frog’s legs in the Neck?” Ryon blurted to Meera.

“Ryon!” Lady Forrester hissed. “Don’t be so——”

“It’s quite alright,” Meera said. “The ways of the crannogmen are not well known. Which is how we like it, I suppose. And in answer to your question, Ryon, yes, I might have tried frog’s legs once or twice. Rather crunchy, as you might expect. We also eat lizard-lions, crocodile meat, snake steaks
and the occasional invader who gets lost trying to sneak through Moat Cailin.”

Bran wanted to know more. Meera spoke but infrequently of Greywater Watch and her family, but to him they were among the most fascinating things about her. “The Neck is all bogs and marsh underfoot,” she went on, “and poison fog and water snakes make it a hard passage for any unwelcome traveller. The trees are full of monkey-men and hooting birds and jumping lizards with bright green scales.

“For thousands of years the Reeds were kings in the Neck, talking and trading with the children of the Forest,” Meera said, “till the Kings of Winter came down from Winterfell and bonded our blood to his in marriage. In the Neck, our names remind us of the land we walk, the land we are sworn to defend: Fenn, Peat, Boggs, Cray, Quagg, and Reed, and so forth. We are stark defenders of the North, and the keeper of its secrets. Stark defenders. We veil ourselves in secrecy to keep those secrets safe, and men make strange stories out of that. But the reality is that we hunt, fight, fish, and raise our children same as any other folk.”

“We do those things in Hornwood too,” Larence said. “Still... and I mean no disrespect, Meera, but your people have never... seemed... as... Northern as most northmen.” He hesitated. “When King Robb rode south—”

“You may not have seen us, but we certainly played our part,” said Meera. “Not all wars are fought on the battlefield. And we felt our losses keenly. When my father heard the news of Lord Stark’s death, he wept, and after that came long nights of contemplation. Then he sent me and Jojen to Winterfell, to find Bran, and serve him. So you see, Larence. We played our part. The North remembers.”

“The North remembers,” said Lady Elissa. “Look no further than here.” Bran followed the drift of her eyes to a banner on the far wall, showing a white hill and white stars against a backdrop of dark blue sky. The Whitehills and the Boltons came against the ranks of Ironrath and Deepwood Motte, White Harbor and the Last Hearth, and faltered, and fell. The North remembered.

Ryon Forrester turned to his sister. “When are you getting married?” he asked.

Talia nearly choked on her wine. “Ryon,” admonished Lady Forrester, “you shouldn’t ask such things.”

Larence found his wits first. “When-whenever my lady wishes it.” That was the only time Bran had ever heard him stammer. “And if my lady never wishes it, then she will never have to marry me.”

Talia was left entirely stranded, unable to say anything that would not embarrass her. Bran chose that moment to step in. “This is a very good pie,” he said to Lady Elissa, “Are those gooseberries?”

“And a few blackberries,” said Lady Forrester. “Whatever we can find in the woods.”

“Bran was telling me that he’d like to see the heart tree,” Talia blurted out. “In the godswood. When we’re finished, I’ll take him out there.”

“Why don’t you take Larence out there instead?” Ryon suggested through a mouthful of pie. “You could get married right now.”

“Ryon!” Lady Elissa shouted impatiently.

“But when are you getting married?” Bran asked. It was a friendly question, but he asked it in his lord’s voice, compelling them to answer.
Talia and Larence only stared at one another. “Er...” said Larence, slowly turning red. “Well...”

“I thought we might wait until we reached Hornwood,” Talia said. “Until Asher and Rodrik get back from the war.”

It was almost unbearable, not being able to tell them. *But how would I tell a mother that her son is dead, and that I know so because I saw it in a dream.* In the pit of his heart, Bran felt a great swelling of shame. “Yes,” he managed to say, “yes, you should wait until...”

“Until they get back,” said Talia.

“Until they get back,” said Bran.

It was not easy to sit at the Forresters’ table after that. The conversation turned considerably more subdued. Lady Forrester asked after Meera’s father, and spoke of her daughter Mira, who had recounted her meeting with Sansa at some castle in the south. “That was before her wedding, of course,” Lady Elissa concluded.

“Wedding?” asked Bran.

“Why, yes, indeed.” She blinked twice in rapid succession. “The Lannisters wed your sister to Tyrion the Imp – we thought she was the heir to the North, you must understand – and then the Tyrells sought to marry her to their eldest son Willas. But she escaped from both weddings.”

“King Joffrey died during a wedding, I heard.”

“His own. Lady Margaery was left quite affected by it all, Mira writes. That was not the first time her husband has died on her. There was Renly too, and after Joffrey she married the younger brother, King Tommen, but then Tywin Lannister and the Imp tore the south apart in some bloody quest to reclaim Harrenhal and King Stannis descended upon the Riverlands, and that marriage ended too, and here we are. Rodrik swore oaths to Stannis Baratheon at Winterfell and again at Riverrun, but now Stannis is dead, and no one seems to know who they serve anymore. Other than the Stark in Winterfell, of course.”

Bran was eventually saved by the timely arrival of Ironrath’s Maester Ortengryn, who told him that Raymund Glover was in Ironrath’s great hall, demanding audience.

Though by the time Bran had heard Raymund’s complaints, he was beginning to wish that he had stayed at supper. “Why were we not told of this?” Raymund demanded, in the name of his sister-by-law, Lady Sybelle Glover. “Your lordship should have sent word to Deepwood Motte that the ironmen had escaped. Who knows how much worse things might have been if they had raided more villages? Gods above, if you had sent a raven, we might have been able to capture them for you.”

“Offer Lady Sybelle my apologies.” Bran was starting to feel very tired. “Should she seek recompense, she need only send a list of the damages to Winterfell. Rest assured, I will not stand by idly.”

Raymund gave him a look, as if to say, *but that is what you have just done,* then nodded his head stiffly, turned, and strode out of the hall. Bran turned to Meera, standing beside his chair. “Perhaps he was right.”

“Perhaps. But what’s done is done.”

Bran turned his head to look at the ceiling. “I doubt Lady Elissa will mind us not returning to the feast. It is growing late, after all, and we have a hard ride ahead of us come the morrow.”
hundred leagues from Ironrath to Winterfell, he thought, three hundred miles as the crow flies. And then... home.
Chapter Summary

Say one thing for House Lannister, say they were almost as generous towards their friends as they were merciless towards their enemies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CERSEI

“That gown certainly looks flattering on you, Your Grace.” The Tyrell girl twisted her mouth into a vile smirk. “A bit too much armour for my taste, though. A bit too bright. You wouldn’t want to outshine your own natural beauty, would you?”

“Not at all,” said Cersei. “Alas, youth is not everlasting, as you’ll soon learn to your sorrow.” She pretended to shiver. “Aren’t you cold, Lady Margaery? I’d have thought you’d prefer something a bit less... open...” The Tyrell girl’s dress left her bared to the shoulders.

“The Reach and the West have very different fashions.”

“Even so... well, winter is here, and I wouldn’t want you catching a cold. Tommen, would you be kind and fetch Lady Margaery a cloak?”

“Oh, there’s no need, Your Grace. Though it speaks both to your... kindness and your son’s gallantry that you would be willing to fetch me one.”

Cersei shrugged. “Very well. Anyhow, I’d wager you know more about cloaks than I do, my lady.”

“As I’d wager you know more than I do about wine.” The Tyrell girl picked up the flagon of Arbor gold and poured it slowly. Cersei watched her, and saw the goosepimples rising on her arms. That gave her a certain pleasure. You’ll be wishing you took my offer before too long.

“I trust you had an enjoyable day,” said Cersei. “Myself, I was busied with certain queenly matters, but I imagine you must have a lot more time on your hands now than you ever did in King’s Landing, no?”

“Of a sort,” said Margaery. “But there are still preparations to make, and no shortage of things to do. I will be princess of Dorne someday.”

“Oh, indeed. You will be princess consort, but not yet. For now, you are free to go wherever the
wind takes you. Be it Storm’s End, or King’s Landing, or Sunspear—”

“We went sailing today,” Tommen said loudly. “Well, I did.”

“And Lady Eleyna?” asked Margaery.

“Oh... yes.” He was turning the colour of his tunic.

Margaery smiled. “A shame that the young lady could not join us for supper. Perhaps some other night? You talk so much about her, yet I’ve hardly heard a word from her mouth.”

“And what a shame that is,” said Cersei. “Are there any fair young ladies in the West that have caught your eye, Ser Loras?” She was well aware of the Knight of the Flowers’s perversions, and also well aware that the uncomfortable pause would prompt Margaery to change the subject.

She was right. “If we are speaking of fair young ladies, then I think it would be most rude not to mention Princess Myrcella,” said Margaery. “I wish I had known about her nuptials with Lord Arryn earlier. We might have sent them a wedding gift.”

“Much as I wish I had heard about yours. A gift, yes. We shall have to find you a gift.” A dagger, mayhaps, and a bold man to wield it. “How did the ceremony compare to those you had in Baelor’s Sept?”

“Highgarden has the grandest sept in all of Westeros,” the girl said blithely. “And I had the most wonderful groom, too.” She smiled at the stupid Dornish boy on her right, and her nervously grinned back.

Cersei nearly snorted with laughter. Prince Quentyn Martell was about as wonderful as a brick, and just as fair to look upon – even without his missing eye. “Oh, to be sure,” she said. “But then again, any woman would say that of their husband, no?”

“Including yourself, I’m sure.” Margaery’s smile had returned. “In your eyes, I am certain there could be no finer man in the world than King Robert Baratheon, the First of His Name.”

The queen took a sip of wine. “Blessed be his memory. Oh, Robert and I had our disagreements, to be sure, but—”

“—in the end he gave you children who are brave and strong and... so kind towards friends and foes alike.”

“Robert was a good man at heart,” lied Cersei. “And kinder than the histories will give him credit for. It is such a shame that so many of us are judged for one thing alone, and often things like wars or battles. Even for women. A woman’s war is in the birthing bed, as I’m sure you may find out, Lady Margaery.” And with luck you will die in it, and your twisted child too. Cersei had a vintage waiting in the cellar for the day when the bitch died. I will dress in yellow from head to toe and dance up and down the halls of the Rock singing ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ at the top of my voice. Doubtless some will tell me that it is distasteful, but who are they to judge their queen?

She must have let her inner happiness show, for Margaery was looking most bemused, and even slightly worried. “I fear I did not understand Your Grace’s jest.”

“Oh, you will,” Cersei promised, radiantly. “Ah, now that we are all in a good humour, shall we bring out some minstrels?” She would gladly have hired half a dozen of them, enough for them to drown each other out and prevent Margaery Tyrell from ever being heard again. But as it happened, the girl and her simple husband had brought a bard of their own. He was called the Blue Bard, for
the dye in his hair and beard. Unimaginative, that. Cersei listened boredly to ‘A Rose of Gold’ and ‘Alysanne’ and a couple of other sickly love songs before the Blue Bard disappeared and she could bring out her own singers. If Margaery was hoping to vex me with merry melodies and lyrics about youthful beauty, she has failed dismally.

Cersei then chose her own songs. One was about the wisdom of the warrior queen Nymeria – ostensibly in honour of Prince Quentyn’s Dornish ancestors – and another about the follies of untamed youth. One song was a king’s tearful recitation of how he’d been forced to behead his traitorous wife for adultery, another a tale of an old maid who had gone all her years unloved, and yet could not see that the poison in her own heart made it so. Let us hope that our little rose can find some meaning in that.

But by the end the girl was wiping away fake tears and simpering at the musician, praising his skill, seducing him with her eyes. Cersei had to all but force them apart. All the while Prince Quentyn and Ser Loras sat dormant. Knights and princes do not stand idly by and let women fight for them, thought the queen. Not if they value their own manhood. It was almost pathetic to watch, but more than that, it was galling.

Cersei decided to turn the conversation in their direction. “So, Ser Loras,” she said over poached pears spiced with ginger. “I am glad to see that you recovered so well from the injuries you took on Dragonstone. I hope they were not too grievous.” The Tyrells had spread rumours that Loras had been burned by boiling oil, but now he looked as pretty and girlish as ever. “If I may be so bold to ask, when will you be resuming your Kingsguard duties?”

Pale red spots appeared on Loras’s cheeks, then faded. “We shall have to discuss that with your council,” he said, to Tommen rather than to Cersei.

“Oh, of course,” said the queen. “I don’t suppose you’ll want to discuss anything else? I am only too willing to hear any and all concerns you might have. Though not for a while, I should think. You have all your new brothers to meet, for a start. Have you seen Ser Robert Strong? He is eight feet tall, and he can cut a man in half with one swing of his greatsword, they say.”

“We shouldn’t talk about fighting over supper, mother.” A scowl had come onto Tommen’s face. “I doubt anyone wants to.”

“Would that we could ignore it,” said Margaery. “Alas, I think... pretending that there was no war would be a disservice to those who died, don’t you? If we do not remember our fallen, then how will we be able to stop another terrible war from starting?”

And may the people of Highgarden weep bitter tears for you when you are gone, Lady Margaery, thought Cersei. “You speak truly, of course,” she said. “No one wants an end to the war more than I do.”

The Tyrells finally left about an hour before midnight, after long minutes of sickly-sweet farewells at the door. Cersei was left with her son. “You seem to have enjoyed yourself tonight,” she said, half-sarcastically.

Tommen smiled innocently back at her. “Oh. Yes. We’ll have to do it again sometime, won’t we?”

“I wish I could. Alas, I fear I shall be rather busy in the coming weeks—”

“Oh. That’s fine. I suppose I could just—”

“—as will you. We have a wedding to plan, you know.”
Cersei watched his fingers twitch around the stem of his cup, contemplating anger. In the weeks since their victory over Stannis, she and Tommen had not spoken of their disagreement over the Tarly marriage, as though nothing ever happened. The only good that had come about was that the Westerling girl had ceased in her efforts to snare her son. Better for all of us, especially her. Cersei was inclined to let the girl live... for now.

“Mother,” said Tommen quietly. “I don’t think I want to marry the Tarly girl.”

“No more than I wanted to marry your father,” Cersei answered effortlessly. “No more than he wanted to marry me. His intended bride was a corpse in the ground by the time I met him.” As was any chance we had at love. “Even so, we both did our duty.”

“Grandfather married for love, though,” said Tommen. “Wouldn’t... wouldn’t you say that your father... loved... more than he ever... than King Robert...”

You are as shortsighted and foolish as your brother. Lord Tywin had supped with her in King’s Landing, the night before he left for his war and his death. He had said a lot of things, then, but you are as shortsighted and foolish as your brother was the only one she remembered. And what are you, my lord? Cersei wondered. I am shortsighted and foolish, but you are wise, proud and full of graveworms. She rather hoped that Tyrion would go a similar way. The valonqar will wrap his hands...

“Mother?”

“What?”

“Did... did Lord Tywin... and your mother...?”

Cersei took Tommen’s hands in her own. His hands were a lot like Jaime’s, but the eyes were hers. “My mother loved us very much,” she said, straightforwardly. “And my father... in his own way.” Hollow words, but she pressed on. “But I lost their love. I lost my mother when I was only a little girl. I promise you, my son, you will not lose mine.”

...and gold their shrouds.

Tommen fidgeted a little in his seat. “Mother... I just... I want to be happy. I want you to be happy. But I don’t think I need a crown for that.” His hands twitched, pattering nervously on the table. “I want to make peace with the Targaryens. And with Stannis.”

She had not been expecting him to be so cool about it. “Tommen—,” she began.

“Don’t. I know what you’re going to say.” He sounded more tired than ever. “That I’ll look like a coward, that I’m going against everything House Lannister stands for. That I’ll be... disrespecting the lives of the fallen, Grandfather and Joffrey and everyone else. But I just want...” and his voice cracked into a boyish note, “I just want to go home, Mother.”

“You are home,” Cersei said flatly. This is the Tyrell girl’s doing, she knew. Not what he wants. Margaery Tyrell is speaking with my son’s voice. “What will you do?” she asked.

“I... I had a letter, last week. From... from Deep Den. It says they want to talk. I told them yes. She’ll be here in a few days.”

Cersei was horrified. “Daenerys?”

“No! Not... not yet, at least. The princess. Princess Shireen Baratheon.”
Seven hells, Tommen, what have you done? “Why was I not told of this?”

“We... I thought you would—”

“We? So you told Margaery Tyrell, but not your own mother?” The queen kept her voice even, but icy cold.

“I... yes... I thought I should, but she said it was best if you didn’t... I’m sorry. I wish I had...”

Cersei picked up her cup and took a long, considered sip. “Why? I would have told you the same thing I am telling you now. This is unwise, Tommen. Most unwise. I have warned you time and time again... but no matter. I see that I will not be able to divert you from your course.” Yet. “Do as you will. What else is a mother for, if not to make sacrifices?”

Tommen did not answer that. “I... if you don’t think it’s a good idea, we could share it with the small council, and see what they think.”

“No.” The small council was fit only for squabbling nowadays. Ser Kevan was largely absent, but his cronies Harys Swyft and Lyle Crakehall were impressively competent when it came to ensuring the queen never got anything done. “A king’s word is what it is. A king’s word should be final.”

“But you’re the Queen Regent—”

“All men must bow to the authority of their king. You do not answer to me, only to the Seven.” Cersei drained the last of the wine from the goblet and turned to face the window. “Leave me, Tommen. I need some time alone.” When she heard his retreating footsteps and the closing of the door, the queen stepped outside onto the balcony and cast her gaze into the now-dark sky. From up here she could see all of Lannisport spread beneath her, a spray of crimson roofs that had turned almost black in the faint moonlight, and beyond its walls the tents of the Lannister army. Their faint red cookfires were insignificant specks in the gloom, and even the towering sentinel trees that bordered the goldroad were reduced to looking like twigs. This is the seat of kings, Cersei thought, not for the first time. The Targaryens can keep their Red Keep. They do not have this, and never will. Daenerys Targaryen could send three dragons, a thousand ships and her entire Dothraki army against Casterly Rock and she would never break through its walls. The Rock could endure a siege for twenty years. No one had ever taken it. Say what you will for the Casterlys, they built their stronghold to last a thousand centuries. Their house crumbled and faded into dust, but they left this as their legacy. And even when all their names have faded from the ancient histories, no man will ever forget them. See, Father? That is what a legacy is.

And what will be yours? It sounded like Lord Tywin.

I was the first Lannister queen in three centuries... and now my own son and the Tyrell girl mean to tear all that down with their peace...

“No,” Cersei said to herself. “No, I will not have it. I will not.” She turned away from the window, strode across the room and threw the door open. Ser Robert Strong, standing in the hallway, snapped his head about to find her. “I am going on a walk,” she told him. “Stay close to me.”

Ser Kevan Lannister had his chambers far away across the castle, where he might find quieter and more suitable rest for a man in his condition. Truth be told, Cersei had been expecting to find him asleep, but when she knocked on the door and was ushered inside she found her uncle sitting behind his desk, writing. He glanced up to give her a very long, deliberate look, then when back to his cycle of signing, sealing, and stamping. One letter was finished, and then he glanced up, expectant, and when she said nothing he glanced back down. Sign, seal, stamp. Sign, seal, st—
“What are you doing?” Cersei asked him at last.

“The king’s business.” Ser Kevan had never treated her as respectfully as he ought, but now he was terser than ever. “Why are you here?”

Cersei ignored that barbed question. “You should not trouble yourself with such strenuous work in your present condition, uncle.”

“I know.” Ser Kevan seemingly paid her no attention. “But no one seems to be troubling themselves with them. I am only doing what I must to serve my king.”

“As am I.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are.” Again the barbed words.

_I will not rise to that._ “Perhaps I was wrong to bother you, uncle. I am sorry to have—”

“I have had quite enough of your horseshit, Cersei.” Ser Kevan set down his pen loudly, and began to clean it. “Say what you have to say, or I will have you thrown from the room.”

Cersei felt her cheeks colouring. “You are very tired,” she conceded, “so I will forgive you that insult.”

“I said I have had _enough_ of your horseshit. And I mean it. Speak.” Her uncle was blunt and forward, and she knew that there was no way to retreat.

“The Tyrells are beginning to vex me.”

“Colour me unsurprised.” Ser Kevan leaned over to the decanter of wine and poured them both a cup. “I suspect you would quite like to kill them, especially given the influence they seem to have over Tommen.”

“You know?” Cersei frowned. “What am I saying? Of course you know.”

“Tommen came to me when he was first having his qualms.” Ser Kevan frowned. “Which struck me as strange, I will admit. What have you done to lose his trust?”

“The Westerling betrothal.” Cersei prepared herself for his snide rebuke. “Tommen refuses to let it end.”

She was not disappointed. “I warned you that this was a bad idea. Yet you pressed onward with it.”

“I did not think that Myrcella would—”

“You did not think _at all_. Your obstinacy will be the death of you.”

Cersei wanted to smack him. “I did not come here to be mocked like some little girl, uncle. Will you help me or not?”

“You created this mess, Cersei. It is your duty to resolve it.” He let out a long breath. “And I am powerless to resolve it, besides. With my duties as Regent now at an end, I have half a mind to head to Castamere. Dorna had the idea, as I recall, and Tommen will surely agree to it—”

_Damn the whole lot of them._ “You cannot go to Castamere,” the queen said.

“Oh?” Ser Kevan leaned forward on his desk. “And why is that? I have no duties, and as you said, I
am tired, and I need to recover.”

“Do not play this game with me.”

“Very well,” her uncle said. “I will put it simply: make me Lord Regent and I will help you against the Tyrells. Or else I will return to Castamere and that will be the last you will hear of me—”

“You cannot—”

“I can. I have. Unless you are foolish enough to try and have me killed again.” He raised his eyebrow.

Cersei frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“The arrow in my leg was most inconvenient. Enough to leave me lucid for a couple of weeks, and incapable. Who would benefit from that, I wonder? Tell me, Cersei, was it your intent to kill or merely incapacitate?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the queen said coolly.

Her uncle frowned. “Incapacitate, I suppose. Else you would have sent Ser Gregor to make an end of me.”

She gave him a blank look. “Ser Gregor?”

“Yes. Though you call him Ser Robert now, Dorna tells me. I would warn you not to dabble in sorcery, niece, but it seems to me that you have ignored that advice more than once over. Tell me, Cersei, what has Qyburn been doing under—”

“Qyburn serves the king, and the realm.”

“Oh? Does he? I wonder how his king would feel to hear about the tasks our mutual friend carries out in the middle of the night. I wonder how his king would feel to find out that one of his Kingsguard is a dead man.” As he held her gaze, there was a hint of Lord Tywin in those eyes. “You can have your man come in and kill me right now, if that is your desire, and I would have no way of stopping him... but everyone would know what you did, and you would find yourself in an even deeper mire than you are already. But you won’t. Because you need my help. Say it. You need my help.” Ser Kevan’s expression was one of cold amusement. “Name me Regent and you shall have it.”

I am the queen. “No. As you said, this is my mess to solve, dear uncle.”

“Then I wish you good fortune in the wars to come,” said Ser Kevan. “I will have them prepare an escort for Castamere.” He wore a rueful smile. “It is not too late for you to change your mind.”

You’d like that, wouldn’t you? In what way can you rule better than me? You are old and worn-out, a decrepit husk, a shell of my lord father. What do you have on me? Patience? All my life I have been waiting in line. But now Robert is dead, Father is dead, and you are not going to take power away from me. Cersei looked back into his eyes, daring him to break her gaze. “It is not too late for me, no. But it is much too late for you. Go, ser, if you will. Go back to Castamere, to the shattered ruin my father left for you. Go and hide. I will not stop you. Though I am left wondering how Tommen will feel to hear that you have abandoned him.”

“Oh, I could say much the same for you, Cersei. It would seem that you have failed as a mother as much as you have as a ruler.”
Without hesitation, Cersei threw the contents of her wine cup full in his face.

For the longest time Ser Kevan Lannister did not move, and said nothing. Then he picked a clean handkerchief from his pocket and used it to rub the spots of purple wine from his face. There was a steady, monotonous drip of wine from his chin. “It is a wonder that you did not get along better with Robert,” he said. “You have the same temperament, the same short-sightedness, and the same blindness. Goodnight, Your Grace. Sleep well.”

He said the words with as much solemnity as Maggy the Frog, and likewise Cersei paid no heed to them. The witch is dead. And soon, they will say the same of Ser Kevan Lannister. She rose to her feet, slowly pushed back the chair, and swept from the room, passing her bewildered Aunt Dorna on the stairs.

The stars were coming out, and the night was getting blustery. The queen’s mood was dark to match them. But I do not need Ser Kevan, she thought, not Tommen, either. She set her teeth. I am a lioness of Casterly Rock, Lord Tywin’s daughter. More than any of them.

Outside Cersei’s chambers, her insipid cousin Joy Hill waited attentively in the flickering torchlight. “Lord Tarly is above,” the bastard girl told her.

The queen’s mouth curled. “I did not expect a visit so late.”

“Should I bring refreshments, Your Grace?”

“No. Lord Randyll will not be staying long.” Cersei climbed the stairs with cold purpose in her eyes. She was loath to rely on Tarly’s loyalty... but now that Kevan had abandoned her, it might be all she had.

The solar was but sparsely lit, and a gusty black wind was coming in from the balcony. The lord of Horn Hill was not an especially big man, but his shadow seemed to fill the whole room. “Your Grace,” he said, with a mildly respectful nod. “I hope I find you well.”

“Less so than I might have liked.” There was a sour taste in her mouth from Ser Kevan’s wine. “I hope you have some good news for me.”

“You might say that, Your Grace.” Lord Randyll was looking vaguely triumphant. “Stannis Baratheon is dead.”

Cersei’s heart skipped a beat. “Dead?” Well, then. This night may not have been a complete loss after all. “You are certain?”

“There was a battle last night beneath the Crag, Jonos Bracken reports. It was only a minor skirmish, but one of our arrows scored a lucky hit, and when the battle dispersed they found the pretender’s corpse half-buried by a snowdrift. His army fled into the mountains and we could not follow them, but—”

“—when they realise that their king is dead they will surely surrender. Where is Stannis’s head? I wish to spike it on the walls of Lannisport. Then all of the West will know how House Lannister deals with its foes.” She could feel a grin breaking out on her face. “Why... Tommen told me only tonight that the Princess Shireen is on her way to Lannisport to make some sort of treaty. It may be that the Tyrells have...” She broke off suddenly. Yes. Oh, yes. A hideous plan was forming in her mind. I will destroy the Baratheons and the Tyrells in one fell stroke. “I was opposed to my son’s plan, but now this idea is starting to seem very attractive. Lord Tarly, when Tommen rides out to speak with this Baratheon girl, I want you and your men to ride with him. More than that, I want the
Tyrells to ride with him. Why, such a meeting will be so confused that anything could happen…”

“I understand, Your Grace.” Tarly’s scowl turned to a smile. “And it would be completely justified, yes... and then it would be on to Highgarden, no?”

“It would. Willas Tyrell has given us a great gift by sending his sister here. Tell me, Lord Tarly, what would Olenna Tyrell do for the sake of her two youngest grandchildren?”

“Almost anything, I should think.”

Cersei could not help but smile. *Stannis is dead! And it could not have come at a better time. It was almost too easy.* “Well,” she said, “if that is all for tonight, my lord…”

She had half a mind to make Tarly the Hand of the King, Cersei thought after he had gone. The man was certainly able, and his support would be essential when the time came to march on King’s Landing. *Yes, that should do nicely.* All in all, her day had ended much better than it had started out. And every dawn and every dusk brought Jaime that much closer to her. *He cannot be that far away now,* she thought. Myrcella’s letter had been a blessing, not just in the news of her brother, but also in the news that Littlefinger would soon deliver the Vale. *We will have the Vale and the Riverlands, the West and the Reach, all united against the Targaryens. Robert took the crown with less men than that. And I am ten times what Robert was.*

That night the queen dreamed an old dream, of three girls in rough woollen cloaks, following an old road through an old wood. A hard black rain beat down from above, and the fallen drops thundered against the hard black earth with a sound like war drums. The moon was an eye in the darkness above, watching all of them. Three girls approached the tent. One ran screaming from the woods. Two girls entered.

And there she was, Maggy the Frog, seated on her throne of black twisted wood and musty cushions, two yellow eyes glowing through the haze of acrid smoke. Most times in her dreams the crone waited for her to approach, but this time she did not bother. “Three children you shall have,” she said, her yellow eyes glittering in the baggy folds of her face. “Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds. And when your tears have drowned you, the *valonqar* shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you.”

A sharp sound hissed from Cersei’s throat, and turned to dust. “*V-valonqar*?”

“Brother,” said the crone. “Little brother.” The tent suddenly turned very dark, and through that misty blackness a figure came drifting towards her, a short figure, with green fire burning in one eye and the other a chunk of cold black ice. “But gleaming is the brother, white and giant tall. He shall slay the *valonqar*, and bring about his fall. Yes, gleaming is the brother, a metal giant’s gleam. He shall slay the *valonqar*, making you a queen.”

Through the hazy mist, she glimpsed bright blue eyes, peering from a shadowed face. Then they faded, and Cersei was alone with the crone again. “Your death is coming, child,” she could hear Maggy the Frog whispering. “But before that you will weep for your losses, I promise you.” A wind cut through the old tent, and blew out all the witch-woman’s candles, and Cersei was alone in the darkness, choking beneath the weight of her furs and blankets.

Cersei threw them off and sat there sweating, blinking rapidly into the darkness. The world was dark and still. All she could hear was her breezy, rasping breath, timed with the rise and fall of her chest. Her feet came down unsteadily on the stone. For the briefest moment, she was afraid. *But this is Casterly Rock. This is my home. I am safe.* The stone hardened beneath her toes, and the queen found her footing again. She threw a silk robe around her shoulders, knotted the sash at her waist,
and wandered towards the door.

Ser Robert Strong stood silhouetted in a rectangle of orange light. If his eyes could feign confusion, they did so now. “Find Qyburn,” said Cersei, finding her voice again. “Go on.”

The knight did not move himself, but one of her other guards heard and set off at a fast walk. The queen retreated back into her solar and woke Joy Hill in the adjoining cell. “Candles,” she ordered. “I want candles, and a fire, and hot tea.” Then she retreated to her chair, looking out of the window over Lannisport far below. When Qyburn appeared, Joy was busy throwing the last scraps of green wood on the coals. “Will you need anything else, Your Grace?” the girl asked.

“Get out.” Cersei ordered her through the door.

Qyburn stepped inside smoothly, watching her go. “Will you be wanting her for your experiments?” the queen asked sourly.

“On the contrary, Your Grace... I think a little kindness is due to the girl.”

“Kindness will kill you as quick as poison.” A lesson some of us never learn. “And my uncle Gerion’s bastard is much a spy as any of them.”

Qyburn sat down on the stool opposite and filled her cup with the hot tea. The queen did not let him see that her hands were still shaking. And when your tears have drowned you...

“I need my brother,” she said. “I need Jaime.”

But Qyburn only looked confused. “Your Grace... he... your brother is... he is still on his way from Harrenhal. Don’t you remember?”

She did. “Well.” Suddenly Cersei did not really understand why she had called Qyburn here at all. “You may go, then.” But as the maester moved to leave, Cersei called him back. “One moment.” A pause. Should I ask him? What will be the cost? The crone had said that some questions were better not asked, as the queen had learned to her sorrow. Yet by then the words were already forming on her lips. “Can... can our morrows be foretold, Qyburn?”

“Your Grace?”

“The future.” She laid the teacup down on the side table. “There are... I have heard stories of priests and priestesses who can see what fate lies ahead of us. A... a prophecy, if you will.”

Qyburn licked his lips delicately. “There are... ways, Your Grace. I do not claim to understand them, nor can I vouch for the truth of them... yet... there are, hmm, delusions too. And those who make a trade of it. This... encounter... you had—”

“I was a girl. She was a woods witch. She had some queer Eastern name, but all the smallfolk called her Maggy.”

“Maegi,” Qyburn pronounced. “A title, not a name. In one of the Eastern tongues it means ‘wise woman’. A healer, a counsellor, and a servant, much like a maester here in Westeros. And, yes, some claim to have some knowledge of soothsaying.”
A brief shiver went through her at the thought of the yellow eyes. “If she was a real maegi, she would have been with her tribe,” Cersei assured herself. “She was outcast, or disgraced, or unskilled in her craft.” But Qyburn was cast out by the maesters, yet his skills far exceed Pycelle’s. “Yes. That was it.”

“It seems likely, Your Grace.”

“She was wrong. I am certain of it. I had a friend, Melara. She said that she would meet her death that night, that worms would have her maidenhood. But Melara drowned down a well, a few moons later. There... there are no worms down wells, are there?”

“Your Grace is correct.” There was a long pause. “Is that all?”

“Yes,” murmured Cersei. “You may go. I am sorry to have bothered you.”

Qyburn ducked his head. “I serve at Your Grace’s pleasure.” But as he was heading away, he hesitated, and moved back to her. “I hope I am not overstepping myself, but there is one thing, Your Grace. It is a little too early to tell, perhaps... but the long and short of it is... I have good news.”

“Good news?” Anything was welcome at a time like this.

The maester licked his lips. “You asked for news when the next stage of my... project was complete. The investigation.”

The investigation. It was a moment before Cersei remembered. Oh, the investigation. “Indeed,” she said, slowly. “That is good news, indeed. You rarely fail to disappoint, Qyburn.”

“I am happy to serve Your Grace.”

“And I will see you well rewarded for it.” Say one thing for House Lannister, say they were almost as generous towards their friends as they were merciless towards their enemies.

Merciless towards their enemies...

As her foes would shortly learn.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter once again reminded me why I love Cersei Lannister. She's so brilliantly, horrendously blind, and I am almost cackling as I upload as I know just how many of her decisions are going to come back and bite her in the foot.

One of my favourite moments in the chapter is when Cersei has her internal monologue about how patient she has been, then almost immediately throws wine in Kevan's face. The little ironies and hypocrisies make for an enjoyable read, I hope.

I cut out bits and pieces of a Tommen chapter that would precede this chapter, and these pieces will probably appear as deleted scenes in the future. They mostly cover his reunion with Margaery, but I think they're a little pointless and pretty much exactly what you'd expect, so I cut them and adapted them to his next POV chapter.
Chapter Summary

The boar’s great tusks, they boded ill, for good King Robert’s health,
And the beast was every bit as fast as Robert was himself.
But our brave king cried, “Do your worst, I’ll have your ugly head.”
“You’re nowhere near as murderous as the lion in my bed!”
King Robert lost his battle, and he failed his final test,
The lion ripped his balls off and the boar did all the rest.

- popular folk song in Westeros, chronicling the death of King Robert I Baratheon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MYRCELLA

The Lord of Harrenhal was looking only too pleased with himself as Myrcella entered his solar.
“Well,” Lord Petyr announced to the room. “Now that we are all here, we can begin. Would you
care for some of this Tyroshi wine, Lady Arryn? It arrived through Saltpans only a few days ago. It’s
not particularly strong, but it is flavourful.”

“I will have a glass,” Myrcella said. “You sound like you know what you are talking about, Lord
Baelish.”

“If I weren’t the lord of Harrenhal, I daresay I’d do rather well as a wineseller,” Petyr replied. “I have
been told that I have a merchant’s smile – though I do not think it was meant as a compliment – and I
know how to haggle.”

That could not be denied. Baelish had milked her for everything she had; once Robert was dead and
the north had rallied against King Aegon, he wanted Tommen to give him new castles in the Vale
and the Riverlands, a seat on the king’s small council, and a wife of highborn stock. It was a wonder
that he hadn’t asked for the Iron Throne, Myrcella thought.

Lord Petyr passed her a cup of pale golden wine. “Shall we sit?”

Her seat was beside Robert, of course. Lord Petyr had positioned himself at the head of the table,
with the lord of the Eyrie on his right and Sansa Stark on his left. Rickon sat beside his sister. Lord
Edmure and the Blackfish made up the far end of the table. “It is so rare that we have the opportunity
to sit with family nowadays,” Lord Petyr said, raising his glass. “Often I am required to sup with the
lords and ladies of the Vale to curry their favour. A tedious task, and one I do not envy you in the
future, Lord Robert.” He chuckled to himself. “It makes a nice change to spend my evenings at
leisure.”
“Indeed,” said Lord Edmure. “Every day my table seems to gather more and more Freys. Stannis Baratheon killed a good part of them at the Twins and the Tumblestone, but a Frey widow is the regent of Darry, and another is the regent of Goodbrook... the Erenfords and the Rygers and the Mootons have all married Lord Walder’s daughters and granddaughters...”

“Oh, but one Frey is much like another,” Lord Petyr replied. “The Vale is a very different beast. The Lords Declarant are so varied in their wants that it is almost impossible to keep up with them. But I manage my task, with a little luck.”

“Things will be easier when we get back to Riverrun,” said Edmure. “They’re only still here because of the wedding. Half of them won’t bother to make the journey. Thank the Seven. The fewer Freys in my castle, the better.”

“Why don’t you just kill them all?” Rickon asked crossly. “They killed Mother, and Robb, and—”

“That they did,” said the Blackfish. “But the Freys who remain are women and children, and killing them would be murder. Rest assured, they have learned their lesson, Rickon. The North Remembers.”

What hypocrites they are, Myrcella thought. From what Tywin Frey had told her, while the virtuous Northmen had spared most of the women and children from death, it was only after a good deal of beating, torture and even rape. Ty still bore the deep, bruising scars from when they’d laid into him with their clubs.

“I agree with Rickon,” Robert said suddenly. “We should just throw them all out of the Moon Door. That’s only just.”

“Oh, justice is a virtue, to be sure.” Lord Petyr now seemed eager to bring this conversation to an end. “And the Seven Kingdoms will be well served in the future by men as just as yourself. But if I had wanted to talk about politics, I would have invited the Knight of Ninestars or Lady Waynwood to supper. Might we talk about something less... mundane?”

“My new falcon,” Robert broke out excitedly. “She’s called Blavtylon. Lady Myrcella got her for me.” He gave her a strange, forced smile.

That had been the only time where Robert had pretended to like her... and even then her actions had come at Littlefinger’s smug suggestion. “It will endear you to Lord Robert, I have no doubts,” he’d said. “He has a way with birds.”

And the wits of one, Myrcella thought.

“Do you ever wish that you could fly?” Robert was asking. “I could go even higher than the Giant’s Lance, couldn’t I?”

“You could,” said Lord Petyr, “but the kingdom of men is on earth. Only birds know the heavens.”

“And dragons,” Sansa added.

“Dragons are different,” he replied, “they have a kingdom of their own, and woe betide any man who tries to dance with them.” His warning words echoed for a moment. Then he smiled and said, “Ah, the soup is here.” So it was. The servants filled their bowls with creamy mushroom and chestnut soup. Loaves of warm bread and a crock of creamed butter were set down in the middle of the table. “There is rosemary in the bread,” Petyr said, tearing a hunk from a loaf. “It is one of only a few things that grows in my sorry holdings. Rosemary, garlic and sheep.”
“Perhaps we might visit your lands on our tour of the Vale,” Myrcella suggested.

“Oh, I would hate to bore you so. My father’s tower does not even have a name, though ‘the Drearfort’ would be apt. Mine own castle is somewhat grander.” He gestured all around him. “Perhaps I should leave the Drearfort to my second son, if I ever get round to having any. He would hate me for that, I should think, being consigned to a pile of rocks while his father and elder brother are the lords of Harrenhal.”

“You’d be doing well to give Harrenhal to your sons,” said Sansa. “The castle is cursed, after all.”

Lord Petyr smiled. “I have defied such ancient traditions before. When I was a boy, Edmure here thought I would never amount to anything, that I was merely someone to be toyed with, for I could never fight him back. How could I, when he was heir to Riverrun and I to a pile of rocks on the littlest finger of the Vale? But here I sit before you as lord of Harrenhal.”

“Yes, you’ve done very well for yourself,” Lord Edmure muttered, a little contemptuously.

“Janos Slynt was lord of Harrenhal too,” Sansa supplied. “You seem to be in good company.”

Lord Petyr’s face darkened, but only for a moment. “Lord Slynt is dead, I have heard. Your bastard brother Jon Snow had him executed at the Wall. I imagine Slynt was deserving of his fate. He was a vile toad.”

“He betrayed my father,” Sansa stated.

Yes, Myrcella thought. But if the rumours are true, it was Petyr Baelish who held a dagger to his throat. Her mother and Ser Arys Oakheart had rushed her out of the hall before the fighting started, but the Red Keep’s guards told all sorts of tales when they thought nobody was listening.

“Yes,” said Lord Petyr, “he did.” He clapped his hands together. “How are you all finding your soup?”

“It’s good,” Lord Robert mumbled through a mouthful. “A bit salty, though.”

Littlefinger nodded. “I thought the same. Even so, you seem to be making short work of it.” He grinned. “Then again, you are at that age where boys make short work of anything that is set before them. A voracious appetite, they call it.” His eyes fell on Myrcella. “The gods help those of us who must satiate them.”

I am not there yet, thank the gods, she thought. Robert was not young enough to want her, as she’d gladly discovered on her wedding night when he had been content to take one kiss from her before falling into a drowsy, snoring sleep. But I do not have long, and soon I may have to force him into it. She did not want to keep Robert Arryn any longer than she had to, but neither did she want to have a cuckolded child as her mother had. Tyg would be only too willing, gods know, and they even have similar hair, but I cannot bear the risk.

Next came the meat: haunch of venison, goose, and ribs of roast boar, arranged around a boar’s head with an apple in its mouth. The beast’s tusks glimmered long and golden in the firelight. As they ate, Rymund the Rhymer played ‘Alysanne’ on his lute, a song about Jaehaerys the Conciliator’s wife, who had gone from Dorne to the Wall and charmed every man she met with her sweet words. But as Myrcella sat staring at the boar’s head, she thought of a different song. A singer had been caught singing it in a King’s Landing tavern, shortly after Eddard Stark’s execution. Joffrey had commanded that the man lose his fingers or his tongue for his offensive work. King Robert lost his battle and he failed his final test. The lion ripped his balls off, and the boar did all the rest...
Afterwards the plates were cleared away, and for the sweet they had apple and gooseberry pie served with cream. By that time Myrcella was growing tired of her company; Rickon and Sansa had withdrawn into themselves, Petyr and Edmure were arguing about everything and nothing, and Robert was on the verge of nodding off as he swallowed down cups of hippocras and lime cordial and gorged himself on lemoncakes. Only Brynden Blackfish remained alert.

It was not long before Robert had his head on his plate. Noticing this, Lord Petyr drew to his feet and called their supper to a halt. “Lady Arryn,” he said, “I fear you will have to help your lord husband back to his chambers. He has drank far too much for a boy of his age.”

“I’m not a boy,” Robert muttered sleepily as Myrcella and Sansa helped him up, “I’m a... I’m the lord of the Eyrie.” He squeezed Myrcella’s hand so hard she heard her knuckles crack. “Come on,” he whined at her, “let’s go.”

It had been bitterly cold all day, but the first snows were only just starting to fall as Robert and Myrcella stepped out onto the landing. From there it was a short ways down a flight of outside steps and along the passage to Lord Arryn’s bedchamber. Robert’s rooms were directly underneath his stepfather’s, and Myrcella fancied she could still hear them clinking glasses and talking above. But the fact of the matter was that she was alone with Robert now.

He did not waste time on courseties. “When are you leaving?”

“Whenever my lord wishes it.”

Robert went to get dressed for bed. Myrcella made out a ghost-pale, floppy arm waving from behind the screen, and then the young lord flung his breeches towards her. They crumpled on the floor in a lifeless heap. “I want you to go now,” Robert called out. “Unless you’re going to read me a story.”

The first option was considerably more tempting, but it would not help her to win his trust. Myrcella sighed. “If my lord wants a story, he shall have one. Another tale of Ser Artys Arryn, perchance?” Robert always wanted stories about the Winged Knight. They were insipid enough to make Myrcella feel sick.

“No,” his lordship said unexpectedly, throwing his shirt out from behind the curtain. “You always do the Winged Knight,” he whined. “I want a different story.”

Once more, Myrcella resigned herself to Robert’s company. By the time she had brought the book of stories down from the shelf, her husband had tucked himself in under the blankets. He smelled unwashed and sickly sweet. “I want some hot milk,” he demanded. “You go and tell Maddy that I want some hot milk.”

Myrcella went and told Maddy that his lordship wanted some hot milk. And could she have a cup of mulled wine too, please, because this was going to be a long night.

She laid the book down before Robert. “Which story do you want?” She did not want to choose the wrong one, lest that make him even angrier.

“You’re supposed to chose for me,” he all but snarled at her. “Otherwise it spoils the surprise.”

“You could always read them yourself, you know.” The words slipped out before she could stop them.

“Shut up,” he said. “I hate you. Now read me a story.” He might have been slightly drunk from the hippocras, but Myrcella could not tell.
“Fine. I’ll tell you a story. There once was a boy called Carbert. His father was a very clever man, but he was a rather normal, quite boring boy, save for the fact that he was obsessed with the idea of flying. There were mountains near Carbert’s homeland, and he wanted to fly as high as he could, to talk with the birds and—”

“That’s stupid,” Robert interjected. “You can’t talk with birds.”

“Well, like I said, he wasn’t a very clever boy.”

“No, you said he was rather normal. You—”

“He wanted to talk with the birds,” Myrcella pressed on. “And to feel the wind beneath his wings as he soared. So one day, his father toiled away and made Carbert a pair of wings, out of an old shield, some feathers, a piece of sailcloth, all bound together with wax and twine. The next morning, he took his son out to a cliff, from where he could launch himself into the sky. But before Carbert took off, his father knelt down and said, ‘you must not fly too close to the sun. Promise me you will not fly too close to the sun’. The boy nodded and smiled, but he was not really listening.

“And then he took off. He went high as the clouds, and higher still, above the tallest trees, above the tallest mountains, so high that the ground below had disappeared into the clouds, and all that was left to reach for was the sun. Of course, Carbert had not been listening when his father told him not to fly too close... for the wax in his wings melted away, and the feathers and sailcloth came away, and down and down the boy plummeted. Is that a good enough story for you, my lord?”

Robert was still scowling. “I preferred the one about the Winged Knight,” he said at last. “Read me one of those.” So she did. He seemed contented with that for a time, but he made a face when his milk arrived. “This smells funny,” he said, after a sip. “I don’t like it.”

“It’s nutmeg, my lord,” Myrcella lied. “Lots of big strong men drink nutmeg to help strengthen themselves for all the fighting.”

That shut Robert up, though only for a moment. “I don’t want to be like big strong men. I hate big strong men. Like Ser Harry.”

“Ser Harry?... oh, you mean Harrold Hardyng.”

“Harry the Heir.” Robert set his mouth in a stubborn scowl. “I hate Harry. He pretends to be nice by teaching me swords, but he’s just waiting for me to die so he can be lord of the Vale.”

Myrcella remembered what Sandor Clegane had said to her in the castle dungeons. You must picture it. You sitting on the Iron Throne with a golden crown on your head, and all of them grovelling on their knees. You want power, girl. And sometimes it comes to you that all you have to do is kill a boy, and you can have that. “You remind me of my brother,” she blurted before she could stop herself.

Robert looked at her curiously. She had never said anything quite so meaningful to him before. “What?”

“You... you remind of my brother. A little.” Too much. “I used to read stories to him as well. He liked the ones about knights too. He...”

The realisation hit her as hard as any punch. Two boys with a year between them in age, but a lifetime between them in everything else. One of them born to the Arryns, another to the Lannisters. One of them raised in the solitude of the Vale, the other among the poisonous intrigues of King’s Landing. But at heart, they are not so far apart. By hating Robert, I am hating a boy as scared as—
Myrcella stumbled to her feet. “I beg your pardon, my lord. I... I think I need some air. Yes.” She left the room before he could stop her, abandoning him with the storybook and his nutmeg milk. Her head was a whirl of colours as she ran headlong down the corridor and out onto the stairs. For the longest time she waited there, one arm braced against the stone railing, as the snowflakes descended in dizzy circles.

It was a long and lonely walk back to her own chambers, further down in the Kingspyre Tower. By the time she reached her solar, Myrcella had somehow managed to bury the feeling of guilt deep inside of her. Let it resurface later, when I am ready to deal with it. Sighing, she moved past Ser Balon Swann, who was out on guard duty, and shouldered the door open.

Tyg was seated over by the fire, blinking feebly at a stack of papers. The room was chilly; the wind through the open windows had reduced the fire to little more than dim grey ashes. Myrcella knelt by the grate, trying to rekindle the faint flames. The soot made her eyes water.

“How was supper?” Tyg asked.

“Fine. Boring.” She took a deep breath. “I think... it will not be long... before...” She could not bring herself to say it aloud. Before Robert dies.

“There was a raven for you,” he stated. “Not long after you left. Oh, and Ty Frey came by. He wanted to know if you’ll break your fast with him tomorrow, down in his solar. I told him you’d probably be busy.”

“How many times must I tell you before you believe me? Tywin Frey is not courting my favour. And yes, I will break my fast with him tomorrow. Better him than Robert or Littlefinger.”

“Oh,” he said. “I only... I meant... I thought we might eat together tomorrow. Before...”

Before our roads part, he meant. Tyg could never have her, of course. A thirdborn son could never marry a princess of House Lannister, no matter how much he loved her. Tygett still lived under the foolish delusion that it could still happen, somehow, not just at night but during the day too, until the end of their days. Myrcella did not have the heart to break his faith in dreams just yet. Let him spend these days as innocently as I spent mine with Trystane, she thought. Let him love me now, and hate me afterwards. Let him find solace in me...

...and me in him.

“This letter you mentioned,” she said. “Where is it?”

“On your desk, my lady. Should I—?”

“No.” I have had enough of the game of thrones for one night. “Come here, Tygett,” she whispered.

Her squire obeyed unquestioningly. Myrcella leaned against her bed and looked up at him. Tyg had a fair enough face to look upon, with a handsome jaw, and his archer’s hands were strong yet nimble. As always, she led the way, drawing him tight to her, unfastening the laces of his breeches and then sinking her hand into the gap, tightening around his manhood. Tyg’s hands fumbled spasmodically with the ties of her gown for a long time before finding their way in. His lips met her breasts and went at them, and then at her neck, her mouth. His fingers clenched and unclenched in her hair in time with the rhythmic movements of her hand down below. Then he had lifted her up, and his cock and his fingers were thrumming inside her instead, and they were one, and everything was so simple, so right, so complete, and there was nothing else to think about, because how could there be...?
“Did you finish inside me?”

A breathless pause, then. “Yes. Sorry. I should have spilled on your belly.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Myrcella took a long breath, drinking in the smell of their union. Sweet red wine and snow-dampened leather. The air was dizzy with firelight. “I like what you did with your hands, Tyg. You have very nice hands.”

He grinned back at her. “And you have very nice breasts. It seemed a shame to let them go to waste.”

For a long time they lay in flushed, uncertain silence, playing with each other, pinching and prodding and laying gentle kisses as though they were new lovers again. “I love you,” Tyg whispered into her neck. “I love you, I love you, I...”

“And I you,” she lied. “Tomorrow, though... I’ll have to go to Robert.” She could not afford to fuel any rumours by spending every night apart from her husband.

He turned over, fixing her gaze with his. “No, you don’t. No one can make you. Especially not him. We can stay here all night, and all of tomorrow.” His fingers trickled down her breasts, gently plucking them, and skated further and further to her navel. “I’ll tell them you’re ill. We’ll stay here all day.”

“Doing what?”

“Just...” He blinked a little, almost as though he were afraid. “Just this. This would be fine. I... I love being near you.”

“Maybe soon,” she lied again, running her hands over his. “When we get to the Gates of the Moon, and Robert goes off on his tour... or when...”

“You’ll need to have a child with him, though.” He sounded absolutely wretched. “Once you’re holding his son or daughter, you’ll be his. For the rest of your days.”

“It will be quite a while before I think about giving Robert any children.” She sighed and sat up, covering herself in a blanket. “There are more immediate things to worry about. I don’t know how Littlefinger intends to convince the more stalwart Vale lords to ally with us. He says that everything is in place, but... I fear I am missing something.”

Tyg turned back to her, his lips nary an inch from hers. “I don’t want to talk about Littlefinger,” he said. “Only you. Only—”

And bells began to ring.

Myrcella felt a sudden, terrible sense of horror overcome her. “Something is wrong.” She swung her feet down off the bed. The flagstones were very cold on her bare soles. The fire had gone out in the grate. She ran to the window, and flung the shutters open. Snowflakes swirled past her. The sound of bells was getting louder.

Robert, she knew, without understanding what, or how, or why. “Tyg,” she called back to the room. “Get washed and dressed. Something... I need to see this.”

Myrcella had just finished washing off the smell of their coupling when Ser Lyn Corbray appeared outside her door. The knight had a torch in one hand, a Valyrian steel sword in his belt, and a grim frown on his face. “Lady Arryn,” he pressed her. “The Lord Protector urgently demands your presence upstairs.” He dropped his voice a little. “Someone has poisoned your lord husband.”
Poisoned your lord husband...

All was a blur as she climbed the stairs. Someone has poisoned your husband. That did not make sense. It is too early. Littlefinger said we would wait until we reached the Vale before doing something. He said so, and I agreed to it, and Ser Lyn too. Myrcella wanted to ask the knight what was happening, but she did not dare. This is wrong, the plan has gone wrong. Robert was supposed to be fine until we reached the Gates of the Moon. As though telling herself that would make it true.

The lords and ladies of the Vale had congregated in the hallway outside Robert’s chambers and on the stairs that led up to Lord Baelish’s. Plainly they had just been woken; they were rubbing sleep from their eyes and most of them were still in their night clothes. Ser Lyn shouldered a path through them, and Myrcella followed. Tyg and Ser Balon Swann came behind her.

Lord Petyr came over to her. He wore silken pyjamas decorated with mockingbirds under his cloak. “I trust Ser Lyn has told you what happened?”

“How—?” Myrcella said. “How...?”

Petyr dropped his voice. “It was Maddy and Gretchel who found him. We should be thankful that Maester Colemon was close at hand. He was... well, I would spare you the details—”

“Tell me.” She would not shy away.

“He was frothing at the mouth and thrashing about,” Petyr muttered. “A seizure, it would seem, of the sort we have not seen since we left the Eyrie. We do not know what brought it about. Right now, all of our efforts are concentrated on saving Robert’s life.”

Will...? Myrcella swallowed. “Will he survive?”

Petyr shook his head slightly. “We can only hope.” He turned to meet Sansa Stark as she came into the room. “Excuse me.”

Myrcella was left wondering how much of his words were an act. It must be, I am certain. Littlefinger must have poisoned him... but why did he not tell me if he meant to do so tonight? And why not wait until we got back to the Vale? I thought he did not want to involve the Tullys.

She wandered back through the crowd and found Tyg sitting on the windowseat. “Someone poisoned him,” she said, in a strangely quiet voice. “He’s alright, for now. But we don’t know how long he’ll live.”

“Perhaps...” Myrcella felt the warmth of Tyg’s hand against her arm, and then it moved up to brush across her shoulders. “Perhaps that would be for the best,” he said quietly.

“No. I need the Vale. And I think... there is a part of me that needs him. I... he is innocent in this.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Sometimes I think otherwise, but... he is. I... nevermind.” How was she supposed to tell Tyg that Robert Arryn reminded her of Tommen? “Tyg... I think... even if Robert does get better, I think we should go home. Back to Casterly Rock.”

“Why, my lady?”

“I... I don’t know. But there were things I should have done before I left and didn’t. Things that I should have... told to people.” A boy’s disembodied voice called out to her. Why are you doing this? Why?

Because I can.
Myrcella closed her mind to the reply, and closed her eyes too, focusing on her breathing. When she opened them again, Lord Petyr had climbed up onto a chair on the dais and was trying to speak over the murmur of the crowd. Eventually the Knight of Ninestars went up beside him and bellowed “QUIET!” so loudly that everyone stopped to listen.

“I imagine most of you are aware of what has happened,” said Lord Petyr. “But for those who are not, it is my solemn duty to inform that your liege lord, my stepson, Robert Arryn, has been taken gravely ill. I wish it were only a seizure, but Maester Colemon tells me that the symptoms were... hmm... consistent with poisoning.”

What?

“I have called you all here tonight for your own safety... yet is very much a possibility that our would-be assassin is somewhere in this very room. There are people in here who would benefit a great deal from Lord Robert’s demise.” And as he said those words, Myrcella could have sworn his eyes fell upon her.

Suddenly the room felt very enclosed, and it was as though everyone in there was staring at her. No, she thought, as a shiver racked her from head to toe. No, this is not right. I have to leave. I have to.

Littlefinger was still talking, but Myrcella inched back through the crowd, tiptoeing away, trembling and in a cold sweat. The faces of the crowd turned nightmarish. “Are you quite alright, child?” she heard old Lady Waynwood say, and then she tripped and fell into a man’s arms.

“Lady Arryn!” a voice called, “my lady Arryn! Are you—?”

“Jaime?” Only her uncle had golden hair like that. No, not my uncle, my father, he is my father—

“I’m... I’m not Ser Jaime.” Harry the Heir helped her back to her feet. Myrcella glimpsed the faces of Sansa and Rickon Stark in the crowd. “Are you alright, my lady?” Ser Harrold asked. “I thought you might have fainted.”

“No, I’m...” She was choosing her words to reply when Ser Lyn Corbray burst in from the stairs, calling “Traitor! Murderer! She’s a murderer!” He pushed his way through the press surrounding them, and pointed a finger straight at Myrcella.

In his hand he held a vial of some milkish white liquid. Sweetsleep, she knew at once, and remembered an old memory. What Tommen doesn’t know won’t hurt him...

...but it would hurt her. The eyes of the crowd flickered between Myrcella and Ser Lyn. No, she wanted to say, Littlefinger put it there, he did this. But Littlefinger was feigning his shock as impressively as any of them, and the only noise she could make was a thin rasping, a choking noise, as Joffrey had at his wedding. It was too unreal. Part of her wanted to laugh. “No,” she spluttered out at last, “that isn’t... it isn’t... that’s not mine...”

“How...?” Littlefinger shook his head. “Ser Lyn, what is the meaning of this?”

“I went to the princess’s chambers while you were here, my lord. I have... I have harboured my suspicions for a long time, if truth be told. She does not love her Lord Robert as we do. Not one bit.”

“And how can you know that?” asked Sansa.

“Look for yourselves, my lady.” Ser Lyn shook his head. “We have not one culprit here, but two.” He nodded at Tyg. “The bitch has been bedding her squire.”

Before Myrcella could move, Tyg had wrenched his sword from his swordbelt. “Run, my lady!” he
shouted. Ser Balon Swann had his own blade out, too. Tyg shoved her backwards, away, down the corridor, and all she had time to think was, *oh, you gallant fool*, before the swords were upon him, and she was backing into a wall of hands, and she stumbled to the flagstones.

Tyg lurched around, sword in hand, and Myrcella knew almost at once that it was over. She met his eyes, pale with fear and bravery at the same time, and heard the crash of steel and wet squelch of steel on flesh. When she opened her eyes again, he was on his knees. And then he was keeling slowly forwards as Ser Lyn Corbray drew Lady Forlorn out of his back. Blood sullied his dark brown tunic and ran through the runnels between the stones.

“Tyg,” she tried to call, but words failed her. “Ser Balon... I... I...” The white knight was making a hard fight of it, but the ending seemed inevitable. All she remembered seeing as they shoved her down the stairs was Sansa’s horrified look and Littlefinger’s half-smile, and Tyg’s corpse, cold and grey upon the cold grey floor.

The night was full of shadows after that. Her cell was dark and damp, and though the drip from the cracked ceiling was water, it might well have been blood. Somewhere far above her in the endless grey hell that was Harrenhal, a sad grey bell was tolling, and a grey wolf howled ghoulishly through the grey night.

For hours she prowled her cell. Every now and again a mad fury came over her, sharp pains of hot and cold, and Myrcella found herself tearing strips from her nightgown, throwing them down on the muddy earth, stamping, stamping, trying to erase them from the world. Then she stopped, collapsed back against the wall, and cried.

She cried for Tyg, who had been brave until the bitter end. She cried for Ser Balon too, and for Trystane, and for Tommen and for Mother, and for herself. *Pride comes before the fall.* That was a distinctly Lannister curse, and she had fallen foul of it. *And Littlefinger. How could I be so blind? I am not the first person he has betrayed.* She let out a scream.

*I will kill him. I will, if it is the last thing I do before they execute me. I will rip out his entrails with my claws and savage his throat with my teeth, I will tear him, I will burn him.*

*Execute. What a funny, final world. It will be a beheading,* she thought. *They will take me up onto the castle ramparts and Ser Lyn will take my head off with that Valyrian steel longsword of his.* She laughed.

Then she began to cry again. The echoes of that *drip-drip* of water from the ceiling formed the words that haunted her. A boy’s voice, arguing with itself, calling out nightmarishly: *Why are you doing this? Because I can... because I can... because I can... This was for you, little brother,* Myrcella thought, *I did this for you, because you told me to, all for you, don’t you see?* She squeezed her eyes shut, holding back tears. *Don’t you SEE? I never should have left. I never should have left you, or let you send me away.*

*But I should have been queen.* It had always been like that. *I am strong, and you are not.* They would tear him apart, she knew, lions and dragons and wolves and roses and stags. They would rip him to pieces and set their dogs to chewing up his remains. *That is the way of the world.*

After a time she fell to the ground again and slumped there, waiting for morning to break through the gaps in the dark prison. But when she heard footsteps outside her cell, Myrcella jerked to her feet with a start. She knew who it was before she even saw his shadow. “My lady,” Littlefinger said quietly. “Please, do not overexert yourself for me.”
She was too tired to think. But she was damned if she’d let him go any further with this. “Go fuck yourself, Petyr.”

“I’m afraid it is you who is well and truly fucked, sweetling. Though the lords of the Vale have been merciful to you, thanks in part to our dear mutual friend Lady Sansa. There will be a trial. Our Lord Robert has survived his ordeal... for now.”

“Thank the gods,” she muttered. *If Robert lives... perhaps it will not be murder.* Then she shook her head. *I tried to kill their lord of the Vale. I will be executed all the same.*

Baelish smiled wormishly. “You seem curiously happy about that, given that you tried to poison him.”

“Lie to them in the court, if you must. Do not lie to me here. This... this has been your plot all along... how could I have been so stupid? Lyn Corbray...?”

“How indeed?” said Littlefinger. “But if you must know, I did not poison Lord Robert either.” It repulsed her how easily the lie slithered from his lips. “Nonetheless, you *will* be trialled before the Vale. And you will be found guilty. And I will see to it that you never see daylight again.”

“I’ll tell them...” Her tongue felt thick. “I’ll tell them what you’ve done.”

“And who will believe you?” Littlefinger asked, and she knew that he was right. “No, you are doomed to die, I’m afraid...” He smiled a little. “Unless—”

He stared at her, expectant. Myrcella sighed. “*Unless?”*

“*Unless* you play the final hand in the game. Unless you take Ser Lyn’s place in our original plan, and end this mummer’s farce for good and all. Unless you make your *confession.*”

*And confess what?* Myrcella wondered. But by then, she already knew.

Chapter End Notes

And all the pieces come tumbling down again...

The story that Myrcella tells Robert, is, of course, that of Icarus, who flew too close to the Sun and fell to his death over the Aegean Sea. She thinks that she's clever by making use of the bird imagery, comparing him to Robert in a spiteful fashion, but in reality she's making an ironic comparison to herself, without realising it.

While this is a case of everything collapsing in a heap all at once (thanks Petyr), there's also a lot of evidence that Myrcella doesn't even know what she's doing in the lead-up to her downfall. She describes Littlefinger's plan in about three different ways, none of which agree.

As for the implications of this chapter, the Harrenhal plotline is going to pick up speed going forward... though its chapters will be surprisingly sparse, with so much going on in the other storylines. We'll be taking a bit of a hiatus from the North (probably).
“R’hllor,” called Benerro through the dusk. “You are the candle flame that lights the dark road ahead of us, the fire that stirs our hearts on cold nights, the sun that rises with every new dawn. You are our Lord and our Saviour, our Holy Truth. O my Lord, give strength to the will of your servants, and to your instrument on this earth, Queen Daenerys Targaryen, the First of Her Name.”

The nightfire flared up violently then, and the whole tower top glowed in the reddish light. It caught the concerned features of Ser Barristan Selmy and etched them on Dany’s memory; it made the bastard boy Edric Storm flinch and look away; it made Marwyn the Mage’s eyes widen in scanty hidden curiosity. “R’hllor,” the onlookers began to chorus back, the twenty or so followers who had come with Benerro from Volantis. “You are our Lord and our Saviour, our Holy Truth!”

“Protect us, O Lord,” beseeched Benerro, “for the night is dark, and full of terrors!”

“For the night is dark, and full of terrors!”

Dany turned away as the fire roared again, and spat brilliant sparks high towards the distant clouds. There is power in fire, that cannot be denied. She liked the ceremony precious little, but it was a more impressive display than any she had seen from the grey crones at Baelor’s Sept. Let them look at the walls of the Red Keep and shake their heads in anguish. I will not hear them. As she looked out over the assembled courtiers, she saw the Red Keep’s septon shake his head disdainfully and lean down to whisper something in an acolyte’s ear, before moving to the tower steps.

Let him go, the queen thought. There are always those who cling to old traditions like a babe to his mother’s breast. Many of the Great Houses of Westeros still clung to the Faith of the Seven and its Andal traditions, but House Targaryen were the blood of Old Valyria, and fire was their power. Dany thought of her brother Rhaegar, and the prophecies Ser Barristan had vaguely mentioned. Those prophecies foretold of fire and blood, too. Rhaegar must have known the truth too. Yet whenever Dany considered that, his face kept turning into Viserys’s, complete with its crown of molten gold.

All eyes watched the queen as she left the tower-top and headed back towards Maegor’s Holdfast.
Icicles slithered down from the lips of old ivy-kissed gargoyles as she passed. The warmth of the Queen’s Ballroom was only too welcome.

“Your Grace,” said Ser Barristan, when the queen had settled herself into a chair, a pelt folded across her legs. “I know it is not my place, but I feel that I must voice my concerns.”

“You are the Hand of the Queen,” Dany told him gently. “Your concerns are mine. Speak, ser.” She already had a good idea of what he was going to say.

Selmy did not surprise her. “When Aegon the Conqueror landed in Blackwater Bay, he was seen as a foreign invader, and he was hated as one everywhere he went. The Storm Kings could not abide him, the Lannisters of the Rock neither, nor the Gardener kings of the Reach. Every castle he took and every mile he advanced, he was eroding the Andal culture that their ancestors had worked so hard to create, and replacing it with the strange ways of Old Valyria. All that changed after the Field of Fire, when Aegon came to Oldtown. Lord Manfred Hightower and the High Septon opened their gates wide to him, at the Crone’s command. They anointed Aegon with the holy oils, and crowned him in the light of the Seven. Without the legitimacy the Faith lent to him and his ancestors, the Targaryen dynasty would never have ruled any of Westeros, not truly.”

“You think I should reconcile with the sparrows,” said Dany.

“I think you should reconsider your situation, Your Grace.” Ser Barristan bowed his head, as though ashamed.

“I am not Aegon the Conqueror. I have allies here. The Tyrells, the Martells, the—” Dany stopped herself. If they are my allies, then why are they not here? They sit with Aegon outside my walls. They are his men, not mine. She glanced back up at Ser Barristan. “I will not meekly make peace with those who insulted me,” she said. “I will not go running back to the sparrows like a beggar. And even if I had that intention... the Faith is dust now. The pillars which supported them have collapsed beneath the weight of sparrows.” The Most Devout had fled to Oldtown, and the few septons they had left behind at Dany’s court in King’s Landing were frail, inconsequential people.

“You are right to say that something needs to be done,” said Dany. She considered for a moment. “The Faith still remains. It is beaten down and broken, true, but if I could bring the remnants together, and have them condemn the sparrows, then perhaps the smallfolk would turn on them.”

“The smallfolk love the sparrows,” Ser Barristan replied. “Even then, there would be no way to flush them out, not without violence. Has Your Grace heard what happened during the Dance of the Dragons when the mob stormed the Dragonpit?”

“That was... during Rhaenyra’s reign, wasn’t it?”

“Rhaenyra’s brief reign. And it was especially brief after that. Five dragons were killed, and thousands of smallfolk, and the queen’s son Prince Joffrey Velaryon. Some might say that her reign ended then and there.”

Dany was well aware of the failings of her ancestors. “But what other choice do we have?”

Other than going on my knees before them. But I will not. The dragon does not bow to the sparrow.

Ser Barristan remained tight-lipped, and did not answer. And if he had meant to say something, it was forgotten when Benerro came up the stairs. And behind him came...

Daario Naharis.
Daario, who had promised to be back in two days, but had left her to wait for two weeks, who had spent his hours in Aegon’s camp, at her nephew’s side, who now came swaggering through the Queen’s Ballroom as though there were nothing amiss, and made a mocking bow before her chair, sweeping his purple cape aside with a flourish. “My queen.”

Dany gripped the arms of the chair so hard that her knuckles turned white. *I am not your queen.* She almost said that aloud. “Captain Naharis,” she said instead, “I did not expect you tonight.”

“I am famous for my surprises,” said Daario.

“We are sorry we did not come sooner.” Brown Ben Plumm, at least, made his apologies. “We were held up on our way back to King’s Landing.”

“I hear you were at Aegon’s camp for the better part of a week,” Dany said coldly. She fixed her glare on Daario. *I want to hear him say the words. I want to hear him say that he is sorry, and ask my forgiveness. I want him to learn the cost of disobedience.*

“His Grace would not take no for an answer,” continued Brown Ben. His voice was distant to Dany’s ears; she only watched Daario. He looked everywhere save for at her. “...we had tired and cold men with us, sorefoot and hungry. Once we entered his camp, it was hard for us to leave again.”

“Then you should never have entered it,” said Ser Jorah Mormont.

“Oh, indeed, Mormont,” Daario returned acidly. “Our men would be perfectly settled if their captains forewent food and rest just to get back to King’s Landing a little quicker.”

“A man should respect his captain, not freely refuse his orders. If you had better command of the Stormcrows—”

Daario laughed. “You would make a poor sellsword, Mormont.”

“And you would make a poor knight, Naharis.”

“Perhaps it is best that we have chosen our paths, then.” As he spoke Daario brushed one of his hands over the golden women on the hilt of his dagger. It was a very deliberate movement, and the way his eyes briefly met Dany’s afterwards confirmed that... but she felt nothing, no quickening of the heart, no longing whatsoever. *I am done with you,* thought Dany.

She sat up straighter. “What did Aegon tell you?”

“That come the morrow, he will be here in King’s Landing,” Brown Ben said. “And the day after that, he will marry Arianne Martell in Baelor’s Sept.”

“I fear he will find the sept somewhat lacking in grandeur,” said Benerro. “The sparrows have melted down the statues and the ornaments to buy bread for the poor. Or so they say. False religion breeds false lies.”

Daario smirked at the red priest. “Whereas you are the very embodiment of righteousness, I’m sure.”

“No. But my loyalty *is* assured.”

There was a long silence. In the yard outside, Dany could hear the Unsullied at their marching drill. “Did you come as Aegon’s messengers?” Ser Barristan asked.

“We came of our own accord,” said Brown Ben.
“Then you could have come sooner,” Dany replied, with an especially pronounced frown at Daario. She would have said more, were it not for the sudden reappearance of Archmaester Marwyn. He came running up the stairs, breathing heavily through his nostrils, made a hasty bow and blurted out, “Sparrows, Your Grace!”

Ser Barristan Selmy touched a hand to his sword hilt. “Is the queen threatened?”

“Not here. But there are more of them coming up the hill. It seems they have marched here from the Sept. A crowd of smallfolk, chanting for bread, waving torches and—”

“Where are the Unsullied?” asked Dany. “The castle guards?”

“Grey Worm is across the city,” said Marwyn. “Your castle guard are holding the gates, but there are not enough of them to withstand a full assault.”

“Where is Varys?” It was strange that he had not brought news of this. Surely one of his little birds must have heard of such a plot? But Dany’s thoughts were elsewhere as she looked out through the window into the throng clamouring beneath the walls, as though moths drawn by the glare from the nightfire. She could not make out what they were shouting, but the unified rumble of voices sounded angry.

“How many?” she asked softly. Ser Barristan had taught her how to count a foe’s numbers, but this was no organised rank and file, and besides, many of the peasants were half-melted into the night.

“Two thousand, by my reckoning,” said Jorah Mormont. “Possibly more.”

“They came upon us quickly,” Marwyn said to no one in particular. “It was organised, I have no doubt.”

Dany saw her frown reflected in the window-glass. “Let them be,” she said. “It has snowed already tonight. It will snow again before dawn, and when it does, the folk will return to their homes.”

“Snow has never stopped them from this sort of thing before, Your Grace,” said Ser Jorah. “But if you were to go up on the ramparts and speak to them, they might—”

“I thought you would know better than to risk your queen’s life in that way, Mormont,” said Ser Barristan. “They are armed, and who knows what madness they might be driven to in the hopes of martyring themselves. You have heard what threats they make as well as I. We have no guarantee that they would listen, anyhow.”

“Wait them out, then,” said Brown Ben. “They cannot stand outside our gates forever.”

Again Selmy shook his head. “King Aegon is returning to the city on the morrow, as you said. We cannot have them making a farce of his return.”

It is a farce already, Dany thought. Damn my nephew in his foolishness. She could not afford to look incompetent when the Reachmen and the Dornishmen arrived on the morrow.

“Very well, Ser Grandfather,” Daario said silkily. “We cannot treat with the sparrows. We cannot talk with the sparrows. We cannot leave them be. So what can we do? So what should we do? Fight them?”

The sarcastic remark made sense, though Dany hated to admit it. “Yes,” she said. “We will fight them. And I will kill two birds with one stone.”
Daario frowned. “My queen jests, but too prettily for me to understand. Two birds, yes – sparrows and—?”

“Stormcrows,” said Dany. “And Second Sons. You brought some of your men into the city, yes?”

“Your Grace, we—”

“And left them in taverns, winesinks, brothels, the like. That does not concern me. What concerns me is that you have sellswords behind their lines, as we have Unsullied guards in front of them. You will go and guide them back to their homes as a shepherd guides his flock.”

Daario Naharis frowned. “Have you ever tried shepherding, Your Grace? It is not as easy it looks. Especially when the sheep are armed with pitchforks.” He scoffed. “What you ask is hardly easy.”

“Then you had best get started,” Dany said. “How many Stormcrows did you bring into the city?”

He gave her a surly look. “Two hundred, Your Grace.”

“And two hundred fifty Second Sons,” added Brown Ben.

“You can fetch Grey Worm’s Unsullied too,” Dany said. “Will that be enough?” she asked Ser Barristan.

The old knight looked slightly pained. *I wish he would just tell me what he thought, rather than tiptoeing around it.* “Aye,” he said at last, “it should be.”

His words left Dany more uncertain rather than less. She could do nothing but nod, and hope that she had chosen right. “Jorah,” she said quietly, “go with them.” The rest of them would watch from the Queen’s Ballroom. There was a good view of the front gates through the window. The sparrows were attempting to climb the walls; it took all the efforts of the Unsullied guards to stop them from getting over. Bricks and stones were lobbed left and right. “At least they are not killing each other,” said Marwyn the Mage.

Not yet. Dany had no doubts that the situation would escalate if it was left unattended. The mob only grew more and more irate, and when she sent Benerro down to see what they were saying, he returned with reports that they were clamouring for the death of her dragons, and for the burning of the incestuously born queen. “There are two Unsullied battalions at the Dragonpit tonight,” she thought. But would that be enough?

To stop Selmy from fretting, she sent him down with a few guards to look. Dany watched him ride out through a side gate, down the cobbled wynd towards Rhaenys’s Hill, and out of sight. There was red smoke rising over the city now, from the brothels and taverns that the sparrows loved to sack. Likely some of Daario’s men were in those taverns; likely brawling had already broken out between her forces and theirs. *The city is in riot, and there is nothing I can do to stop it.* She wished she had Drogon with her, that she could climb onto the dragon’s back and soar away over the tiny fires below. She remembered how the quarreling Dothraki had fallen down upon their knees in awe when he came down to her on the fields outside the city, and the problems facing her had resolved themselves in an instant. She told Benerro as much.

“Your dragons are a wonders of the gods,” the red priest said, “and this is the work of man. This is your mortal battle to fight, Daenerys Stormborn, not theirs. But you will prevail, I am sure of it. And when the darkness comes, and the Great Other rises in the shadows of the world, no man will dare defy you. Or them.”

“Where is this Great Other? Can we not go and fight him now?”
Benerro shook his head. “You cannot run before you can walk. I have seen three conquests in your life, Your Grace. This is but the second. The first was in the East, the second is here, the third lies... somewhere in the darkness ahead of you. Azor Ahai had three trials, and so do you.”


“There is power in three,” said Benerro vaguely. “Though I know not why. But there always has been, even in the earliest stories.” He drifted over towards the hearth and started whispering to the ashes.

Dany’s vigil at the window did not last much longer. The mob was turning its sole attention away from the gate, to the Unsullied streaming up the street, and the sellswords beneath the banners of the Second Sons and the Stormcrows. Some fled at the sight of the approaching spearmen and horses, squeezing through gaps in the crowd and dissolving into the alleys; others chose to stand and make a fight of it. The battle – if it could be called that – was languid and tired, a jab here and there deftly turned aside by the Unsullied spear wall, the occasional rain of flung stones and bricks against round metal shields. Eventually, Benerro went up to the walls to offer his help; he and his acolytes stirred up great roaring tongues of fire from the wall torches, sowing doubts in the hearts of the attackers below. But even then it was nearly an hour before the mob started to properly dispense, hurling insults in their retreat. And another hour passed before Ser Jorah and Brown Ben returned to the Queen’s Ballroom, where Dany sat with her handmaids Irri and Jhiqui. They brought a third visitor with them too: the eunuch, Lord Varys.

“The mob is shattered, Your Grace,” said Ser Jorah. “Most of the ringleaders have been taken captive, and the others have retreated towards Rhaenys’s Hill and the Sept of Baelor.”

“Ser Barristan is at the Dragonpit.” Dany had gotten messages from the squire Edric Storm, son of the Usurper. The boy had delived them looking down at his feet. “He must be having more difficulties than we thought.” She looked at Brown Ben. “Gather up the Second Sons and ride to Ser Barristan’s aim. Take as many of the garrison as seems necessary.”

“This will not be the last of them,” Varys said as Brown Ben left the hall. “Your Grace, already I have heard whispers that they mean to make another move, on the night of King Aegon’s wedding.”

Dany felt inexplicably unsure of the eunuch’s words. “You did not come to me with news of this attack. So how did you manage to find about the next one already?”

“My little birds do not hear everything, despite what you might think.” Varys tittered. “Why, if they did, I would be king of the whole world by now. A jest, of course. I would never want such a responsibility—”

“That is not an answer, Lord Varys.”

“My apologies, Your Grace.” He shrugged. “It... it seems that my little birds were searching for whispers in the wrong places... rest assured, they will be more accurate now.”

Ser Jorah shared her doubts. “It does not add up,” he said when Varys was gone. “The eunuch hears everything... but not this, of all things.”

“I thought much the same,” said Dany. “But I have enough enemies without searching for new ones among my allies.”

“That will not make them go away, though,” Jorah warned.
“No.” Dany suddenly felt very tired with it all. *Does it end, Jorah? Does it ever end? The waiting, the watching, this feeling of helplessness? Three fires. Three mounts. Three treasons. The dragon has three heads. Three conquests. Three sacrifices. All in threes. All in threes. All in threes—*

“Where is Daario?”

“He went to see the prisoners down to the cells, Your Grace.” The way Jorah said the words suggested he did not really believe them. “To ensure that there were no... complications.”

“Complications?”

Jorah sighed. “Captain Naharis refuses to trust me, even now. And the feeling is somewhat mutual. He would not let me escort the prisoners down to the cells.”

“I will speak to Daario,” she promised. “For what it is worth, Ser Jorah, I am feeling far more confident of your loyalty at the present than I am of a man who spent two weeks lingering in my nephew’s camp. As for what happened there... well, we shall find out on the morrow, I suppose.”

Dany had had enough for tonight. She would leave the rest to the morning, and to Aegon’s arrival.

When she returned to her chambers, Dany knew at once that something was odd. But she had no time to think on that; a hand clamped over her mouth from behind, and the hand she reached for the knife at her belt was clasped so tightly she feared it might break. Her call for guards went unheard, but after a few moments’ struggling, Daario released her with a laugh. “You are a fighter indeed, my queen.”

“Get out,” Dany said.

“My sweet queen has a cruel tongue. And crueller lips.” Daario moved towards her.

She pushed him away. “Get out of my chambers!”

“Are you certain?” he mocked. “Certain you would not prefer me to get out of my clothes?” Before Dany could say anything, he had pulled off his leather tunic, shirt and breeches, and pressed his hard body up against hers, smelling of saddle leather and hob-nailed iron. There were flecks of blood in his purple beard. *Where did he get those from?* Had her captain been—

*No. Not my captain. He made me wait. He left me.* She stepped back towards her bed. “Leave my chambers now, Captain Naharis.”

“Captain Naharis? Your words are cold and barbed, my queen. I—”

“I am not your queen.”

“Yes, you are. And you know it.” Daario smirked that smirk she had once found so appealing. *I hate him,* the queen realised. *I hate every part of him, and everything he does. The fighting. The laughing. The killing. The kissing. He has made a monster of me... And I of him.*

“Get away from me,” she said, very quietly. “Dress yourself and go down into the courtyard. Gather your most trusted men and ride back to Aegon’s encampment. If I am your queen, you will obey my orders without question.”

For a moment it seemed that Daario Naharis would disobey, as he so often did. Instead, Dany watched as he slowly redressed, taunting her with his eyes, rubbing those fingers over the naked
women on the hilts of his daggers – those fingers that had rubbed her once, and made her so warm and so wet. At the door he stopped and looked back: “I will return when your moon blood has subsided.” Then he was gone.

The suddenness of the insult left her disarmed for some time, but then Dany felt anger boiling inside her, and she was rushing back towards the door without knowing what she would say, not caring whether she would come to regret it. But when she threw the chamber door open, and started down the corridor, Daario Naharis was gone.

“Is something wrong, Your Grace?” asked Irri.

_Where is he? Where did he go?_ She shook her head and retreated back inside, feeling suddenly sick. Jhiqui brought her a glass of cool fresh water, and soon Ser Barristan returned to give her his counsel. “We drove them away from Rhaenys’s Hill, Your Grace,” the old knight said. He said some other things too, but Dany’s thoughts were hot and hazy, and she barely heard him. “Good,” she summarised. “I... I am tired, Ser Barristan. We can leave the rest until... until...”

She was feeling tired, but she could not sleep. Instead Dany lay awake on her pillows, listening to the pounding of sleet outside, as heavy and angry as the pounding in her heart. Daario’s words were the ones that stayed with her: _I will return when your moon blood has subsided._

But her moon blood had not come in two months.

**Chapter End Notes**

Surprise! Both with that final sentence and the fact that I completed this chapter so quickly. This one was surprisingly easy for a Dany chapter, which usually take ages and aren’t very fun. So here we had religious strife, more religious strife, and - yeah, there’s a theme here - yet more religious strife.

Not much to say on this chapter, other than I had a dilemma over whether or not Aegon should appear on it, and instead decided that this one would be mostly character development based. We’ll be back in King’s Landing very soon (possibly with Dany, possibly with Arianne), but before that we’ve got to head over to Braavos for the long-promised Arya chapter, which I have very nearly finished.
The House was dark tonight. There was a silence, and it was a silence of three parts. It was a silence made by things not moving, but it was also the silence of things that ought to have made a sound, and it was also the silence of impossible stillness. It was silence and silence and silence.

In the sanctum of the House the servants of the Many-Faced God gathered, and stood in a circle, cloaked in the shadows of the stone gods all around them. There was a time when they’d had names. Now they only had faces. All were cloaked in robes of black and white, and cowled too, so the few differing features of their faces remained mostly hidden. They were Faceless Men, and one man could masquerade as the next if he so chose, and none would be any the wiser. Perhaps once there had been men and women beneath the masks, but that had been a very long time ago, before they had drank the black water from the fountain, and given themselves into the arms of the god.

“No One”
which of his allies are not as loyal as they would like him to think. Surely it would not be too much to give him that.”

The kindly man only smiled back at her, then around the room at the rest of them. “I think we all understand that,” he said, “now, shall we move on?”

“The Horn,” said the Lorathi.

“The Horn,” agreed the kindly man.

“The Horn,” said the fat fellow. He snapped his fingers into the darkness, and two more acolytes emerged from among the lichyard of statues. Between them they carried a small black horn on a grey cushion, and stood in the centre of the room. The fat fellow reached out and took the horn delicately in his hands, with all the grace of someone far younger and far more lithe. “Here it is.”

“It is smaller than it was,” said the handsome man.

“We have our reasons for that,” the waif replied, “but rest assured, it is the same horn, with the same powers. Dragonbinder.” Now she spoke in High Valyrian. “No mortal man shall sound me and lived. There is a curse.” The faintest of faint smiles curled her lips.

“A good curse.” The Lorathi was also smiling. “Fregar will be indebted to us, if he values his life. Though I wonder whether he would sooner martyr himself and ensure some sort of legacy.”

“He is too proud for that,” said the kindly man. “And why would he, when we are so willing?” The smile went from his face now. “But enough gentle mockery, I think. What have you discovered?”

“Nothing more and nothing less than we expected,” answered the handsome man. “There is some damage, but not enough to prevent us from carrying out our purpose. The closer we are, the better this will go.”

“So we must go to Dragonstone?” asked plague face.

“We must.”

“And who will go?”

The kindly man smiled again, but said no word. If that smile had some meaning, it was known only to a select few of them, those he trusted most of all. “Bring the horn,” he said in a soft, dusty voice. “And the egg.”

The dragon egg had come from Euron Greyjoy, as part of a trade made in Oldtown many years ago. Fire for ice, and ice for fire. A pair of acolytes carried it into together, in an ebony box with weirwood handles. The egg itself lay on a plain grey cushion. Its scales glittered midnight blue, with flecks of gold. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but the priests of the Many-Faced God thrived in darkness.

The kindly man lifted the egg from its cushioned box, and laid it upon a stone pedestal at the middle of the room. It rolled a little, then was still. Next he took up the horn, and passed it over to the handsome man. There was a long, frail pause as the kindly man moved back to his accustomed place. The handsome man raised the horn to his lips, and pointed it at the egg. His breath made a slow, whistling sound as he blew.

Later, the kindly man called one of the God’s newest servants to the sanctum, where they met alone at the feet of the Stranger, the god of Death in the Faith of the Seven. The egg was still upon its
pedestal in the sanctum, though now its scales were dull and murky, as though they had been painted over.

“Who are you?” the kindly man asked when his servant came in. That was his custom.

“No one,” she replied. It was so. She had taken the cup from his hands a third time, and she had made herself a part of the House of Black and White for good and all. And here she was, serving the only god she had ever learned the name of. *There is only one god, and his name is Death,* she remembered being told, a long time ago, in a faraway place. *And what do we say to Death?*

*Nothing.* You said nothing to death. He was all around you, and there was no running from his gaze. He was in her thoughts now, always. “Valar morghulis,” the girl said.

“Valar dohaeris,” the kindly man replied.

She was here for a reason, the girl knew. Her, and not any other. “What would you have of me?”

“It is not what I would have of you, but what the Many-Faced God would.” The kindly man frowned; he had done that more often since she had drank for the third time. “You were in the sanctum earlier, were you not? When we gathered and discussed the path that lies ahead of us. The path with dragons at the end of it.”

“And the... dragons... must be given the gift?” asked the girl.

“No,” replied the kindly man, “the dragons must *die,* for good and all. And there must be someone to do it.” A small smile crept back onto his face. “Now, I know what you are thinking, child—”

*You don’t,* she thought. *No, you don’t.*

“—you are wondering how one goes about killing a dragon. Well, I think you know now, don’t you?” But even as she opened her mouth to tell him, the kindly man held up a hand. “That is something worth sleeping on, though, I think.” Just then, the waif came down the stairs with a pitcher, and laid it wordlessly upon the kindly man’s desk, along with a pair of cups. The other girl peered over the rim of the pitcher.

“It is only milk, child,” said the kindly man. But she knew that it was something else. When she had been blind... a long, long time ago, they had given here this. A potion to dull the senses, to rob of her sight, to drive her into begging on the streets of Braavos. It did not even *smell* like milk. But how could she refuse it, with the kindly man still smiling at her?

She took the cup; she drank. There was a honeyed taste to it, and underneath it the half-familiar pang of bitterness. “You look displeased, child,” said the kindly man. The waif lingered on the stairs, watching.

*Calm as still water.* “I have tasted this milk before.”

“That you have. And every one of us too. It runs in our veins same as blood. It is life and death, both bitter and sweet.” There was a note of menace in his voice at first, but it gradually began to fade. “What we gave you before was but a diluted drought, designed to heighten your senses save for one. You were not strong enough to understand, then.”

He was daring her to ask. “To understand what?”
"Why, child." The kindly man smiled more than ever. "Death, of course. Think on that when you sleep tonight."

In the pitch darkness of her sleeping cell that night, the girl dreamed for the first time in what might have been years. She dreamed, but she did not dream of anything, only the stark and unending expanse of a world beyond her own. There was nothing in that world; it was as empty as the hole in her heart, and she did not know why she was there, only that she was, and that she was dreaming.

Who are you? asked a faceless voice in the gloom.

Her answer was always the same. No one.

That is not true.

It is. She paused. Who are you?

Your pack.

I have no pack.

You do. You always have and you always will do.

A long moment of holding her breath. Where are you? What do you want?

Come, she heard the voice say, softer now. Come and run with us. Pack sister. The voice was very faint, but it was the only thing that remained to her and this world of dreams, so she clung to it, without quite knowing why. She felt herself being dragged away into the lurching, lucid darkness, through a whirlwind that made the hair stand up on her arms and the back of her neck...

It was as easy as slipping on a new cloak. Her skin prickled a bit at first, but then she was there, and it was as though she had never been away. The wolf was in her, and the wolf was her. Yet this wolf had a will of her own, too, and had not been a slave to man for a very long time. She did not protest, or fight, but she made sure that the girl inside her knew the way of things, and her place in the world.

Through the night sky the snowflakes fell like pale white flowers and were trodden underfoot as the pack, garbed in shadow, followed the curve of the still grey shore. Moonbeams graced the water with their iridescent touch, reaching out all the way to the distant green island at the edge of the fog. The old gods were strong here, and especially tonight. She could feel it in her bones.

The pack was not alone. A murder of crows had made their nest in some nearby tree, and were cawing some grotesque parody of a rooster’s morning song. That was nothing out of the ordinary, but for some reason their midnight tune chilled her. Every brief burst of song. Every strange halt. As though they were telling her something in a language she did not understand, and never would.

This was too quiet. Much too quiet. She knew these nights, the wolf had made them her own. In the pack they called her ‘Night Queen’. Yet tonight her dominion was haunted by the absence of things like fear and uncertainty among the lesser creatures... and instead, they manifested themselves in her.

Why? Why tonight, of all nights?

The wolf stopped in the middle of the unknown road. When the others saw that their leader had gone no further, they stopped too, and slunk back into line beside her. Low, meaningless howling tore through the darkness. She bared her teeth and snarled them into submission.

And things were still. Even the crows had stopped.
“Arya...”

It came from somewhere over by the man-road. Yes, from the hill, the ridge that hid them from the gaze of the tall black castle. Stay back, she signalled to the pack. I go on alone.

She took the steep and thorny way to the hill. Nettles kissed her flanks as she rose, but the itch they made did not bother her; they were nothing compared to the itching within. It was a dull ache that spoke of something inexplicable, something that she should never have forgotten, and yet had. As she reached the crest, the ache rose to a rolling drumbeat, louder than her own beating heart... and then subsided all at once. A low hiss burst from her lungs.

“Arya...”

Who are you? She could not say the words aloud, but the girl watching from within heard them. It occurred to Arya then this was more than just the wolf dream. She had dreamed this dream before, yes, but he had never been here. My brother. He is my little brother. And he is a cripple. He can’t walk.

And yet here I stand. He did not look too much like Jon Snow, she thought. Perhaps he looked like her other brother, the one who had been king... but she couldn’t remember what he had looked like.

She couldn’t really remember Jon either.

This was too strange to be real. The kindly man made me drink that milk, she thought. They could be here now, listening, watching my every move...

No one does not dream, she thought evasively.

But you are not no one, said her brother. You are part of the pack. They can close your waking mind, but not your sleeping one.

This is a trick, she insisted. They want me to give in. They want me to reveal who I really am.

There is no one here, save for the two of us, came the reply. You brought yourself here, don’t you remember?

That was true. There had been whispering, yes. The whisper... he sent the whisper, Arya thought. Did you send it?

Her brother nodded. How? she asked.

The same way that you put yourself inside Nymeria. I dreamed it. I dreamed that you were here, and that I could walk... and you must have dreamed of me. The old gods are strong in those who have the blood of the First Men, and we Starks have more than most.

Arya could hardly remember what it meant to be a Stark. It means the pack survives. It means ‘stick ‘em with the pointy end’. It means... something else. Something I don’t remember.

You’re far away, little sister, he said. And you need to come back. Where you are now... it isn’t the right place for you...

Back? But I don’t remember where. Or how.

You will, the boy promised, you will. When you wake. If you try. Then her wolf’s yellow eyes blinked once, just for half a second, and he was gone. A loneliness filled her. It might have been
longing, but she wasn’t sure what she was longing for. *Home is only a bittersweet dream, after all.*

She turned her head. *I am not a wolf,* Arya thought. *I am with a wolf, but I am not one myself. I am a girl. I am Arya Stark of Winterfell. I am not a wolf. I am no one.*

*Oh, but you are. You are but a mummer, and a poor one at that. And that is all you will ever be.* The waif’s words, harsh and cold as steel. *The gift is death.* This time the kindly man’s words. *But what is death, if not mercy from life? And what is life, if not mercy from death?*

*Valar morghulis. Valar dohaeris.*

*Two sides of the same coin.*

She woke all in darkness, her heart racing far faster than it should have been, her breaths awkward and throaty as she exhaled them into the cold close night. *“I am Arya Stark of Winterfell,”* she said. Her bare feet came down cold on the stone floor. *“Not Mercy the mummer, or Cat of the Canals.”* Her robe flapped around her feet, and Arya stumbled out of the dark cell, into the stairwell. *“I’m Arya Stark of Winterfell, and I’m going home.”*

She wasn’t even sure if it was true, or if it meant anything, but if she pretended enough, it might. As for how she was going to get there, she could not say.

The stairs beckoned her downwards into the crypts that led beneath the House, and out into the night, but Arya was damned if she was going to go unprepared. She wasn’t sure how one went about taking a face from the Hall, but it proved easy enough. The fleshy mask simply tumbled into her palm. If she had a mask, she could have pocketed it.

When she turned round to face the door, he was there, one half of his robe in black wool, the other half in white. *Life and death.* That smile was there, the one she had come to know so well, but now it was menacing. As though a light had been turned on in her head, and everything now shone so much truer.

*“You are late, child,”* he said. His voice was as hard as stone, as soft as silk. *“I commend you on your patience.”*

Arya swallowed, perhaps hoping that if she did not speak, he would go away and forget that he was there. Eventually her lips opened. *“How long have you known?”*

*“Years and years, child. Decades and centuries and still more than that. Since Braavos was dust, and you were but a spark in the eye of a faraway moon.”*

*“You’re dead.”* Arya stated it as a fact. *“All of you are dead. You... you were the very first Faceless Man. Or among the first. You died a long time ago.”*

The kindly man smiled. *“But here we are.”* He advanced a step nearer to her.

Arya crept back behind the nearest pillar, into the shadows. *“What do you want?”* she asked, and then again, more loudly. *“What do you want?”*

*“You tell me, child.”* His voice came from in front of her and beside her and all around her. Arya stepped back around the pillar. The kindly man was gone, but his voice remained. Dread crept through her. *He is right behind me.* *“You tell me...”*

She spun round quick as a snake... but he was not there either. *“You... you want to kill the dragons,”* she said. *“That’s why you took the horn. That’s what the Sealord told me. You want to kill the...”*
dragons because...” Why? Why?

He said, “Because all men must die. Valar morghulis. And only then can they truly serve. Valar dohaeris. Something is coming, Arya Stark of Winterfell. Something that will bring death to all of us, everyone you have ever known, every last one of them. But what is it?” The voice had taken on a horrid, childlike distortion. “What is coming, I ask you?”

“Winter,” she said. Winter is coming.

“Oh, indeed. The Starks of old knew it well. And your Stark blood is the only reason we have kept you here instead of casting you out. You have dreams, don’t you? Dark dreams.” Suddenly he appeared from the blackness right in front of her, and Arya stumbled back, careening into a pillar and sending a dozen faces tumbling down like a warm, fleshy waterfall. “And a girl who dreams of wolves could dream of dragons just as easily,” the kindly man said.

Arya turned, and ran. The stairs seemed to go on forever, up and up and up, and she could hear the kindly man behind her, his breath whistling oh so softly as he pursued here. Then it died away, and as Arya emerged into the sanctum she knew that he would be there before she saw him. He stood by the pool of dark water, midway between the stairs and the door. She could sense other Faceless Men standing in the dark recesses of the hall, waiting for her. The only way to go was towards him.

By the time she got there, the kindly man was looking almost sad again. “Oh, my dear child. You can run all you like, but you are one of us now.” He gestured to the pool. “You drank the water too. You are the servant of the Many-Faced God, same as the rest of us.”

“No,” said Arya. Said the girl who had never swallowed the water, but had spat it out in a basin, leaving her reeling from the taste of it. Said the girl who had been both no one and someone at the same time.

“No,” she said. “Not today.”

She took the knife – the knife she had taken from her bedside, the knife concealed in her sleeve, the knife now in her palm – and thrust it into the kindly man, tore it out, gave him a short, sharp shove, towards the pool, and ran. Ran like she never had before, as fast as she could... her heartbeat was so loud that it was an age before she realised they were not chasing her, and that the only sound was her fear, throbbing in her chest. Fear cuts deeper than swords, Arya thought, as she pushed through the tall ebony and weirwood doors of the house. Fear cuts deeper than swords. She ran across the stony square, beneath the pelting black rain. It had been raining back in the Riverlands, she recalled, back when she’d seen the wolf and her brother. Their names... she would remember their names soon. Fear cuts deeper than swords...

The steps. She knew these steps. Arya counted them as she ran down, without really noticing, or even remembering why. One-and-fifty two-and-fifty three-and-fifty four-and-fifty. She stopped and knelt down, feeling her way as she had when she was blind. Raindrops beat against the stone... but when they fell, they made an odd, slightly hollow noise. There is something under there.

Arya dug with her nails, and lifted up the old craggy slab. Inside was a sword. As sharp and skinny as her. Why, it almost looks like a...

Needle.

It was more than a sword. It was a reminder of what she had been, and what she was. It was a reminder of Jon Snow’s face, of him mussing up her hair as he said, “stick ’em with her pointy end,” and as they parted ways. I have to get back to him, Arya thought. The boy in the dream had told her
as much. Her brother. His name would come to her later. *I have to get back to them.*

They would be after her, she knew. She could not say why they had let her go in the first place, but Arya was not about to go back and ask. And so she picked up Needle from its sackcloth sheath, and turned towards the city. A few black ships remained stark against the purple horizon. *This is Braavos of the Hundred Isles, and beyond that lies all the promise of the West. Home.* The raindrops fell cold on her cheeks.

Arya ducked her head, and ran.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm.

I like to think I did this better than D&D, and their weird chicken soup plot, but this chapter was so vague and murky that I think it's going to split opinions over whether it was good or terrible. Either way, Arya is out of the House of Black and White now, so I can finally start to write her properly. I will freely admit that Braavos is my weakest plot, mostly because I have absolutely no clue how to write the characters or about the ideology of the House. There are plenty of fics that do this better than I have.

Personally, I try to ignore all the murkiness with this chapter, and instead focus on the return of Nymeria and Needle.

Anyway, the next chapter is set in Braavos too, but it's from Tyrion's perspective.

A few endnotes:

Some of you will have recognised the opening lines of this chapter as being very similar to prose that occurs during the prologues and epilogues of Patrick Rothfuss's *The Name of the Wind*. So credit for those lines goes to him, I guess.

You'll have noticed that the first third of this chapter is written from an omniscient POV viewpoint. We assume that Arya is in the room, but we know that she could be behind any of the masks; hence the ambiguity.

He did not look too much like Jon Snow, she thought. Perhaps he looked like her other brother, the one who had been king... but she couldn’t remember what he had looked like.

She couldn’t really remember Jon either.

That's probably one of the saddest things I've written, but it is probably true. Arya remembers bits and pieces of things, but she still drank the water in the House (at least) twice, so her memories are a bit of a muddle.
Deep Water

Chapter Summary

Live a lion, be a lion, die a lion.

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place concurrently and immediately following the previous chapter, entitled: No One.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

TYRION

“Do you trust this man?” Tyrion asked Ser Justin Massey.

“No,” the knight answered. “Not even slightly. His mere presence here at all stinks of suspicion. But I am familiar with his particular treachery, which is more than I can say for any of others.”

It will have to suffice, Tyrion thought uncertainly. He took a closer look at the pirate captain Ser Justin had brought him. Salladhor Saan was a black-hearted rogue out of Lys, and a successful one too, from the look of him. Rings circled every one of his ebon fingers, set with emeralds and garnets and onyx and chunks of blue jade. A man who wears his wealth on his hands is asking to have his hands cut off, Lord Tywin Lannister had been known to say. Tyrion did not doubt that his father would have been only too glad to wield the cleaver himself.

“Captain Saan,” said Tyrion. “I have heard much of your esteemable reputation.”

“You are a bad liar, little lord.” Saan smiled through big white teeth. “Salladhor Saan was expecting better trickery than this, after what he saw at the Battle of Blackwater Bay. Still, you are only a dwarf.”

“The most famous dwarf in the world.”

“Indeed. They have a play about you, did you know?”

“The Bloody Hand. I have seen it.” Tyrion had shared an interesting conversation with Phario Forel
the night before, when both of them were very drunk.

“And you call me vain,” muttered Ser Justin.

Salladhor Saan snapped his fingers. “Wine,” he declared. “I will not talk without wine. The finest vintage you have. Salladhor Saan does not settle for half, oh, no.”

“You shall have it.” He signalled for Numbers to enter; the boy poured first for the visitor, and then for Tyrion. “Of course.” Tyrion poured, first for his visitor, and then for himself. Ser Justin shook his head. “They need me at the Arsenal,” the knight said, rising. “Checking damages from last night.”

Tyrion doubted that. There were several hundred men up there already to oversee the rebuilding of the damaged harbour wall, but he would likely fare better without Ser Justin’s constant interference. By the time the knight left, Sallahdor Saan had finished one cup of wine and was busy pouring his second. “A man after my own heart,” Tyrion said dryly.

“Or your head. That would make a fine prize. It is good luck to rub a dwarf’s head.”

_It’s even better luck to suck a dwarf’s cock_, thought Tyrion, suppressing a snigger. “Surely you do not lack for luck already,” he said. “Few pirates have been at their trade for as long as you, Captain Saan. Forty years, Ser Justin tells me. And a ship for every year. Clearly you must be good at what you do.” Flattery might not work, but there was no harm in trying.

“Salladhor Saan mostly leaves the smuggling and pirating to his little friends, now, while he lies on soft pillows in the cabin of his flagship and eats grapes and licks gooseberry wine off the breasts of virgins. Which makes him ask: why should he risk it all for you, dwarf?”

Tyrion pointed to the flagon. “A few more cups of that wine, and you might find out.”

To his relief, Saan smiled. _And I have him._

The negotiations took the better part of two hours, and they went through four flagons of wine before Sallahdor Saan came to an agreement. It was hard for Tyrion get a word in edgeways, since Saan talked so feverishly and so excessively. But by the end Tyrion had definitely come off better; Saan was so drunk he could barely stand, while Tyrion merely had a disgustingly sour taste in his mouth from all the wine he’d spat back into his cup. Still, that was better than throwing up.

“You drive a hard bargain,” Saan slurred out, with a sultry nod. “Lord Imp, if Salladhor Saan was not such a good-natured man, he would damn you to hell. Like the men who lost their sons on the Blackwater.” Mad, silent laughter bubbled through his lips.

“Well, my friend, you may see another Blackwater tomorrow night,” said Tyrion. “See that you are on the right side of it.”

“Oh, I will. But do not disappoint me, dwarf. Salladhor Saan is expecting fires the colour of burning emeralds, dancing with all the animal ferocity and splendid grace of a naked woman.”

_How I long for an imagination like yours, Salladhor Saan._ “I will do my very best,” Tyrion promised. They had no wildfire, so there would be no green flames, but he would let Saan keep his dreams, and face his disappointment when it came. _How can I deny him that? I had dreams once too._

He called Numbers back into the room. “What time is it?”

“The hour of the cat, my lord.”
“Hmm. A little too dark for my liking. I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong ideas about my work. Only thieves and liars work by night.”

“And which are you?” Numbers japed.

Which indeed? Tyrion wondered, as they headed out into one of the countless stone warrens that linked their makeshift stronghold together. Their only light through the tunnels was Numbers’s torch, and in its weak light Tyrion felt especially small. The weight of their war loomed over him, and every now and again the walks rattled with the echo of the storm in the harbour.

A few more staircases brought them back into Moredo Prestayn’s halls. They were barely inside the hall when Phario Forel appeared from nowhere and begged Tyrion’s company for an audience, asking about ideas for a rewriting of *The Bloody Hand*. Amusing as that would have been, Tyrion had to refuse. “I have a report to make.”

They had not bothered to wait for him; few men did. “I have six barges coming up from the Drowned Town,” a fat nobleman named Mentaros was saying. “They are only small, but every one of them counts if we are making a landing in the Purple Harbor—”

“No one mentioned a landing in the Purple Harbor,” said Qarro Volentin. “The walls of the Arsenal are strong and high. From them we can use our trebuchets and scorpions to great effect.”

“I think everyone has heard more than enough about your trebuchets and scorpions, Qarro,” said Moredo Prestayn. “And the waves of attack will not get any smaller. There are nearly two hundred thousand sellswords up near the Sealord’s Palace. We cannot defend against that many.”

“I have two more galleys as well,” said Selazar of the Shipwright’s Guild. “Yesterday’s efforts were sufficient.” At the Arsenal, the Braavosi could outfit a war galley in a day. Though that was much harder under constant threat of attack.

“Two galleys?” Prestayn said. “A great help, I’m sure.”

There was no better time for it. “Fear not, my friends,” interjected Tyrion. “Their numbers will not matter if I can implement this plan of mine. I have found not one, not two, but thirty-seven ships for you. A mixture of war galleys and trading ships, some battered and broken, some nearly in ruins, but for my plan, none of that will matter.”

“Thirty-seven ships?” It was the first time Tyrion had seen Qarro Volentin look surprised. “How did you come by those?”

“A pirate fleet,” Tyrion explained, “moored in a cove a few leagues to the south of here. We still hold the Titan of Braavos, don’t we, so we can let them through. Once they are in the bay... well, I trust these ships will be more than suitable for ramming, if nothing else. And we will have at least thirty-seven fools willing to die for the glory of Braavos.”

“How did you come by a pirate fleet?” asked Prestayn.

“Salladhor Saan. An old contact of Ser Justin’s.”

Prestayn sniffed the air. “Saan is a notorious pirate. I will not have him be the saviour of the city of Braavos.”

*He has not refused my plan.* That was a good start. “Saviours are rarely chosen,” Tyrion said. “If you can get past your pride, I have thirty-seven ships ready to be filled with all sorts of nitre and pitch and a dozen other things that will catch and burn.”
Qarro Volentin narrowed his eyes. “And how did you buy this pirate fleet?” he asked. “I hope you have not made promises on the behalf of the Free City of Braavos that you cannot possibly keep?”

A shame I did not think of that. I could have promised him all the Iron Bank’s gold; it would have been fun to watch him try and collect that. “A Lannister always pays his debts,” Tyrion said. Three million golden dragons to soften Salladhor Saan’s purse. More than he is probably worth. Ferrego Antaryon would doubtless be angry that he was wasting the money meant for Queen Daenerys, but Antaryon was dead (and Tyrion might soon be joining him) so it did not really matter.

“I do not like your plan, Imp,” said Moredo Prestayn.

Tyrion smiled. “Have you got another one?” They might come up with one, given time, yes, but time was not something they had in abundance. Even so, the man might have lied and made a bitter reply, were it not for the horn. AAAAAWHHHHHHHHHHH, came the sound from the Arsenal, out on its rocky outcrop, AAAAAWHAHHHHHHH.

“Our visitors have arrived,” Tyrion said dryly. Qarro Volentin jumped up with the litheness and grace expected of a First Sword of Braavos, and was on his way out into the hall before anyone else had scarce moved a muscle. That one would make a better Sealord than Prestayn, the Imp thought. Men respect him for his talents, not his wealth. And he knows how to lead. He wondered if there was a precedent for a First Sword taking his master’s position.

Tyrion waddled over to meet Numbers in a dim corner of the hall. “Ready for another night of this?”

“Not really, my lord.”

“They’ll expect to see me out on the ramparts.”

A pause. “They? Who are they?”

“I don’t know. But as a Lannister, it is somewhat expected of me. My family is loath to let others take all the glory.”

“I suppose we had better find you an axe.”

“And you as well. You’re much less fun than my last squire. Tyg would have loved this. Pod too, though he’d be too busy stammering to admit it.” Tyrion headed off, leaving Numbers to catch up.

“I think I saw her back in the kitchens. Below our chambers.”

“Where’s Penny?”

“Apart from the fighting starts, you can head back to her, if you’d like. Make sure she doesn’t end up falling over a rampart to her death. That would be most unfortunate.” Tyrion felt a strange affection for the girl, though in the light of everything she’d said and done over the past few days - alternating tirades of sobbing and irascible questioning – he wasn’t sure why. If she did fall over a rampart, my life would be a lot easier. Though the guilt wouldn’t be worth it. He worriedly discarded that thought.

The armory was crowded as he’d known it would be, but one lucky benefit of being a dwarf was that no one else fit into the child-sized breastplates and armour pieces he sought out. Thus Tyrion was able to find armour which, though tight in place and loose in others, was mostly unaffected by age and wear. Numbers brought his short axe and a big bowl-shaped helm that forced the dwarf’s hair down into his eyes, then went off to find his own armament. Minutes later, they were pushing through the crowd and out onto the rampart, rattling like two peas in a giant steel pod. The air was rife with the smells of rusty metal and dried sweat and nervous anticipation.
He had no way of seeing through the maze of arms and legs, and even when he slipped through the gaps in the crowd and pressed himself close to the rampart, his view was obscured both by his height and the rising plumes of dark grey smoke. Tyrion tugged on Numbers’s arm. “What do you see?”

“Fire, my lord,” the boy answered. “Lots of fire. Though I reckon there are a few ships in there, too.”

“Ours or theirs?”

Numbers squinted. “I don’t know. I can’t tell. But I don’t think it matters. It’s on fire now, too.”

Burn them all. Tyrion felt an odd desire to laugh. There will be many more ships on fire when I carry out this plan of mine. A shame it would have to wait until another night. He did not doubt that the flames from thirty burning ships would outshine the moon.

The battle on the water was quite boring, as battles went. Occasionally the order went up for men to defend the lower levels of Prestayn’s palace and the Arsenal from armed attackers, but none of them wanted the help of a particularly sharp-tongued dwarf, so they let Tyrion stand with his head barely poking above the rampart, listening to the fire of catapults and scorpions. The stones and bolts made a great cracking noise when they pierced the wooden bellies of the foe’s fleet; otherwise they hit the water of the bay with a vague splash. It was a strangely exhilarating feeling to be present at a battle without the risk of being killed by it. So he stood at the merlon and listened until the enemy gave up for the night and turned their boats back towards the Purple Harbor. As the defenders began to celebrate their victory, the Titan of Braavos blasted out his great horn, once, twice, thrice, half revelling in victory, half mocking the failed attack. Tyrion smiled. “The gods are on my side for once,” he muttered as he and Numbers headed back to the armory.

“There’ll be a feast in the main hall,” Tyrion said. “Coming?”

Numbers drew off his helmet and straightened the hair that had been crushed down. His eyes blinked tiredly in the moonlight. “I’d like to get some sleep, my lord. Maybe tomorrow.”

Good idea. Tomorrow we will be victorious for good, so long as Salladhor Saan delivers on his promise. So long as my trust in a pirate was not unfounded... Tyrion had his doubts, but they would wait until dawn. So while Numbers went to his bed, he headed downstairs into Moredo Prestayn’s hugely crowded hall.

Midnight found him in the company of the Merling Queen, one of Braavos’s most famed courtesans. The Queen never went anywhere without her Mermaids, four impossibly pretty girls with silver hair that shimmered with every twist of the light. They looked as perfect as the statues of the Maiden that stood in the sept. And their resemblance to Sansa Stark was uncanny, Tyrion thought.

I should get one of them for Numbers, he thought drunkenly. Gods know the boy could do with some entertainment to loosen him up. Tyrion felt much the same. Without the interference of his personal guard and unrestricted by Bronn hovering at his shoulder, he felt free for the first time in years. Live a lion, be a lion, die a lion, his father had said. To hell with that, Tyrion decided. He was drunker than he had been in months. He made bawdy japes about the Titan’s scrotum with Phario Forel, and danced a strange foreign jig with the Black Pearl. At one point Justin Massey tracked him down to ask about his negotiations with Salladhor Saan, but it would wait till the morrow, till the morrow, till the morrow...

He eventually discovered Penny in the midst of a crowd she had somehow gathered. Tyrion ducked under arms and legs and pushed his way through to find her performing cartwheels and tumbling over tables. He could not quite tell whether this was her intention or whether she was in distress. Penny was a born performer, but her dance left him feeling more guilty than amused. They are not
laughing with her, he realised, looking at the chuckling onlookers, they are laughing at her. Through his drunkenness, a sudden hot rage gripped him.

Penny spun round suddenly, and saw him. “Have you come to join in?” she asked brightly.

Tyrion’s cheeks burned. “No. I’ve come to—”

“We’re dancing.”

“We?”

“Me and Tam.” She pointed to one of the Braavosi soldiers, who was making an unsuccessful attempt to replicate Penny’s tumbling; clearly he’d had about five times too much to drink. “Oppo taught me in Tyrosh.” For once she was smiling.

“You are a lucky man to have a wife like this one,” said a gold-toothed Myrman, with the hint of a smile.

“She’s not my wife,” Tyrion snapped back at him. “Nonetheless, I need to talk to her in private.”

That brought a round of mocking laughter, but Tyrion heard a few crude suggestions that Penny was not his wife, but his whore, and that ‘talking’ was what dwarfs called fucking. With a last icy glare, Tyrion dragged Penny away before the situation could get any worse. The chuckles of the soldiers mingled with the wailing of the wind outside as the two dwarfs stumbled through the halls. Once safely out of earshot, Tyrion pulled her into an abandoned storeroom, barely more than a cupboard.

Penny stared back at him with her child’s eyes. “Tyrion? M’lord? What is wrong?”

It was hard to explain. Drunk as he was, Tyrion did not really know what he was explaining. “They... were laughing at you. At us.” He sucked in a breath. A Lannister is always suspicious of laughter. But how could he tell her that, and have her understood in her stupid naivety?

“They were supposed to be laughing. I wanted to make them laugh.” Penny spoke as though she were explaining it to a stupid child... but how could she not understand that she was the stupid child here? “It was only a jape.”

“Aye, only a jape. For now. But... if you make your life all about japes, then you will never amount to anything other than that.” They were cruel words, but she needed to hear them. “You need to grow up, Penny.” His voice cracked. “Please.” A pause. And another. And then a shy nod, which might have meant everything, or nothing at all. “Where’s Numbers?” she asked, a little timidly.

“He said he was tired,” he replied. “He went to bed.”

“Oh,” she said, and gulped. “Um... Tyrion... can I sleep with you tonight?”

Tyrion nearly choked. “What?”

“Oh.” Penny’s face turned Lannister crimson. “I meant, sleep in your room. So I’m not lonely. The night... it can be... scary.”

Damn you, Penny. Don’t you ever listen? Tyrion was on the cusp of getting angry, but decided it wasn’t worth his trouble. She is only a child, and she means nothing by it. “Fine,” he said heavily, trying not to look at her, as though that would make things less real. “Let’s go. I’ll—” Before he could say another word Penny slammed into him, throwing her against his shoulders and his waist, nervously bumping her head against his neck. Awkwardly, after a long, long pause, she let go.
“Sorry... I shouldn’t have...”

“No,” Tyrion said, very quickly. “You... shouldn’t have.” He turned his back on her and stepped back out into the hallway. Penny lingered a moment, then scurried after him. They went through a guardsroom where the men were too busy playing dice and drinking to notice the dwarfs passing through. Eventually they made it to Tyrion’s chambers. Numbers was lying in the bed beneath the window, snoring gently beneath the blankets. “Be quiet,” Tyrion told Penny, as he helped her into her bed and shoved some blankets after her. “We shouldn’t wake him.”

She looked down at him. “There’s only two beds, Tyrion. Where... where will you sleep?”

“On the floor, I expect. For tonight. They’ll put another one in tomorrow, if you want to come back.” He could not deny her that.

“You... there’s room up here, if you want.”

*Is she so blind that she cannot see what that would look like?* All it would take would be one person seeing them together when he came to wake them in the morning, and the rumours would spread like wildfire. “I’m fine,” he said in a strangled voice, “I doubt I’ll sleep much anyway.” That was true. Tyrion was aching to head back to the hall to fetch a sour wine to pass the time with, and a book, if he could find it.

“Tyrion,” said Penny softly. “Will there be more fighting tonight?”

“I don’t think so. And if there is, I am so drunk that I might sleep my way through it.”

“Oh,” Penny replied in a small voice. “I’d like to sleep through it, too.”

“Be my guest,” Tyrion said. “There’s wine on my shelf.” A moment passed. “You’re afraid.” *And who could blame you?*

The girl spoke in broken, stumbling sentences. “It’s just... all my life... Oppo always knew where we were going. When... if even if we survive this... I don’t have anywhere to go. I... I don’t know if I can do it on my own... where will I go... did they find me funny, or just Oppo?”

“Believe me, Penny, they laugh at dwarves all over the world,” Tyrion said bitterly. “If you are looking to make coin out of mockery, King’s Landing will be a seed-bed of fortune for you.” *As for whether that fortune is good or bad...*

“I hated King’s Landing,” Penny said after a long time. “I always said it was a bad place, but Oppo did not listen. Someone had paid a lot of money for us, he said.”

*I meant to pay them back,* Tyrion recalled suddenly. *I took Podrick Payne aside and I told him to find a way to pay the dwarves for their service and their good humour. I never did repay that debt.* There was a cruel irony in that, as though the gods had delivered Penny to his door precisely so that Tyrion could make good on that promise. *A Lannister always pays his debts, and sometimes the debts come back to haunt him.* “A lot of money, you said.” He let out his breath. “My father had a lot of money. But it wouldn’t have been him who paid for you. He hated dwarfs.” Sudden curiosity gripped him. “Was your father a... a little person, Penny?”

“Yes. His name was Hop-Bean. He was famous in the taverns of Oldtown. He died when I was young.”

“And your mother?”
“No. She was normal-sized, I think. I don’t remember. She died when I was very young.”

“In the birthing bed?”

“I…”

“My mother died in the birthing bed. My father said that I had killed her. And perhaps I did. Perhaps she knew as she squeezed my monstrous body from her womb that the path ahead of me was so dark and twisted.”

“I don’t think you’re dark and twisted.”

Tyrion almost pitied her naivety. But he wasted no time with it and pressed on undeterred. “Oh, I am dark and twisted. My father made sure I was never anything but.” It was hard to speak from the heart; it made him burn inside. “He said ‘you are an ill-made, spiteful creature, full of envy, lust and low cunning.’ Afterwards he would say ‘you are a Lannister, you are my son,’ to try and convince me to remain loyal to him when others would not. And I believed him. It’s hard to believe that I was so… desperate for his affection, but for a time, I lost my cynicism and I believed that my father saw worth in me. He played the same trick on me twice, and fooled me the same way. Both times, I put on the badge of the Hand of the King and did as Lord Tywin had commanded, always deferring to my father’s better judgement.

“The story has a bittersweet ending, I suppose.” Penny was listening, he thought, but Tyrion was no longer talking to her. “My father could go on about his legacy for days, yet all that remained of his line when he died was the twisted little dwarf and his two beautiful and horribly flawed siblings. I still take some small pleasure in knowing that Cersei and Jaime were fucking each other for decades and he never noticed. But how could he have never noticed? Perhaps he did, and spent his dying moments denying that, despite knowing it to be inarguably true.”

He chewed his lip. Penny said, “You’re not your father, though.”

I am more like him than either us would care to admit. “I remember what you said earlier, Penny, about dwarfs and japes. You like to see them laugh. I like to see them crying on their knees as they beg mercy and forgiveness for their laughing. I may have the body of a dwarf, but I have the fatal anger, wrath and pride of a lion.” Hear me roar.

Time passed. Before he knew it, Penny had joined Numbers in the land of dreams, and Tyrion was left alone on the floor. As he always had been. From the bleak grey world outside came the proud boom of thunder.

Once, when he had been a boy, and even shorter than he was now, a great storm had come to the Rock. “The greatest in a generation,” Uncle Gerion had said. He’d woken Tyrion and Jaime on the fiercest night of the storm, and they’d gone up to the maester’s turret to stare up at the clouds through the far-eye telescope. Tyrion was too short to reach the lens, so Jaime had lifted him up, and for a while they’d sat together, brother and brother, draped in a blanket, listening to the echoing thunder and watching the distorted flashes of blue light behind the clouds.

Are you seeing this, Jaime? he wondered now. Are you watching this as well, from wherever you might be, wherever you might have fled?

“Mother.”

At first Tyrion thought it might have him who had spoken, some drunken fear coming to his lips. Then it came again, a pained moan, and a sob. “Mother, oh, Mother, please… I don’t want you to…
don’t want you… not to go, please, please, Mother…”

*Not Penny*, he realised. *And not me… Numbers.*

Under his blankets the boy was shaking, his skin pallid and ghost-pale. “Mother,” he murmured again, lost to the world, “Come back, come back, please, Mother, please… please…” His feet made a drumbeat against the floor. “Please, please, I don’t-don’t-don’t…”

And then all at once Numbers was awake, staring round with frightened eyes, shivering, a single tear making its slow trail down his pale face. Then came the shivering and the shaking and the incoherent muttering. “Mmm…oh, I, I… I’m… so-sorry…”

*Seven bloody hells. Looking after Penny is bad enough.* Tyrion staggered up from the floor and crossed the room to kneel at the boy’s side. “Numbers,” he said sharply. The boy’s face was damp and sweaty. “*Numbers. Squire. Boy.*”

“Mother?” came the reply.

“I… I’m not your mother.” He swallowed. “I’m Tyrion, Lord Tyrion, and—” But before he could say any more the boy was busy sobbing into his arms. Awkwardly, Tyrion sat and waited it out, reaching out a tentative arm to hug him back, but never quite finding the strength.

Penny was waking up. “What’s happening?” she asked. “Are we being attacked?” She made an impressive and surprisingly graceful leap from the bed to the boards below, rolling a short ways across the floor before jumping up to her feet again. Her brown hair was tousled from sleep, her eyes alert beneath the shelf of brow.

“No,” Tyrion said. “Penny. Fetch some wine from the guardroom, please. We’ve… we’re in need of a drink. Numbers is, I mean…”

To Penny’s credit, she did not waste any time. In an instant she had fled. Numbers’s fingers squeezed tighter around Tyrion’s wrist, the fingernails digging. “I was crying out, wasn’t I?” he said in a strange hollow voice. “Crying out in my sleep.”

Tyrion saw no reason to deny it. “Something about your mother. You can tell me, if you like. Pain and I are old friends.”

Numbers did not seem to hear him. “Cold,” he said quietly. “I’m cold.”

“Your clothes are all soaked through,” Tyrion observed. “I’ll fetch you something.” He retreated across the room to pick up the blankets from his makeshift bed. When he turned round, Numbers had pulled off his undershirt and stood shivering before him. His skin was scarred by dozens of bruises and welts, every colour from mulberry to faded blue.

“They beat you,” said Tyrion simply. “They… but you’re a boy.” *Of course they beat him*, he thought. *That’s what hardship is, not that you’d know. Fool of a dwarf.*

“I did bad.” Numbers shivered a little. “I did bad, my lord. I took… I stole books… sometimes they caught me… Master Edoryen… he beat me in front of the camp.” He turned round then, and Tyrion saw that he was crying, his shoulders hunching and shaking erratically.

*Cripples, bastards and broken things.* “You don’t have to tell me everything—”

“I do. You said…” He staggered back across the cabin. There were bruises across his front as well, chest and shoulders and arms, all over. “And not just them,” the boy continued. “The other squires
too, m’lord. Letters and numbers, they said, stupid, mocking, and... they started to call me Numbers... I took it as my own name, to try and prove them wrong, but they hit me anyway. I tried to... defend myself with a shield and sword, but I was never any good.” He sobbed suddenly, and hid his face in his hands.

Tyrion shrugged off his shadowskin cloak and draped it over Numbers’s shoulders. “I know,” he said through cracked lips. “I know how it feels to be... to be beaten down.”

“No, you don’t. I tried. I tried so hard to defend myself... but I never – I never could. They never should have bought me. I don’t know why they did... a man... a man in a cloak took me, though, and sold me on... I don’t know why. I don’t know.” And he dissolved into another spate of sobs.

“Numbers,” Tyrion said softly, squatting down on the boards and desperately wishing that Penny would return. She would be far better suited to this than I am. “I’m sorry. But... I... what did your mother call you?” He felt bad about calling the boy by a name that had clearly caused him so much grief.

“My... mother?” The boy glanced up, watching him with eyes the colour of a summer’s sea. “My lord, I never knew her. But they said... she named me after my father... a company man, they said.”

“They?”

Numbers stifled a sob. “Ser Laswell Peake. He said I could be a fighter, like Father, he said. Afterwards, they said he would have been disappointed with me... with everything.” He took a deep breath. “My father was called Gerion. Like me.”

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who are looking closely will realise something very wrong in this chapter. Those of you who are looking very, very closely will be on their way to working out a vast conspiracy that reaches far beyond Tyrion's wildest imagination.

The final conversation between Tyrion and Numbers was supposed to be the ending of "Debts to Pay", then the ending of "The Counting Game", then the ending of "The Iron Bank", but I kept moving it further and further back, until here we are. This is pretty much the latest time I could have thrown in the big reveal.

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So, this chapter: more a character study of Tyrion than it is an advancement of the Braavos plot. Not to reveal too much, but "Deep Water" is the character climax of Tyrion's arc; from here onwards, it's heavy plot stuff.

I did enjoy building on the character relationship between Penny and Tyrion, and I think they'll be having some very interesting conversations in his next POV chapter: Tyrion and Penny both live under similar circumstances, but have come from very different directions. And this is the first time Tyrion has really interacted with another dwarf, so we may see a side of him we haven't seen before.
Tyrion was more bitter during this chapter than we've ever seen him:

“He said ‘you are an ill-made, spiteful creature, full of envy, lust and low cunning.’ Afterwards he would say ‘you are a Lannister, you are my son,’ to try and convince me to remain loyal to him when others would not. And I believed him. It’s hard to believe that I was so... desperate for his affection, but for a time, I lost my cynicism and I believed that my father saw worth in me. He played the same trick on me twice, and fooled me the same way. Both times, I put on the badge of the Hand of the King and did as Lord Tywin had commanded, always deferring to my father’s better judgement.”

This is him realising that Tywin's last words to him (at least those that we see in the narrative): 'you are my son’ from ACOG, Tyrion IX (I think) were merely his father's way of manipulating him once again as he did in AGOT, Tyrion IX.

Numbers: “...they started to call me Numbers... I took it as my own name, to try and prove them wrong, but they hit me anyway. I tried to... defend myself with a shield and sword, but I was never any good.”

This is sad because it directly denies Tyrion's philosophy of 'wear[ing] what you are like armour, [so that] it can never be used to hurt you.' Basically, it's pointing out that Tyrion's worldview is greatly limited because of the fact that he is a Lannister, and thus would never be mocked to his face because people feared Lord Tywin's wealth and power.

And here's the bitter truth about Tyrion's lack of heroism:

“I remember what you said earlier, Penny, about dwarfs and japes. You like to see them laugh. I like to see them crying on their knees as they beg mercy and forgiveness for their laughing. I may have the body of a dwarf, but I have the fatal anger, wrath and pride of a lion.”

This quote sort of references that thing Queen Elizabeth I said, though I don't think there's much of a historical parallel between Elizabeth and Tyrion Lannister.

The main theme of this chapter is that Tyrion hasn't faced as many challenges as he thinks he has due to being born into power and privilege - he could easily have lived a life like Numbers' or Penny's. This is summed up by his final judgement:

[Numbers's life is] what hardship is, not that you'd know. Fool of a dwarf.

The chapter title "Deep Water" is a reference to House Reyne of Castamere, whose words in the canon of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS are 'Still Waters Run Deep'. So there's more evidence here of Tywin Lannister breaking things down and destroying them. On a surface level (no pun intended), it's about how people hide their true selves beneath the water, and we only see the very 'tip of the iceberg' when we look at their personalities.

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So, um, there's my analysis, which went on a lot longer than I'd intended. "Deep Water" is one of my favourite chapters in this series, which surprised me, because I thought it would be a rather bland when I first started writing it. I guess it was pretty deep. ;)
The next chapter is similarly a character study, but looking at some very different characters and a very different dilemma. Then we're back to plotty stuff again.
The Last Heir

Chapter Summary

“Too many good men have died already.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TOMMEN

The hill was swamped in mist, and the east wind was blowing the rain into their faces. King Tommen ran a hand through his hair and turned to look at Lady Margaery. “Maybe they decided not to come.” Part of him hoped so. He was not feeling confident about any of this. Maybe I should have listened to Mother.

No. He cast that thought aside. Mother wanted a war, for whatever reason, and he would not kneel down and give it to her. Not when they could end it all right now.

Can I do it, though?

But now was not the time for doubts. Regardless of how he felt about it, they were here, an uncomfortable welcome party one hundred strong, hiding beneath the overcast grey clouds and a score of Lannister, Tyrell and Martell banners. I cannot ask them to turn back, Tommen knew.

“We’re only a minute away, Your Grace. If you want us to fetch some mulled wine—”

“Where is she?” he asked. The hour they’d agreed upon had come and gone.

“She will come,” Margaery said. “She has to.”

It was not long before Lew Piper rode up through the patchy mist and proved her right. “They’re only a minute away, Your Grace. If you want us to fetch some mulled wine—”

“Not here,” Tommen decided. The wind was starting to sting his eyes; this was hardly a suitable place for their meeting. “We’ll ride back to the camp. But you should get bread and salt ready.” Not that it means anything, after the Red Wedding and the Night of the Wolf.

“Nervous?” Margaery asked.

A king must be brave. Lord Tywin’s words, over and over again. Tommen even whispered them under his breath. What is there to be afraid of? “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t,” he said.

“You’ll be fine.” She brushed her hand against his. “I know you will.”
“I’m glad you think that.” Tommen fiddled with a thread of his padded doublet, and gave the pin that bound his cloak a nervous twist. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them to the sight of horses thundering up onto the ridge, and Baratheon banners waving above them. There was some commotion among the new arrivals, and then two figures climbed down from their horses and made their way across the grassy sward. Both were wrapped up in thick cloaks of grey wool, and only drew back their hoods once under the canopy of the tent.

Tommern stepped forwards. “Lady Shireen,” he greeted. “I am pleased to receive you.”

“That is Princess Shireen to you,” said the man at her side.

“Patience, Ser Davos,” counseled the girl. “Lord Tommen. May I introduce Ser Davos Seaworth, Hand of the King to my father.”

Tommern gestured to Margaery. “This is Lady Margaery Tyrell. I mean, Martell. Wife to Prince Quentyn of Dorne. My councillor and good friend.”

Princess Shireen nodded. “I am pleased to meet you, Lady Margaery. It has been a long time, I know, but may I offer you my condolences on the death of your husband, Lord Renly. He was a good uncle. A good man.”

“He was a good man, yes.” Margaery remained tight-lipped. “His death came as a terrible shock to us all. And may I offer you condolences on the death of your lord father.”

“You may, but I must reject them. My father is not dead.”

This argument would do them no good, Tommen decided. “If it please you, my lady, we will head back to our encampment at Lannisport. It is only a short ride. The rain is not good for any of us.”

Shireen glanced at Ser Davos. If there was a message in his eyes, Tommen could not read it. “Very well,” she said eventually. “I don’t imagine any of us want to catch a cold needlessly. But I will need your assurances, of course.”

“Oh. Yes, of course. Lew, the bread and salt, please.”

Little Lew Piper held out the platter. Ser Davos chewed it down suspiciously, and his brown eyes spoke only of distrust as he stared at Tommen. It is not that he does not like me. He hates me.

“Well,” he said quietly. “We should go back to our horses.”

Margaery followed him out of the tent. “You did well,” she said, as Tommen mounted Breeze.

“I haven’t done anything yet. That was the easy part.” And even that went worse than I’d hoped. His palms were sweating. He wiped them on his breeches. “When does Prince Quentyn need you back? You’re not going anywhere, are you?” I need your help. The last part was unkingly, so he did not say it.

“Quentyn and Loras will be occupied most of the day, so I won’t need to go back until suppertime.” Margaery smiled. “Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not.”

She ignored that. “We’ll be in your tent, now. On your terms. Remember that. And if the worst should come about...”

“Lord Tarly has a thousand men waiting. I know.” But a fight was the last thing Tommen wanted.
That would mean all his efforts had been for nothing. He turned Breeze in a slow circle towards the valley below and they ambled off.

Princess Shireen decided to lead the way. As she passed him, Tommen caught a glimpse of the device on the back of Davos Seaworth’s cloak. *What did she call him? The Onion Knight.*

*Onions.*

For a moment he was back on the battlefield at Sarsfield, and there was that boy with the onions on his shield, and Lawbringer slashing its way through the rain. He swallowed the bile that was rising in his throat. *There must be other onion knights.*

Tents began to appear in the mist around them. Lannisport had been a city at war for so long that it sometimes seemed to have known nothing else. Its smallfolk were all bound to duties of training for war and patrolling and rebuilding the defenses in case another army should suddenly appear. The perimeter wall was ringed by ditches and caltrop pits. Crossbowmen watched their approach from rain-soaked siege towers. And all their eyes watching him. Tommen could not shake off the feelings of uncertainty even as he dismounted and led them inside his tent.

“You keep an impressive camp, Lord Lannister,” Princess Shireen opined, as Tommen led her inside. Ser Davos Seaworth followed her, and Margaery followed him. “I confess I would be clueless about attacking it, so you need not fear.” She quirked her mouth in a half-smile. “I hope you won’t object to me having Ser Davos here?”

“Not at all. I mean, I’ll be having Lady Margaery as well.” Tommen cleared his throat. “Having her here. I mean... have a seat. I’ll... would you like some mulled wine? We have lemon cakes as well, and plum pie.”

“Just the wine, please.” She left Tommen in the awkward position of wondering whether pouring the wine for her would be seen as submissive. But he decided he would rather be a gracious host than a chilly one and filled her cup anyway, and then Ser Davos’s, Margaery’s, and lastly his own. Then they gathered at the table, Tommen and Margaery on one side, Princess Shireen and Ser Davos on the other.

*A king should be strong,* Tommen thought. *Or at the least, he should appear strong.* He squared his shoulders and made sure he was sitting tall. “So,” he said.

“So,” said Princess Shireen.

“You came to negotiate?”

“We came to talk. And if we can agree on anything of it, then so much the better.”

Tommens swallowed. “What... what do you want?”

“We want peace,” she said. “That is the long and short of it. If you can give us that, my lord, then this will not be hard.”

A pause. “Peace on what terms?”

“Mutual terms,” Margaery interjected. “Terms that suit both the Lannisters and the Baratheons.”

Ser Davos Seaworth snorted. “You will have an easier time finding a dry stone in the sea than a peace which accomplishes that.”
“Then we had best get looking,” said Shireen. When Tommen laughed, she returned his smile. “You see, Davos. We have made more progress in three minutes of talking than in three years of fighting.”

Ser Davos gave a noncommittal shrug. “Three minutes of talking cannot undo three years of fighting.” His eyes bore into Tommen’s. “Forgive me, boy, but I have lost five sons to this war. That does worse things to a man than you will ever understand. I admit that you are no monster. But all the same, I would very much like to drive a dagger through your heart, and if you had found me on a bad day, I might very well have done.” He pushed back his chair, and stormed from the tent.

Princess Shireen watched him go. “You must forgive my Onion Knight,” she said. “He is a good man, but he has a lost a lot to my father’s cause. He should have stayed at Riverrun, but he would not let me venture into the West alone.”

“Why did you come this far west?” Tommen asked.

“For the same reason you agreed to meet with me. I want to end this war.”

“It sounds so simple.” But Tommen did not have a clue where to start, and from the pause that followed, Shireen did not either.

She sighed. “I should go looking for Ser Davos,” she said. “I can try and... convince him...” Shireen did not seem to believe it herself. “I will see you at the feast later, my lord.”

Wait, Tommen might have said. Stay a moment. But by then she was already gone.

Margaery turned to him. “Well,” she said, “that could have gone worse.”

“It could have gone better.”

She touched his hand. “You worry too much, Tommen. We were never going to get them to consent to peace at our first meeting, and they would not have expected it from us either. But if we can sit them around the table once, we can do so again.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I hope so too. The important thing now is to make sure that we are prepared for the next meeting. That we make ourselves certain of what they want.”

“They want to put Stannis on the Iron Throne.”

“Well, that is a moot point, since you don’t have the Iron Throne. King Aegon is not likely to agree to that, either.”

Sometimes Tommen forgot she was here on behalf of Aegon Targaryen. He made vague promises about peace to her as well, but Margaery didn’t really bother lecturing him on it. Mother won’t want to make peace with the Targaryens either, he thought. As if I don’t have enough obstacles to deal with.

Tommen decided that he did not want to deal with any of them today. “I’ll think about it later,” he said dismissively. “You... you should go back to Prince Quentyn. He’ll be expecting you. I have... business with the war council.” There was always business with the war council.

Margaery withdrew from the tent with a brief, “As Your Grace commands.” It took all of Tommen’s willpower not to call her back.
In times like these, he usually turned to his grandfather’s old advice. Only Tommen knew without hesitation that Lord Tywin would tell him to have Shireen dragged into a cell, even if it meant breaking laws of guest right. Lord Tywin probably would have done the same with the Tyrells and Prince Quentyn, too.

There were two letters on the table in front of him. One was from Myrcella, and one from Bran Stark, who was at Castle Black: We hid in the crypts... the Black Gate at the Nightfort... Jon helped us escape the cave... I know you must be busy with your kingly responsibilities, but the war in the north is more important... I promise you safe passage into my lands... our fathers would be pleased to see us working together... I would be more pleased to work with you as my friend...

Odd, that. None of this was supposed to have happened. Bran was never supposed to have been lord of Winterfell, and Tommen was never supposed to have been the king on the Iron Throne, or lord of Casterly Rock, or Warden of the West. Robb and Joffrey should have taken those responsibilities. He had written seven pages back to Bran, on seven different nights, explaining Joffrey’s wedding and the battle of the Tumblestone and how Myrcella was and all his troubles in the West. I am sorry that you fell. He crossed that out. I am sorry that you fell was so brief that it seemed insulting. He didn’t just fall, anyway. He plummeted from that tower and broke with a noise like a turtle dropped from an eagle’s claws. His legs and arms were out like a spider’s, and he was pale as the summer snow, and he wasn’t breathing, and I was sure that he was dead. And it was my fault.

Tommen pushed the letter away. The King’s Companions, he decided, would be considerably less traumatic than thinking about Bran’s fall, and less complicated than thinking about his intentions for Princess Shireen.

He walked to the Companions’ command tent. After the battle of Lannisport, Smallboar had taken over as their commander while Tommen busied himself with diplomatic duties. Rollam Westerling was among his captains, and Addam Marbrand’s son Lorent, and Josmyn Peckledon, a hero from the Blackwater, and little Lew Piper, who was short in stature but smarter than he looked.

They gathered around Smallboar’s messy desk. “We have four hundred twenty-two King’s Companions accounted for,” said Rollam. “And many more waiting to join the ranks. Thousands, we think.”

“Thousands?” Tommen said. “Well. That has gone... rather well, I think.”

“They were all inspired by the bravery and honour of their leader,” said Smallboar, grinning. “Me.”

“Hopefully they don’t adopt his habits,” said Peck.

“Says the one who spends all his nights with some buck-toothed serving girl.”

Lew Piper grinned. “Pretty Pia.”

“Shut your fat face, Lew.”

“All of you shut your faces,” Tommen said, though he could not entirely suppress his grin. “You’re like... children. Tell me something useful for a change.”

“Rollam says we should have accountants and paymasters,” Smallboar contributed. “Like the Golden Company. We’re not sellswords, I told him, but with four hundred soldiers, I have to admit that it’s starting to seem like a good idea.”

“Yes,” Rollam said carefully. “Though we still have to be careful when we’re giving out four hundred golden dragons every year. Even to those who desert or move on to the City Watch. We
should pay them half at the start of the year, half at the end—”

Tommen nodded. “Well, we’re not going to run out of gold, with all the mines down in the Rock. I’m going to see about establishing a permanent barracks, if I can. It’ll cost a thousand dragons, Rollam, so we need to talk about paying for that. The City Watch could do with reforming as well,” he said as an afterthought.

“Well,” said Peck. “It’s not their fault that they’re useless at taking down the camp and everything.”

With Lannister forces departing to seek out the remnants of Stannis’s army and to retake his captured castles, the streets and walls of Lannisport were slowly being cleared of siege machines. It was a pleasant thing to see. At Queen Cersei’s suggestion and Tommen’s request, the King’s Companions were now working on the construction of his new galleys. The Lord Tywin was coming along nicely; from his window at Casterly Rock, he could see its timbers being filled in day by day.

Eventually they gave up on any sort of talking and went out for sparring practise instead. Tommen had no trouble with little Lew, or Rollam, who was gangly and awkward despite his newfound height, but the others finished him off quite easily. “It’s a lucky thing you’re a better commander than a fighter,” Smallboar said as he helped Tommen up. “Else we’d die in every battle.”

“A better commander?” Tommen ran a hand through his matted hair. “You really think so?”

“You’re a damn sight better than I would be. Because people like you, whereas... well, I scare them. That’s why I’d be a bad commander.”

Yes. And because you were never born to do this. You wouldn’t stay up all night writing letters to the families of the fallen. You wouldn’t be able to send them into battle knowing that some of them will never come back.

Tommen swallowed. “Lord Tywin always said that a commander should be feared, not loved.”

“And now Lord Tywin’s dead. Perhaps you shouldn’t be taking so many lessons from him.”

Back in his tent, Tommen washed and changed into new clothes for the feast ahead. Princess Shireen would sit in the place of honour beside him, which meant that he had a good deal of talking to prepare himself for. Before that, though, he sent for Eleyna. His wounded hand was starting to throb again.

Eleyna brought her bag of ingredients with her. “I hope I’m not disturbing you,” she said, taking out rolls of white bandage, and a pestle and mortar. “It just seemed a better idea to make the salve fresh. That should make it work better.”

He watched her as she worked. Sometimes, he still thought about that night during the battle, when he’d had his nightmare about Joffrey, how she’d come and pressed herself against him, brushing his hair and putting her warm hands on his face, the way her hips curved against his leg and how her mouth had looked. But she had not come back since, save for after the victory feast, when they’d shared a drunken kiss he barely remembered. That was probably for the best.

“I won’t be long,” Eleyna said. “I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you when you have so much on your mind.”

“Yes, Princess Shireen.”

She reddened. “Oh.”

“Yes, Wait, I mean, no. Not like that. I don’t.” She rubbed the paste over his bruised palms. “You
"have nice hands," Tommen said. "And... um, skin." Warm skin, and even warmer by candlelight, and warmer still on a cold night, with coverlets of Lannister crimson—

Eleyna smiled. "Most people have skin, as I understand it."

The bruising burned like a bloody bastard when she took her hands away, but then he could feel it going down, cooling over his skin. "Does it still hurt?" Eleyna asked.

"Not anymore." Tommen chewed his lip. "I deserved this," he said quietly to himself. "I shouldn’t have hit him. He... he yielded."

"It was war. You did what you had to."

Tommens nodded without really listening. No. I killed him. He begged me for mercy, but I punched him, and I broke his nose, and he died. Now a purplish bruise had opened out all over his left fist where his gauntlet had been driven back into his palm. It tickled day and night, and stung every time he made a fist. "I’ll be alright," he said quietly.

Eleyna smiled, winding a bandage gently around his hand. "There you go," she said and tied the ends. "You should be fine until tonight, at least." Her eyes met his, for longer than they should have done,—

Seven hells. "Eleyna," he blurted, as she was turning away. "I... I’m... tomorrow... I’ve got no one for supper. I mean..." His face flushed. "I... it would please me if you... if you joined me."

Eleyna nodded. "I would like that, Your Grace." There was a moment of awkward silence. "Um... but I think I should go now. Else Rollam will be wondering where I’ve gotten to. I... I’ll see you later."

That was stupid, he thought as soon as she had gone. Now you’ve started it all over again. He tried to distract himself by putting on his cloak, but there was only so much amusement to be gleaned from clicking the antlered pin open and shut, open and shut, and not nearly enough for the ride up to the Lion’s Mouth.

It came as a mercy in the end when Princess Shireen arrived in the Mouth just behind him. Davos Seaworth rode just behind her, looking very wary. "Well, boy," he said gruffly. "For better or for worse, Shireen has convinced me to listen to what you have to say. But I warn you, I want the truth, and only the truth."

Tommens cleared his throat. "Thank you, ser. I know we are... enemies, but I hope I can convince you that I don’t want this war to continue between us. Too... too many good men have died already."

"Yes," said Ser Davos, "and they have died for your mother’s lie." He melted back into the crowd before Tommen could reply.

"I think we had best wait until the morrow before we talk again," said Princess Shireen.

Queen Cersei stood inside the Hall of Heroes, where the Lannisters welcomed their guests beneath the gaze of enormous golden statues. Qyburn hovered at her right shoulder, Ser Robert Strong at her left.

"Mother." Tommen went first up the steps. "May I present Lady Shireen of House Baratheon, daughter of—"

"We have met before, as I recall," interrupted the queen. "You came to King’s Landing, a very long
time ago. You, your father and your mother. Do you remember?”

“I do, Your Grace.”

“I doubt that. You were a child of... about seven, by my reckoning. What has it been, then? Nine years.” She paused. “I was sorry to hear about the death of your mother, truth be told. I had certain... sympathies with Lady Selyse. Tommen, lead our guests to their places in the great hall. I have things to discuss with Lord Tarly, when he comes.”

He led Shireen up the stairs into the great hall. There were candles burning everywhere, filling the room with berry-scented incense, and holly wreaths had been mounted on the walls too. The high table was set in a horseshoe; seven hundred soldiers and servants of the castle garrison would dine on salt pork, stewed goat and roast vegetables in the hall below. Meanwhile, above the salt, they dined on mostly fish – Margaery said it would remind the princess of her home – and some of the better wines from Casterly Rock’s cellars.

Tommen found Princess Shireen to be unexpectedly good company. “Your mother just reminded me about the time we met before,” she said to him. “I seem to recall that you kept cats.”

He blushed. “I still do, actually. You probably met Mittens. But he died. Now I have Ser Pounce. There were some other kittens too, back in King’s Landing, but I only managed to bring Ser Pounce to the Rock.”

“You used to play a game with a fishing line and a ball of wool. You used to throw it out, and the cats would chase after it.”

“Yes. How do... do you remember that?”

“You don’t?” She softened her smile. “We have to keep memories like those, my lord, lest we lose them forever. When... when I’m lonely, I think of running round the garden with Edric and Devan and Patchface, our fool. The bells in his hair are ringing, and he is always singing a different song. Do you sing?”

Tommen took a long sip of wine. “I... no, not really. Not for a long time.”

“You must know some songs. Here, I’ll teach you one. It’s always summer under the sea, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh... the birds have scales, and the fish take wing, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.” As she sang she began to rearrange the shells of the oysters on her plate, building up a mountain range. She only stopped when the servants brought round the next course: salmon, layered with some vile-looking beetroot.

“I despise beetroot,” Tommen said. “I might have it banished from the realm, but I would hate to deny you the pleasure, my lady.” He nodded to Shireen’s plate.

She smiled. “Don’t call me ‘my lady’. No, don’t call me ‘princess’ either. My name is Shireen. May I call you Tommen?”

He was not used to such forwardness. “You... you may.”

And that was the moment of the impossible realisation. She doesn’t hate me, Tommen thought. Not for what I’ve done, or for what the Lannisters have done. And I don’t hate her either. I didn’t hate them when I fought them. I only hated myself for what I was doing.

“Would you like some more wine, Shireen?” he asked, picking up the flagon.
“Please.” She smiled again. “Father only let me have wine on feast days, and only a cup even then.”

“That was probably a good idea,” Tommen said honestly. “Mine didn’t really care. He spent all his time drinking, or hunting, or cavorting with whores.”

“My father banished all the whores from Dragonstone,” said Shireen. When she suddenly burst out laughing, her face went bright pink, save for the greyscaled patch on one cheek.

“He might have had the right idea. If I told you how much trouble whores had caused with the King’s Companions... I have Robert Crakehall up before me at least once a week, telling me how he just found them in his bed.” Tommen snorted a laugh of his own. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s hardly a topic for a lady’s ears—”

Shireen smiled. “Don’t you think I heard any stories from Father’s soldiers at Castle Black or Winterfell or Riverrun? They never thought I was listening, but of course I was. I’d hide around corners and behind horsecarts and sneak up on them.”

“I used to do the same in King’s Landing. You’ll never believe everything I heard about Uncle Renly—”

Shireen looked down at her hands. “I liked Uncle Renly. A lot. He always seemed to be more interested in what I said than what Father said.” There was a long pause in which the only sound was the sleet outside. “Uncle Renly would want us to make peace,” Shireen said, suddenly serious.

Tommenset down his wine cup. “Yes. He would. And I think we can. That’s... that’s why I invited you here.”

“I know. But you sound... doubtful?”

“Mother was doubtful. And Ser Kevan. And a lot of people, actually. But I thought... and Lady Margaery said...”

“Ser Davos had his doubts too. He thought you might throw us in prison.”

*If I had any common sense, I might have done.* “But then we’d just keep fighting, and we’d never get anywhere at all. I... I don’t like wars.” There. He had said it. And it had been so easy.

“I don’t think anyone really does. There are so many beautiful things in the world, you know. Like the sound of krakens and jellyfish inside a seashell, or mother starlings making nests for their babies in the highest trees... or flowers. Even on Dragonstone, we had flowers. Big sunflowers with thick green leaves. Everyone said they were weeds, and maybe they were, but even weeds have their beauty. There is so much more to the world than just fighting.”

Tommens took a deep breath, and turned to look at the windows of the hall. The sleet was turning to snow, blowing lightly into his face. Somewhere up in the clouds, all the Baratheons past and present were thundering at him, growing angry. “I only went to Storm’s End once,” he said, more to himself than to Shireen. “When I was nine. One day it stormed so hard that the lanterns fell from their hooks and the stables roof collapsed. Myrcella was scared, and so was Mother, I think. And so was Joffrey. I thought that anything that Joff was afraid of was a friend of mine. It was the bravest thing I’ve ever done. I went out onto the battlements in the storm.

“I found Father out there. Not doing anything, just watching the sky. His eyes were more serious than I’d ever seen them. ‘It was like this,’ he said to me, ‘on the day the Windproud broke up in Shipbreaker Bay and my parents drowned before my very eyes, it was exactly like this.’ And he lifted me up so that I could see over the ramparts better. This might be yours someday, Tommen.
Storm’s End, and all the lands around it.’ He ruffled my hair and set me down with a laugh. ‘Ours is
the fury,’ I said. I’m not sure I knew what it meant. But I know that he looked on me proudly then,
for perhaps the only time in my life.”

He looked at Shireen. “If Father was here now, and your father... would they want us to make
amends, for the sake of our House, or would they call us cowards for making peace with our
enemies?”

“I don’t know.” Shireen’s hair blew back from her face, and those blue Baratheon eyes set as hard as
King Robert’s ever had. “But they’re not here now, and we are. We’re not them. We’re... what
comes after them. So the question is: what do we do?”

Not just sons of someone else. How could he let more men die in pointless battles after the battles
he’d already seen? But at the same time, how could he disrespect their memories so, by making it
that they had died for nothing? “I don’t know,” he replied. “I... I want peace. But there are those who
don’t. And they’ll hate me for it.”

“Ser Davos called it ludicrous,” said Shireen. “He... you have to understand, he had seven sons
before the war. Now he has two. One of them... Devan, he was my best friend.”

“I... I...” Tommen swallowed and took another long sip of wine. How am I supposed to tell the
Onion Knight that I killed his son? That his face is the one that haunts my nightmares?

“—but at the same time, if we ended the war after the Blackwater, Davos would have lost four sons,
not five. Father would still be... well... at least I’d know where he was. And Mother... she might not
have taken Melisandre’s path...”

Tomen picked up his wine cup again. A long time ago, Uncle Tyrion had told him that a man only
revealed his truest secrets and his truest self when he was drunk. Not only the secrets he kept from
others, but the secrets he kept from himself. Some men are strong of body. Others are strong of
mind. But the best men are strong of heart. “I want to end the war,” he admitted, “but I don’t know
if I can.”

Chapter End Notes

King Tommen, as you probably saw, is having second thoughts about things. Which is
the story of showTommen in a nutshell, really.

You'll have noticed that Cersei didn't really appear much in this chapter, and neither did
Margaery - Quentyn and Loras didn't appear at all. The reason for this is that this was a
tightly character-focused chapter, bringing together Tommen and Shireen - the titular
'last heirs' (of Houses Lannister and Baratheon) from this chapter's title. Admittedly, this
was not the chapter I wanted it to be, but it had to end on this rather mellow note rather
than the intended cliffhanger for the sake of the story's pacing. It is, alas, mostly filler,
and one of those chapters that hinders the pacing quite considerably.

However, I felt that I needed to properly set up the situation in Casterly Rock - Cersei
and her supporters on one side, Tommen and his on the other - before Jaime's arrival,
which will probably happen before chapter 92. Additionally, Jaime has a lot to do in
Casterly Rock, and as such I can't really press forward with the action just yet as it
would overcomplicate the narrative of his next POV chapter to shove in a major inciting
event.

TL;DR: ending this chapter dramatically would force me to rush the rest of the storyline.

To be perfectly honest, there is a fair bit of character development in here - for once, Tommen is actually moving in a direction instead of randomly drifting back-and-forth between various pro-war and anti-war viewpoints like a kite in the wind.

Tommen: “Lord Tywin always said that a commander should be feared, not loved.”
Smallboar: “And now Lord Tywin’s dead. Perhaps you shouldn’t be taking so many lessons from him.”

That's certainly a lesson that is going to resonate with Tommen, but most of what he decides by the end of this chapter is as a result of his interactions with Shireen during the feast.

“I don’t think anyone [likes wars]. There are so many beautiful things in the world, you know. Like the sound of krakens and jellyfish inside a seashell, or mother starlings making nests for their babies in the highest trees... or flowers. Even on Dragonstone, we had flowers. Big sunflowers with thick green leaves. Everyone said they were weeds, and maybe they were, but even weeds have their beauty. There is so much more to the world than just fighting.”

One of my favourite quotes from the whole story. Shireen is a joy to write dialogue for: she has such an honest viewpoint, one that is innocent yet assured in its reasoning, and I think that is what makes it so compelling. Shireen is a voice of reason and human goodwill in the battle between what is right and what is better for the good of the realm, which is the main theme of the storylines of Tommen, Aegon, Dany, Davos, Barristan, etc. and of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS as a whole.

For Tommen, the struggle between what is right and what is necessary is defined by the battle of his familial identity, too. He thinks that Robert would tell him to just keep fighting, and that Tywin would have him imprison or execute Shireen, the Tyrells and Quentyn a la the Reynes of Castamere. Since he’s very easily influenced, it's hard for him to directly oppose everything they've said.

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Next chapter is Jaime or Arya, depending on which one fits better. There will be more of Davos in the next few chapters, too, though probably not from his POV just yet.
When he saw Jaime riding up towards the inn on his muddy horse, the serjeant spat out a wad of sourleaf, jumped down from the low stone wall, and stepped into the yard. “You ain’t supposed to be here,” he called.

“Says who?” Jaime dismounted and led his horse over by the bridle. The rain was pissing all over them.

The serjeant spat. “Says the king.”

Jaime ignored him. “Has your inn got any ale?”

“Ain’t my inn. Ain’t no innkeep neither.” He frowned, and stupidly repeated, “You ain’t supposed to be here.”

“Well, I am. Do you have the command here, ser?”

The fool was undoubtedly not a knight, but he liked being called one, and it made him grin. “Aye, I have. Well, for our small band.”

“You’re the king’s men?”

“We are. King Tommen, long may he reign!” His men let out enthusiastic cheers, but they were cheering the ale, not the king – ale they had found, or more likely, stolen. Well, there goes someone’s honest livelihood, Jaime thought, all in the name of House Lannister.

“Why are you out here, then?” he asked.
The serjeant said nothing. “Ser sent us,” said one of his men, a gangly freckled youth with a cowlick. “Ser Boar, that is.”

“Strongboar? I know him.” Ser Lyle probably knew this inn, Jaime thought; Strongboar had tumbled the innkeep’s daughter a couple of times in their youth. The innkeep’s daughter had been a buxom thing, but what she had in breasts, she lacked in wits. The girl had wanted to fuck Jaime too, but he only had eyes for Cersei.

“Like hell you do,” said the serjeant, finding his authority again. “No one’s supposed to be out here, save for the king’s soldiers.” He frowned. “You a deserter?”

_of a sort._ Jaime shrugged, and held up his golden hand. It was the young soldier who got it first. “Seven fucking hells, it’s the fucking Kingslayer!”

Once they’d ascertained it was indeed ‘the fucking Kingslayer’, the serjeant stuttered over his apologies enough to make Podrick Payne envious. Then they brushed down their garb, unfurled the Lannister banner and fell in beside him, forming a mangled honour guard to escort him back to Ser Lyle’s camp.

The western clouds had been looming all morning, but the rain had the courtesy to wait until he got back to camp before bucketing it down. Strongboar’s encampment had tents for about seven hundred men, and one big pavillion of crimson canvas in the middle, where Jaime dismounted. As he climbed down he caught a mousy-faced squire staring at him, goggle-eyed. “Garrett,” he called, “be a good lad and take my horse, would you? Try not to be too rough with him.” Then he ducked past his former squire and into the command tent unannounced.

To say the silence when he entered the tent was palpable would have been an understatement. For a long moment the tent’s occupants held their collective breaths, until Strongboar said “Seven fucking hells,” and the whole thing erupted into raucous chaos. Jaime found himself being thumped on the shoulder and shouted at and having his hand shaken by twenty different people at once. He barely recognised any of them save for Strongboar; some of the others were Ser Harys Swyft’s son, Steffon, a bastard son of Lord Vikary, a couple of Addam Marbrand’s cousins, and so forth. Eventually Ser Lyle succeeded in clearing the tent of everyone save for him and Jaime. “So,” Strongboar said uneasily, “so…”

“I’m back. Doubtless your fellows will be scurrying to find their quills and parchment now, hoping to be the first to tell my sweet sister the good news.”

Strongboar shrugged. “They’d do anything to get themselves into the Queen Regent’s good books.”

_The Queen Regent_?

“Your uncle Kevan took a couple of nasty wounds at Lannisport. One arrow right through his thigh, and another in the shoulder. So it fell to your royal sister to take up the Regency.”

Jaime frowned. _Things could be worse, he supposed, and they could definitely be better._ It was under Cersei’s stewardship that Ned Stark had lost his head and the whole bloody war had started in the first place. “I’ve travelled up from Deep Den and barely seen a man,” he said, “neither yours, nor Stannis’s. Is the war over, then?” Stannis’s head could be rotting on a pike for all he knew.

“He’s broken and run for the hills, if that’s what you’re asking. It was a good victory. Your sister sent Addam to chase him north, but we haven’t got his head, not yet.”

That made Jaime uneasy. “If I were Addam, I’d act with caution. Stannis Baratheon will sooner die
than surrender, and with winter drawing in, those Northmen of his might be at an advantage.”

“Half of his Northmen went running back to Winterfell,” Strongboar said. “Lord Bracken was talking with your sister the other day, and Clement Piper’s come over to us again. And the Paege lord.”

“I saw his son outside. Garrett.”

“You can take the boy to squire again if you’d like, Jaime. He’s not quite useless, but he’s close. Mind you, that lad Peck’s done well for himself. Killed three knights during the last battle, and captured the lord of someplace too.”

“Hmm,” Jaime said. “Maybe he’ll wear a white cloak someday.” And hopefully he will honour it better than I did.

“You’ll be needing a few men to fill those white cloaks,” Strongboar went on. “Arys Oakheart’s dead, and that Lydden boy your sister chose to take his place died too. And Balon Swann’s off in the Riverlands with your niece.”

I know, Jaime might have said, but he’d sooner not tell Strongboar exactly where he’d been, or what he’d been doing. “I have an urgent message for the king,” he said. “Can you put together an escort for me?”

“I reckon they’ll all be fighting each other for the chance to ride back into the city at your side.”

“They’ll be disappointed, then. I don’t want an escort much bigger than half a dozen, and Garrett’s going to be one of them. Someone has to tend to my horses.”

“Half a dozen men?” Strongboar shrugged. “I can give you that.” He whistled for Garrett Paege. “You’ll be riding back to the city with the Lord Commander,” he told the lad. “In the meantime, go and find Watkyn, and tell him to send up five of his best men.”

“I should’ve sent him for some mulled wine too,” Ser Lyle considered when Garrett was gone, “A cup would warm you right up, Jaime. The nights are cold, and likely to get colder.”

“Winter is coming,” Jaime replied bitterly. “Even rotting away in his cold crypt, Ned Stark will always have the last laugh.”

“You almost sound like a philosopher, Jaime.”

He snorted. “A singularly ill-suited philosopher. Well, it’s either that, or a knight without a sword hand. Take your pick.”

Twenty minutes later, his horse was scrubbed and saddled, they’d found him a new cloak of Lannister crimson to replace his tattered and torn travelling garb, and the rain was turning to snow. “Send my regards to your sister,” Strongboar said, as Jaime turned for the road. Send your regards. Once again, Jaime heard the words Catelyn Stark had hissed at him beneath the boughs of elm trees. Jaime Lannister sends his regards.

It was near noon when they set out; by the time the city walls came into view, the sky had turned from blue to crimson to purple, and then from purple to black. Everything was snow and campfire smoke, as far as the eye could see. The camp was ringed with wooden watchtowers. A guardsman in Lannister colours called out to him from atop the nearest one, while his fellows pointed down crossbows. “Halt! Who goes there!”
“Don’t you recognise me?” Not that he blamed the man. His beard was longer and wilder than ever, and he could not have been farther from the golden tourney knight had he tried. “Now, you are a lucky man...” Jaime paused for effect. “...my sister will be half in love with you when you bring her the message.” He edged his horse a little closer, standing in the faint circle of moonlight. “The prodigal son returns, the golden lion, me, Ser J—”

“Open the gates!”

Jaime sighed as the gates drew open, and the camp unveiled itself to him. So much for my grand entrance. He’d expected trumpets, at the very least. Instead he got Lew Piper, all puffed up and proud in his squire’s raiment. “Little Lew,” Jaime said, climbing down from his horse. “Though you’re not quite so little anymore.”

Lew grinned. “No, my lord.”

“Did my sister send you to fetch me?” Somehow he thought it unlikely.

“No, my lord. The king did. If you’ll follow me...” Lew turned and started off through the city of tents. Lannister crimson and gold, and... was that Tyrell green he had glimpsed? The colours were all faded, and crusted in so much frost it was hard to tell them apart. Men-at-arms wore gloves to keep their hands warm and thick wool cloaks, and squires went about in mittens and hats with flaps over the ears. Jaime glanced down at his own hands, gloved in soft brown leather. It was hard to tell which was real and which was gold. That should serve to distract Cersei from my stump. But first, he must needs meet with the king. With my son. Of course, he wasn’t allowed to tell the boy that; Myrcella had made him promise as much on the night he left Harrenhal. “Tommen mustn’t know,” she said. “It would destroy him if he did.”

And it may destroy the Seven Kingdoms if he does not. Telling Tommen the truth of his parentage would bring an end to his pretensions to the Iron Throne, which was exactly what Aegon Targaryen wanted. I must get him to end this war, Jaime thought, before it ends in fire and blood.

A white knight Jaime did not know stood outside the king’s tent. “Good evening, lord commander,” the man said. Who are you? Jaime might have replied. He had almost forgotten his duties as Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. We will need to establish a few things. Their names, for a start. But that could wait until later. This would not.

Two chairs had been set out beside a small iron brazier, and between them a table was laid out with bread, fruit, a round wheel of some yellow cheese, some cold beef and ham, and a clay jar of mustard. A serving woman stood with a flagon of hippocras – or at least Jaime thought her to be a serving woman, until he looked more closely and recognised his aunt Dorna.

“Have a seat, Jaime,” said Ser Kevan Lannister, entering through the back. His uncle looked unusually grey and sallow, his broad shoulders sagging.

“And have something to eat, dear,” added Lady Dorna. “You are awfully thin.”

Jaime was irritated, but not to such an extent as to refuse the food. Meanwhile Ser Kevan plucked a single grape and chewed it thoughtfully. “You must be wondering why you are here.”

“I wanted to see my sister. I was expecting to see the king. Instead I have found you. But no, I am not particularly surprised. How are you, uncle? Strongboar told me you were wounded in battle.”

“I am well,” replied Ser Kevan, “though I will not credit your sister and her army of healers with my recovery. I suppose you know about Cersei’s newfound responsibility?”
“Aye.”

“Cersei is Regent,” Ser Kevan pronounced sombrely. “And may the Seven have mercy upon us.”

“Well,” Jaime said. “There have been worse Regents. At least you will be able to keep her in check.”

“Or not,” Ser Kevan said stiffly. “The Queen Regent has dismissed me to Castamere. Those lands have gone too long with an absentee lord, she says. And so I must become Lord Kevan Lannister, and depart at once.”

Jaime had a hundred questions, but the one at the forefront of his mind was, “Why are you telling me this?”

“I had hoped you might do something about it.” Ser Kevan took a sip of wine. “Cersei is irate and unpredictable. She is hell bent on the folly of marching to war in King’s Landing and entirely opposed to sensible ideas. Tommen intends to make an alliance with the Tyrells, and Cersei means to destroy it, along with anyone who opposes her.”

“A ruler must show strength,” Jaime said blithely.

“The right sort of strength,” Ser Kevan said. “Cersei is—”

“How am I supposed to do anything about it? She has always been strong-willed. Why do you think I will be able to convince her otherwise?”

“Because you’re the only one who can, Jaime.” Kevan Lannister was too proud to plead, but this was as close as it got. “And—”

“I’ve barely been here five minutes, and you’re already asking me to work against my sister? Don’t you think I should be... hmm... allowed to meet her first? And see her ‘folly’ for myself?”

Ser Kevan sighed. *If you see her, she will do everything in her power to turn you against us,* his eyes said, and Jaime knew it was true. *She will cling to me as a drowning man clings to wreckage, though she will be too proud to admit she is drowning.*

In the end, his uncle let him go. Jaime rode up to the Lion’s Mouth surrounded by an escort of crimson-cloaked guardsmen. It was a far grander entrance than when he had returned to King’s Landing with Brienne of Tarth, covered in dirt and sweat from the road behind him. He was still muddy, but at least he had some semblance of dignity.

Jaime hadn’t expected to find Cersei waiting for him, but he had expected a more respectable escort than Qyburn. “Lord Commander,” said the rattish maester. “The Queen Regent has sent me to greet you.”

“You make an odd welcoming party,” Jaime said. “You and...” He gestured to the knight at Qyburn’s side, who wore helm and full plate even indoors.

“This is Ser Steffon Strong,” said Qyburn. “His brother, Ser Robert, serves in His Grace’s Kingsguard.”

“Excellent,” Jaime said unenthusiastically. “I am honoured to meet you, ser.”

Some muffled noise from inside the helm. Qyburn rapped on Ser Steffon’s armour; the sound was strangely hollow. “Ser Steffon and his brothers have sworn a holy vow of silence,” said Qyburn. “They will not speak until all His Grace’s enemies are dead and the evil has been purged from the
“They may stay silent for a good long while, then,” said Jaime. Qyburn ushered him towards one of the winch lifts that would take them up through the Rock to Cersei’s chambers. The view as they ascended was familiar. “She has taken her old chambers,” he realised.

“Yes,” said Qyburn. “And she has offered you the adjoining rooms. She said they were yours during your childhood.”

_They were, until Mother found what we were doing and moved me halfway across the castle. And now Cersei had moved him back. Jaime felt strangely unsettled. There are things in our past that should be kept in the past. Especially now._ He was starting to wonder if he should have gone to visit Tommen first, but they were practically outside Cersei’s door by then. A huge knight in white armour was waiting in the hall. From his silence, Jaime concluded he must be Ser Robert Strong. He nodded in cursory greeting. Ser Robert did not return the gesture.

“Her Grace is waiting inside,” said Qyburn.

And that was it. Jaime went through the door and Qyburn and the knights disappeared behind him.

There was a long hallway between Cersei’s outer door and her solar. Torches cast his shadow upon the bare stone. Jaime glimpsed flashing moonlight through the windows. It was as though he were in a dream. And when Cersei appeared, silhouetted in the moonlight, he found his mouth could not form words.

“Jaime,” she said softly. “Oh, Jaime. They told me... they...”

She did not finish that sentence. Instead she put her hand over her heart and moved, wraithlike, towards him. She wore shimmering red satin slashed with veins of gold, but it was the skin of her arms which drew his gaze, as soft and bright as the moon which she now hid from his view.

Sometimes reunions are full of words, and sometimes they are not. Afterwards, Jaime would faintly recall kissing her back, soft on her lips, then down on her neck, down and down, and then the pair of them melting together, each urging the other into the movements they had practised so well simply by the power of their gazes. And all the old transgressions of the past were forgotten. Cersei gasped when he hiked up her skirts and put himself inside her, again when he kissed her cunt, again when he shoved her down onto the bed and sent the pillows and blankets spiralling away into oblivion. Her golden tresses tumbled down over bare white skin as he forced himself against her, untamed and unbound, and her moans were sweet music to his ears; “yes, yes, Jaime, oh, take me, take me!” When they stopped it felt as though some part of him had died – a part of him that had only just come back to life, and was now stone cold dead again. Now his senses were slowly returning to him. We should not have done that.

“Too long.” Cersei’s voice was husky in the darkness. “It has been far too long.” She shivered a little against his chest. “My sweet Jaime. Where have you been?”

“In Aegon Targaryen’s dungeon.” Jaime shifted uncomfortably. “Living among the rats.”

Cersei sat up. “All of this time?”

“Yes. I was captured by outlaws, but they gave me up to Aegon.” He thought it best not to mention Brienne of Tarth or Sansa Stark or any of his other adventures.

“When I heard they had killed Father, I feared the worst.” She drew her robe loosely about herself and stood at the window. “We will avenge him, though. We must.”
I fear you are looking in the wrong direction. He wondered what Cersei would say if he told her the truth. “You were gone for so long,” she said.

“I came back as soon as I could.”

“Did you?” There was a definite hint of bitterness there. “Did you really?”

“Cersei...”

“You should not have come here tonight,” she said suddenly. “To my chambers. There are far too many rumours about us already, Jaime.”

“They aren’t rumours. They’re true.”

He went over and sat beside her, but she would not meet his eyes. “No one can know that, Jaime,” she said. “Least of all Tommen. The truth would destroy him. And all of us. No...” She let out a rasping breath. “You should not have come here. They’ll be watching for these sort of things. They have eyes and ears everywhere. The Tyrells—”

“I know.”

“About the Tyrells?” Her voice dropped an octave. “How do you know about the Tyrells?”

“I... I... it doesn’t matter.” I should have told her that Strongboar told me, Jaime thought, but by then it was too late.

“Was it Margaery Tyrell? Have you and she shared—”

“No. It... I spoke to uncle Kevan.”

Cersei bristled; he could feel the heat radiating off her bare skin, and the very air seemed to shiver a little. “I am Regent, not Kevan. Not our uncle, not our father, and not you, Jaime. All my life I have been waiting. You will not steal this from me.”

“I never said—”

“No, you will not steal this. You should leave now, Jaime. Before my feelings of discontent turn to anything more.”

“Cersei, I—” This was quickly becoming surreal. After all this, she wanted to cast him out now?

“Go.” She bundled up his clothes and tossed them at him. “Go. Get out, Jaime. Leave me alone. I will speak to you on the morrow.”

He did as he was told. It was not worth the argument, not here, not now. And besides, what else could he do? He went out and down the stairs, leaving the torches to flicker in his wake. Where was he to go now?

In the end he decided on the sept, not because he wanted to, but because he felt some strange duty to the gods for bringing him safely here. Casterly Rock’s sept was a tall, vaulted building seated on a rocky outcrop, supported on all seven sides by marble columns. Below the sept were the cavernous vaults where the corpses of dead Lannisters were sealed away in gold-and-marble tombs. Father is not among them, though. Lord Tywin’s grave was a rotten barrow beside the Trident, his only ornaments the crows pecking at his eyes.

The sept was deserted save for a few novice boys and a couple of silent patrons who made it clear
they did not want to be disturbed. They left Jaime to consider his own transgressions in silence. His
god had always been the Warrior, so Jaime prayed to him for strength and wisdom in the days ahead,
though he might have had more luck seeking the Smith and the Crone. He prayed to the Mother too,
though it had been so long since he had last believed in her, or in mercy.

He went back to his old rooms. Back to the canopied bed where Cersei had once snuck under the
quilts to share in his warmth, before a white cloak and a queen’s crown sent them in different
directions forever. He dreamed fitfully – of Cersei, of his mother, of blood streaming from the
silvery-white armour of the giant who guarded his sister’s door at night – and woke to bright dawn
light and a chill in the air.

Jaime bathed, dressed, ate half an apple and threw the rest away. Garrett Paege appeared at his door
with a pile of white Kingsguard raiment. White doublet, white breeches, white cloak. Then Jaime
affixed the golden hand to his stump, and thought acerbically, *Goldenhand the Just.* A poor
Kingsguard, but surely some effort was better than none.

And now for the king.

A white-cloaked knight stood outside the king’s chambers. Jaime did not recognise him. “And who
are you?” he asked. “One of my new Kingsguard brothers, I suppose?”

“I am Ser Jasper Peckledon, my lord,” said Ser Jasper Peckledon.

“Peckledon? Good.” Jaime tried to remember if Peck had mentioned an older brother, or a cousin. *If
he is as loyal as Peck, he will suffice for now.* “Is the king in?”

“His Grace is having breakfast. You can go in, if you’d like—”

“One moment.” Jaime gave Peckledon a good long look. He was of middling height, with a lithe
build, but looked somewhat sleepy. *Probably because he has been on guard duty all night.* “How
old are you, ser?” Jaime asked eventually.

“My twenty-first nameday is in two weeks. But I hope—”

“*Twenty,* then. Give me a straight answer, Ser Jasper. I do not like wasting time.” He frowned.
“Young knights can be rash, foolish, and more concerned with their honour and their reputation than
their king’s safety. I trust your concerns lie with your liege rather than with making deeds worthy of
song, ser?”

Ser Jasper never got round to answering. The king’s door opened, and a serving maid came out – or
so Jaime thought – until he saw the rich cut of her dress, buttoned with tiny silver lions. *A Lannister,
then?* But her hair was dark brown, not golden – and her half-familiar face marked her out as
someone else entirely.

“Lady Westerling,” he said.

She looked startled to see him. “Ser Jaime. I do not believe we have met before.”

“Oh, we have, Lady Westerling. Would you prefer me to call you Lady Stark?”

The girl blushed. “You are mistaken, ser. Jeyne is my sister. I am Eleyna. I am... a friend of the
king.”

The girl did not seem to be lying, but deceit was in her blood. “Oh,” he said. “Her younger daughter,
the one that remained at the Crag all along.” He smiled, suddenly realising Sybell Spicer’s lie.
“Excuse me, ser.” She bowed her head and went past him. Jaime watched her go with some mild curiosity. *If she knew Robb Stark, then Cersei would have marked her as a traitor by now. So why is she—?*

“Ser? Uncle Jaime?”

Tommen had grown another two inches by Jaime’s reckoning. He certainly looked older than the boy Jaime had glimpsed at the Tumblestone.

“I hope you are well, Your Grace,” said Jaime.

“Don’t call me ‘Your Grace’.” Tommen beckoned him inside. “Have you eaten? There’s more than enough here for me.” He ushered Jaime to a busy breakfast table and filled his cup with pomegranate wine.

“Did you see Myrcella?” asked Tommen. “How was she?”

“She was fine,” Jaime lied. “Or so she said, the last time I saw her.”

“I’m not sure whether to believe the letters she’s sending me. They seem... wrong. You can have a look, if you’d like. I—”

“Maybe some other time.”

Jaime was about to bring up King Aegon’s letter, but Tommen spoke first. “I’m sorry. Sorry I couldn’t help you at the Tumblestone. At the parley. I...”

“They were never going to give me up. You couldn’t have tried any harder. You were brave for trying. Now, have you been good for your mother while I’ve been away?”

“I... I tried. It’s just... she and I look at some things differently.”

“Such as?”

Tommen chewed his lip. “She’s probably told you already, but Lady Margaery is here. And Princess Shireen, Stannis’s daughter.”

“Shireen Baratheon?” *No wonder Cersei is uncomfortable.* “Why have you—?”

“Shireen wants a peace.”

“And do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do you want a peace?”

From the long, uncertain look Tommen gave him, Jaime knew his answer. “You know,” he said, “I met with King Aegon, while I was at Harrenhal. He told me—” and here he brought out the sealed scroll from his cloak, “—that his aims also involved peace. Though they might be on undesirable terms for you.”

Tommens touched the seal. “He wants me to give up my claim to the Iron Throne, doesn’t he?”

Jaime hesitated. “You... I know it is a hard offer, but—”
“I might, but... there are so many people who have died fighting in my name. It would be an insult to their memory if I just gave up my claim. Your lord father would have died for nothing—”

_A fate he duly deserved._ “If you overly concern yourself with the past,” he told Tommen, “then you can never look to the future. Lord Tywin would have died in vain, aye, but no good will come of us dying with him.”

Tommen seemed surprised. “You agree with me?”

“I’ve seen far too much death, on both sides of the war. We can turn back from dark paths in life, however impossible it may seem. In death we are doomed to nothing, and all that remains are sad reminders of what might have been.” Jaime sipped his wine, took Aegon’s letter from Tommen, and put it back in his pocket. “This is a bleak topic to be discussing so early in the day,” he decided. “You can be my nephew during breakfast, and my king afterwards, I think.”

_*And even that is a lie. Look at him. A blind fool could see that he is born of my seed._ For a giddy moment, he wanted to tell Tommen everything, there and then... but of course that was impossible. Instead they talked about Jaime’s adventures through the Riverlands (greatly romanticised and made as exciting as possible) and debated a few other things. “I spoke with Lady Westerling outside,” he said.

“Oh.” Tommen turned red. “Please don’t tell Mother. I just... like her, that’s all.”

“When a man likes a woman very much, certain complications may arise.”

“Oh. Yes. I mean, no. We haven’t...”

“But you _would_, if you could.”

“Would what?”

“You are aware of what men and women do at night, aren’t you?”

“No. I mean, yes, but that’s not what I want...”

“Then you have an admirable amount of restraint, and you are an example to us all.” Jaime smirked. “Climb down from your high horse, Tommen, you are no different to the rest of us. Fortunately, I think your affection is mutual. If you asked, I think she would...”

“Maybe she would,” said Tommen, “but... I don’t know how.”

“How _what_?”

“How it... how it all works.”

Jaime was now beginning to wish he’d never sired the boy. _This conversation would be a lot easier if I actually was your uncle._ “The most important thing is not to rush it,” he said flatly. “Just... treat her like a queen. I don’t know. Ask your maester.”

Tommen had apparently realised the awkwardness of this situation. “I’ve been practising my swordwork every day,” he said in a small voice. “Like you told me.”

“And have you gotten better?”

“I think so. Everyone else got better too, though, so it’s not any easier to beat them.”
“It may not matter. If your Kingsguard serve properly, you’ll never end up in any real battles.”

“I killed a man,” said Tommen distantly. “I killed four. There was... a squire, only a boy. I... I cut off his hand and he yielded to me, but I hit him instead, and his nose and his face just... shattered... broke... all over the place.”

“A man’s thoughts are not always entirely with him in battle,” Jaime said. “It is normal to do things you would never do otherwise.”

“Do you remember all the men you’ve killed?” Tommen’s eyes were big and guileless and green.

“I try not to dwell on it,” Jaime said. “But it is hard, sometimes.” He was thinking of Lord Tywin, now: you are no son of mine, he said, and the sword plunged in and out and the rains wept down and washed the blood from his blade. The things I do for love. That was what he’d said when he pushed Brandon Stark out of the tower. Tommen’s little friend. I hoped he would die from the fall. Did he scream as he fell?

“Do you... do you ever pray for them?” asked Tommen. “I thought I should pray for them, and to the Mother, for forgiveness.”

Jaime began to feel unreasonably angry. He wondered if this feeling was a father’s rage at the way his son had been forced into this so young. “You should not be fighting,” he said thickly. “Your Kingsguard should have kept you well away from the battle. I failed you in that, but...”

“Ser Arys died, and Ser Lorent after him,” said Tommen. “And Ser Balon went with Myrcella. As for he others... well, there is only so much Ser Jasper and Ser Loras can do, and Loras has been in Highgarden besides. Ser Jasper is a good fighter—”

“Mere skill at arms does not make a knight of the Kingsguard.” Jaime felt a terrible hypocrite as the words spilled from his mouth, but he did not hold them back. “And as for this Ser Robert Strong your mother has named—”

“I don’t like him. He makes me nervous. But I trust you, uncle. I trust you as my lord commander.” Tommen held his gaze a moment longer, then looked away. “I should go. I have things to do. Lord Tarly will be expecting me—”

“Lord Tarly is the King’s Hand, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

Jaime hesitated. “Did... did you choose him, or your mother? Only... I would have thought that there were other... alternatives. My uncle Kevan, for example.”

“I asked him to stay, but he’s going back to Castamere.”

“You could order him to stay.”

“Don’t worry. Please don’t. I just want...” Tommen looked pained. “You should go to your duties, uncle.”

My duties are to the Kingsguard, Jaime considered as he left the king’s chamber. He would have to see what provisions had been made for the White Swords. Casterly Rock had more than enough empty towers to serve as a replacement home for him and his Sworn Brothers. As for the brothers themselves, though...
Jaime decided to seek out Ser Loras Tyrell. The joust had always been Ser Loras’s sport, and Jaime was unsurprised to find him at the far end of one of the tilting courses, levelling his lance at an opponent across the yard. His silver armour was decorated with roses of green enamel and had golden clasps at the shoulders. He wore no white cloak.

Ser Loras had cheated in the Hand’s tourney, a thousand years ago, riding a mare in heat to unnerve Gregor Clegane’s mount. But today he rode a swift brown courser draped in the Tyrell colours, and his course seemed honorable. Jaime watched from the gallery as the two horsemen came together in the middle of the list. One man fell from his saddle, and Ser Loras Tyrell soared past unscathed. The fallen knight rolled a few feet in the mud, then stood up looking groggy but unhurt. Loras cantered to the end of the list, then trotted back and dismounted beside his opponent. The defeated knight wore House Martell’s colours.

Jaime stepped down onto the muddy ground and met them halfway between the tiltyard and the stands, as squires led their horses and lances away. Loras furrowed his eyebrows. “Ser Jaime,” he said curtly. Not ‘my lord’ or ‘Lord Commander’, only ‘Ser Jaime’.

“Ser Loras,” returned Jaime. “A pleasure to see you again. And even better to see that you have recovered from your wounds on Dragonstone. I heard rumours that you were maimed, or even killed.”

“I’m sure you did,” Loras said through gritted teeth. “I heard rumours about you, too.”

“It seems none of the rumours were true, fortunately. We are both alive and well.” He turned to the other knight and held out his hand. “I assume you are Prince Quentyn?”

Prince Quentyn had a sober, conscious look, and not a hint of his uncle Oberyn’s wicked smile. This is a very different sort of Dornishman to the ones in the songs. “Ser Jaime,” Quentyn said as they shook hands. “It is good to finally meet you.”

“I remember the days when people meant that in earnest.” Jaime smiled. “Nonetheless, I am pleased to see another Martell in Casterly Rock. Your uncle and I met here when we were both boys. I like to think we formed half a friendship.” Though I’d wager Oberyn would say the opposite.

“My uncle has spoken of you too.”

Evasive as only a Dornishman can be. “How are you finding it here?”

“Enough of your false courtesy, Ser Jaime,” said Loras hotly. “What do you want from us?”

“I want to know why you are prancing round in silver like some prized pony. As I recall, the Sworn Brothers of the Kingsguard wear white cloaks, and carry white shields, regardless of what House they were born into.”

Loras responded more angry bluster. “Men do not call you Ser Jaime of the Kingsguard. They call you Ser Jaime Lannister—”

“Yet I wear my Kingsguard colours, at the very least. You, on the other hand—”

“I will not be trialled like this—”

“No one is trialling you, ser. I am merely asking what you are doing. I am willing to excuse your absence, but you will return to your duties now.”

“Who in seven hells do you think you are?”
You walked right into that one. “The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, Tyrell.” He forced a scowl. “A shame. I thought we had come to an understanding back in King’s Landing.”

“Brienne of Tarth was seen in Highgarden,” Loras blurted out, “shortly before Sansa Stark disappeared from my brother’s wedding. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you, ser?”

“What Brienne does nowadays is of no interest to me,” Jaime said. “My interests lie with King Tommen, and the Kingsguard, and thus with you. Now, Ser Loras—”

“Ser Jaime!” The exclamation belonged to the girl who was the source of his sister’s frustrations: Margaery Tyrell. She had a woman’s body, yes, but a girlish demeanour, Jaime thought, and he was uncertain of whether to view her as coy or innocent.

“Lady Margaery,” he greeted. “I hope you are well.”

“And you, ser.” She was cloaked and shawled, properly dressed for winter. Her cheeks were red and flushed with cold. “I did not realise you had returned so early.”

“Well, we could all do with unexpected surprises from time to time. I hope you will forgive me for stealing Ser Loras from your company, my lady. We need to talk about his Kingsguard duties.”

“Oh, the king and I have talked about this,” said Margaery. Jaime frowned. He did not think she was lying. “You have?”

“Yes. He was very amenable on the subject.” She remained infuriatingly vague. “But the Kingsguard is none of my concern, ser. I will leave you and Loras to talk.” She held out her arm for Prince Quentyn, and the pair walked off. Jaime was certain which of them was the more dominant. The Tyrell girl has them all wrapped around her finger. Small wonder that Cersei is so concerned.

Ser Loras stood glowering at him. “Oh, stop frowning,” Jaime snapped. “Do the Kingsguard have a tower somewhere?”

“They do,” answered Loras. “In King’s Landing.”

He was bitterly correct. And the White Book was there too, a book so heavy it could not be moved from its place, because the Kingsguard did not flee. *There is only one White Sword Tower*, Jaime thought. *And only one Iron Throne.* “What do you want?” he snapped at Loras, shoving the younger knight back against the wall. “To forswear your vows and dishonour yourself? I’m trying to save you from that fate, you fool.”

“Oh, spare me your righteous anger, Kingslayer. You’re hardly one to heed when it comes to matters of honour.”

“No. But neither are you. We both have our vile sins in the eyes of the Faith. Shall we get down on our filthy knees in the sept and pray together?”

“You killed your king.”

“Yes, I did. And you fucked yours. And a false king at that, with no claim to the Iron Throne. The gods do not look kindly upon your perversion. I am willing to allow it, but the High Septon will not.”

It was an empty threat, and Ser Loras knew it. “The High Septon is miles away from here, you
crippled fool. And besides, how are we supposed to redeem ourselves in the light of the Seven? By putting your son on the Iron Throne?” His mouth twitched. “Oh, yes. Let’s talk about gods, then. Yes, they might scourge me, but they’ll have you and your sister burned at the stake. Drag me before the Faith if you must, but I will make a very particular confession. Renly had me look at the genealogy of the Baratheons before he died. I’ll wager I found the same thing Stannis did.”

Jaime scowled. “And now Stannis is dead. A Lannister always pays his debts, ser.”

Suddenly Loras stepped back. “I have no wish to start a war with you.”

“Nor I with you.”

“Would it not be so much easier if we came to an understanding? I cannot serve in the Kingsguard. And you know I cannot. If I did, the day might come when I stand between my family and your king. And when it does, I might make the same choice you once did. None of us want that.”

Jaime took another look at Loras Tyrell. Yes, he seemed the same rash, headstrong knight he had once been, and his anger was proof of that... but there was a slight gauntness to him, and his eyes seemed darker, more haunted. His eyes are reflecting me. “When you took Storm’s End, I heard you were burned.”

Ser Loras shifted a little. “Aye. I was fortunate to escape with few wounds.”

And none of them on his pretty face. But there are scars on him, even if he hides them. Jaime decided to try a different tack. “Then you know the truth about war. I only realised it myself very recently.”

“There is no glory in it,” Loras said emptily.

Aegon’s letter still itched in his pocket. Jaime was tempted to take it out and show him. “No,” he replied. “No glory at all. Back in King’s Landing, I showed you some names in the White Book. Some of them are names which make boys want to join the Kingsguard. Prince Aemon the Dragonknight. Ser Duncan the Tall.” Ser Arthur Dayne. “Then there are those which warn us of its dangers. Ser Criston Cole. Ser Terrence Toyne.” And me. “Perhaps neither of those are great heights to aspire to, though. Perhaps you’d be better somewhere in the middle, doing your duty but not overreaching yourself.”

Loras frowned. Where are you going with this? his eyes asked. “Perhaps.”

“Oh, more than perhaps. As I said before, you and I are not so different, Ser Loras. We both want people to remember our names. If you stay in the Kingsguard, you may well be remembered. You may be remembered as a great knight, but there is a risk of being remembered as a terrible one. If you leave us... your chance to be remembered is gone...”

“But I will have a whole new world ahead of me.” Loras swallowed. “What do you want?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t want you to follow in my footsteps.”

Loras mulled that over. “At Bitterbridge... I slew Robar Royce and Emmon Cuy in my rage. All they had done was... let Renly die. Such a man cannot serve in the Kingsguard.”

“No,” said Jaime. “Better you realise that now, though, instead of making the mistakes I did.” He moved past Ser Loras, out into the yard proper. He wasn’t at all sure if he had done the right thing. After all, he had come down here intending to get Loras to return to his duty, and had instead convinced him to leave the Kingsguard.
Then again, he had done something, and that was probably better than nothing.

He turned around and almost immediately came face-to-face with the other Tyrell sibling. “Have you and Loras resolved the matter?” Lady Margaery asked.

“For the most part, I think so.”

“Good. I thought you might prove rather persuasive.”

“How can you have thought that, when you did not know I was here until a few minutes ago?”

Margaery smiled. “Call it my sense of intuition. You need to be able to trust in your intuition to survive in a place like this. Either that, or a considerable number of guards. Luckily, I have both.”

*Neither will save you from an assassin in the night.* “That is good to know.”

“It is. But it is even better to have friends you can trust in a place like this. Can I trust you, Ser Jaime?”

“I don’t know. Can you?”

“Maybe Cersei has told you why I am here. Or maybe Tommen has. And maybe I know why you are here. And maybe I happen to think that our goals are not so different.”

Jaime stared at her. “I really must be on my way, Lady Tyrell,” he said.

She let him go. *She knows about Aegon’s letter,* he thought as he climbed the stairs, not really knowing where he was going, only intending to get away from the rest of them. *She knows why I am here, and what I want, and she wants to work together with me. She wants me to go against Cersei.*

*But why? What does she get out of it?*

It was starting to snow. Jaime stopped on the landing, and looked out over the Sunset Sea. The sea was a shivering pane of silver. On the right of his view stood one of Casterly Rock’s oldest towers, pointing sternly up into the grey sky. *That might do as a replacement for the White Sword Tower,* he considered. *For now, at least.* Jaime clenched the fingers of his left hand tightly around the hilt of his sword, in its white leather scabbard. His war was not over yet.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, boy. I don't remember any other chapters taking quite so long to complete. There have been drafts of this one in the works since around November last year, albeit all incomplete and in many different forms. However, "Return of the Kingslayer" is a chapter that I'm very satisfied with.

I did have to cut 2000 words from my final draft to get here, but some of it (e.g. Jaime's second conversation with Cersei) will probably pop up in one of his future chapters.

So: this is everything you were expecting, I hope. The big inspirations for this one are ASOS Jaime VII, where he returns to King’s Landing and reunites with Cersei and Tywin, and ASOS Jaime VIII, where he sits all of the Kingsguard down in the room and has a big talk with them. We may see Jaime starting his Kingsguard recruitment
process in an upcoming POV chapter, but first Jaime has to deal with the repercussions of talking to Margaery, which is bound to piss off his sister. As such, TSK Jaime VI will start in medias res, with something quite unexpected (probably).

Okay. Chapter analysis time. The main themes are Jaime trying to reconcile his Kingsguard identity with his Lannister identity, and his coming to terms with the game of thrones once more. By the end of this chapter, his Kingsguard 'honour' seems to have prevailed, with him looking out to the sea and making contemplative choices about the future. It's snowing at the end of this chapter, too, furthering the imagery of white cloaks and honour and purity and all that.

Of course, Jaime is pretty conflicted here. We see that he still loves his sister more than he should:

> When they stopped it felt as though some part of him had died – **a part of him that had only just come back to life, and was now stone cold dead again.** Now his senses were slowly returning to him. *We should not have done that.*

And we see that he isn't really a good person, from his harsh threats to Loras, similar to his 'trebuchet' speech to Edmure in AFFC.

> “What do you want?” he snapped at Loras, shoving the younger knight back against the wall. “To forswear your vows and dishonour yourself? **I'm trying to save you from that fate, you fool.**”

The Jaime-Loras conversation is my favourite in this chapter; Jaime goes in with the intention of forcing Loras to stay in the Kingsguard, then convinces him to do the complete opposite and seems confused by what he's done, even though he did it instinctively - which shows that he's able to make his own choices.

And the Jaime-Tommen scenes were heartening too:

> Jaime was about to bring up King Aegon’s letter, but Tommen spoke first. “I’m sorry. Sorry I couldn’t help you at the Tumblestone. At the parley. I...”

> **They were never going to give me up.** You couldn’t have tried any harder. You were brave for trying. Now, have you been good for your mother while I’ve been away?”

The above exchange was inspired by [this scene](#) from Season 6.

***

And that's all for now. Next time, we'll be returning to Braavos with Arya, and from there we could go in all manner of directions...

Thanks to everyone who has read, left kudos, subscribed and commented.
The Faceless Woman

Chapter Summary

“I will defy him.”
“You can try.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SOMEONE

_I am Arya Stark of Winterfell_, the prayer went. _And I am going home_. There had been other words, once, but she did not remember them. “I am Arya Stark of Winterfell,” she muttered. “And I am going home. _Valar morghulis. Valar dohaeris_.” The light grew as she moved towards it. The extreme brightness of it made her eyes sting. “I am Arya Stark of Winterfell,” she repeated. “And I am going home. _Valar morghulis. Valar dohaeris_. All men must live. All men must die.” She thumbed the sword at her belt. _Needle. Stick ‘em with the pointy end_. Arya remembered little, but she remembered that, and did not dare forget it.

Then the brightness faded, and she was no longer standing in the damp tunnel, but standing in the damp afternoon. Arya fastened her footsteps a little; if the Faceless Men wanted to kill her from afar, she would have little chance of survival in a space as open as this. It was hard to resist the urge to run, but she did not want the guards on Moredo Prestayn’s gate getting any more suspicious than they already were.

Prestayn’s palace loomed over her; high stone walls adorned with tendrils of black ivy and a more-than-necessary number of spearpoints and crossbowmen. The buildings and towers had been canary yellow or pastel pink once, but beneath a sky as dark as this they seemed as cold and grey as any castle keep, and twice as uninviting.

The girl dared not look upon it with her own two eyes, though. She wore instead the face she had taken from the House of Black and White: the face of Lyanna Tarellys, the dead captain’s daughter. Someone here might recognise her, but better that than they recognise Arya Stark of Winterfell, a girl who did not even recognise herself.

The guards on the gate called down to her. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

Her time among the Faceless Men and her lessons from Izembaro had taught the girl how to act. “P-please, I’m... I’m Lyanna... I’m Lyanna Tarellys... I’m just... I’m scared...” She had torn her shift a little and left one of her shoulders bare to the rain, giving her an especially vulnerable look. Some of the men would take pity on her. Others would seek to take advantage of her. Arya did not mind, so
long as they let her in. “Please... I’m cold... I ran...”

The men on the ramparts glanced round hesitantly. The girl’s gaze darted around the square, seeking out invisible attackers; when she looked back at the walls her eyes were bright with fear. “Please...”

How could men with hearts refuse her after that? “You can go in through the sally port,” one of the youngest guardsmen, pointing to her a narrow door in the base of the wall. As it opened, Arya felt a pang of worry. The Faceless Men can pretend to be scared and shivering little girls, too. They could be inside the castle. But surely she would be safer inside the walls than outside them. And there were ships here which could take her north, to the Wall or White Harbor, instead of to war.

One of the men escorted her to a big hall filled with hundreds and hundreds of other refugees, possibly thousands, all crammed together. He ushered Arya into a corner near a big hearth and told her to wait for instruction. She squeezed between a gaunt old woman and a thin street urchin in filthy rags, and squatted down so close to the coals that she could feel the very air hissing from their heat.

She was not tired, but some instinct made her want to close her eyes. Only when you close your eyes do you truly see. Had the kindly man said that once? It sounded like something he might say, full of double meanings and inexplicable philosophy.

Arya had stabbed the kindly man. Not that it mattered, if he was already dead. She should have thought that through more carefully. It almost made her laugh.

Close your eyes, child, and you will truly see.

Arya closed her eyes. She dreamed that she was in two places at once: she was Lyanna Tarellys on the floor of Moredo Prestayn’s hall, surrounded by mellow torchlight and dusty ornaments and shivering children so ragged you could count the bones in their faces and the smell of burned-out candles and sour fear-sweat and the sounds of oatmeal rumbling in empty bellies and babies refusing to heed their mothers’ hushing... but in the same breath she was in the night forest, and there was blood on her coat from the deer she’d just brought down and wet leaves spiralled down from wet branches and she could hear the deferential snarling of her pack rivals who wanted the first meat for themselves but dared not take it, and the playful laughter of the young wolves who did not know that winter was coming; here they were all strangers, there they were all pack.

“Child?”

Arya spun round. “What?” But when she saw who it was, she swallowed and said, “my lady,” and felt a flood of great relief come over her. The Nightingale stood over her between two guardsmen, holding out her hand. “Are you alright, child? Lyanna, was it? A lovely name.” Her reddish hair glowed wetly and was slightly unruly in the firelight, but she was still twice as beautiful as anyone else in the room. The sweet note of her voice left Arya ever so slightly stunned. “Y-yes,” she said, after a dumb moment. “Lyanna. I’m Lyanna. We... we met.”

“Of course, child. When I heard that you were here, I had to find you. Come, now.” She took Arya’s arm and helped her up; her grip was surprisingly strong. “You look positively wretched. A hot bath and a hot meal would do you a world of good.” They must have looked an incredibly odd sight as they went through the hall, through a pair of big wooden doors that the refugees were not allowed to go through, and up a long marble staircase into the palace proper. Here, Arya started to recognise the occasional face from Ferrego Antaryon’s party, though she could not remember many of the names. I wonder if Aresto is here, she thought, slightly panicked. I don’t want him to come chasing after me.

Upstairs, the Nightingale sent her serving man to fetch hot water for Arya’s bath. She brought Arya a cup of tea, too, with ginseng, swordnettle and witch’s finger and a few other herbs Arya recognised from her study at the House of Black and White. “To soothe your nerves, child,” the Nightingale
said. “You need some time to breathe, that’s all.”

Arya sniffed the tea discreetly before taking a sip. It was probably rude, but she was wary of being poisoned, and the Faceless Men might have slipped something in the cup somehow, while the Nightingale was not looking. After, she went into the next room, closed the door, threw her clothes down in a crumpled heap, and climbed into the bath.

It felt like years had passed since Arya had taken a proper bath; in the House of Black and White she washed daily with tepid water, but nothing more, and her many guises had not afforded her the luxury of a bath. And before that... well, surely she must have had a bath at Winterfell, where her father was the lord.

Where had she gone from Winterfell? Her father had gone... somewhere... and someone had cut his head off. Then there was the time she and Clegane had been travelling through the Riverlands – strange that she remembered Clegane of all people, though really all she could recall was him cringing away from her and shouting “Kill me!” over and over into the sunset – and after that, or maybe before, she’d travelled with the Bull and Lord Deric. She’d never had a bath then, had she? Though she had a faint, hazy memory of a woman seeing her bathed and forced into an ill-fitting dress; her mother, perhaps? And sometime before that had been Syrio Forel, who told her that fear cuts deeper than swords and that she must be calm as still water, but had never given her a bath. And before them all was Jaqen H’ghar: a man owes a girl three names. Valar morghulis. Valar morghulis. Valar morghulis.

The sun set. Arya lay back in the hot water and watched it descend behind the craggy mountain that was the Titan of Braavos. Part of her had feared that the mask of Lyanna Tarellys would dissolve in the hot water, but fortunately it did not come sloughing off her face. She had a woman’s body now, or the suggestion of it; not the curvaceous, full-breasted form of a courtesan or a princess, but one that had a woman’s features and suffered through a woman’s monthly rituals. When had that come about? In the House of Black and White, where all time was moot, it was hard to tell.

The moon rose. Arya dried herself on the towels, and slipped into the cotton shift and loose clothes that the Nightingale’s servants had left for her. The garb was made for sleeping, plainly, but it was light and supple enough for her to dance in it. She pirouetted across the room. Quick as a snake. Quiet as a shadow. Fear cuts deeper than swords. They had left Needle undisturbed too; curiously enough, neither the guards on the gate nor the Nightingale had seen fit to comment on the sword’s presence. Arya rolled the hilt between her fingers, readjusting herself to the familiarity of the grip. Last night she had killed a rat in one of tunnels with Needle, and only this morning she had speared a pigeon with it. She was still quick, and wiry and strong too.

When the Nightingale came in, she tucked Needle under the pile of clothes once more and let herself be led to a chair. There was a big canopied bed on one side of the room, piled with slightly musty quilts. The furniture smelled very faintly of cats. “These were the chambers of Moredo Prestayn’s aunt,” the Nightingale explained, “she kept a small menagerie. I met her once. She was somewhat endearing, but mostly mad.”

“And now her rooms are yours.”

“Was Moredo suggesting something, do you think?” The Nightingale laughed. “He was very kind in giving them to me. And yet... I cannot help but feel that there are poor folk in the halls below who are owed these comforts far more than I am.”

Arya was not sure how to reply. “Then... why...?”

“Why don’t I do something about it? Would that I could. But Lord Prestayn and his captains have
more than enough to worry about without me interfering by upending the whole social structure.” She said the words a little venomously, and that was how Arya knew.

“You’re commonborn, aren’t you?”

The Nightingale smiled weakly. “As are you, Lyanna of the House of Tallerys. Oh, you attend the Sealord’s parties and you wear a noble name, but in your heart you are just a pretty common girl. And so was I, once. A long time ago. Now I am no longer any of those.”

“You’re pretty,” Arya said. The word sounded stupid in her mouth. “Prettier than almost everyone I know.”

The Nightingale only laughed. “Not all beauty lies on the surface, dear child. So many people wear masks.” Arya felt her heart suddenly quicken, but the Nightingale looked around airily; it was just an offhand comment. “Do you know why I became a courtesan?” she asked quietly.

“No.”

“Have a guess. Why do you think most girls become courtesans? It is a hard and difficult path, and many start out as common whores, or plying a similar trade. And they do not become courtesans because they want to lie with lots of men, I will give you that clue.”

“I... because they want... they want fame.”

“Indeed. The Veiled Lady. The Black Pearl. The Poetess. You might never have seen them, but you know those names. That is what those girls aspire to be. Most of them fail, because they have never realised the truth that hardly any beauty lies on the surface. There are a hundred girls in Braavos prettier than the Black Pearl, but none of them have her allure, or the prestige of her name. The Poetess is not the fairest of faces either, but she can make even the hardest men weep with a page from her book. The Veiled Lady wears a veil not only to hide her face, but to make sure that the men who pursue her are truer lovers than most, for they are ensared by the beauty within her as well as the beauty without.”

“And you?”

“The past has left its marks on me, child. I only wish to see that those marks are not repeated in the future.” Her explanation ended there. “But you are tired, child, I can see that.”

“No,” said Arya.

“You have just fled across a wet, cold city, and you were in the bath for nearly two hours in your exhaustion. I will be back later. For now, you need to rest.”

There was no way for Arya to protest. She did not feel particularly tired, but she knew that a few hours’ sleep would do her good. And if she had to run again, it was better to be rested. She did not expect to fall asleep so quickly, but months of rough pallets and ragged quilts made the soft swell of the mattress feel lighter than any cloud, and without minutes she was away from Braavos, and returned to her pack in the land of dreams she had visited earlier.

This time the she-wolf barely stirred as Arya became a part of her world. The hackles on her back raised and twitched, as though in greeting, and a low and hoarse growl came from her throat, warning the girl not to intervene; this was the world of wolves, not of men, and she was only a visitor here.

They were headed east; Arya was not sure how she knew that, only that she did. The lake-shore had
long since faded away behind them, and the black hall of dead kings along with it, both disappeared into swirling tunnels of grey mist and snowflakes. Now the land was flat and dull, and from its muddy black soil grew tall fronds of yellow grass and dying cornstalks. In the faint and faraway moonlight, the wolf glimpsed fires burning with tall red flames and lots of blowing smoke. But she smelled fire much closer to her, a strange, abnormally crimson flame with a scent of unnatural mystery to it. Only two figures had gathered round the firepit, both swathed in red woollen robes and cloaked in the same colour. “We will have little luck in saving the kings and queens of Westeros,” said a man’s voice. “All we can do is bind up the wounds when the time comes.”

“We can save them. If we find the right king. I have spoken with Benerro and Moqorro in King’s Landing, with Kallan in Volantis, with Garralon in Braavos, with Kinvara in Qarth. And they all agree that Daenerys Targaryen is the closest thing to a saviour we will find.”

Arya pricked up her ears and moved a little closer through the parting corn. She could not make out their faces, but she faintly remembered the man’s voice... very faintly, for she had not known this voice for many years. “You were saying the same of Stannis a year ago.” They spoke in the tongue of old Valyria, but Arya understood most of what they said.

“Stannis was the most likely choice,” said the woman. “We thought it would be much easier to find a saviour in the west. The east is vast, and back then Daenerys Targaryen was but a girl, the prize of some Dothraki horselord. It was not until she sacked Slaver’s Bay that we contemplated that she might be the promised queen. Yet...”

“Yet?” asked the man.

The woman deliberated a few moments. “Yet while I was in the north with Stannis, I felt the prophecy calling to me. As though there was something there, but I failed to notice it. At the time I thought it was indicating Stannis’s success to come... yet as we rode south, the certainty faded. And the flames keep telling me to go north. I have seen it. Azor Ahai is in a kingdom ruled by snow. But Daenerys Targaryen is in the south—”

“It may be that she will head north sometime.”

“It may be. But then the flames would be telling me to go south now, as they told Benerro.”

A pause. Then the man said: “There was a time when I believed in such wonders as prophecy, too. When I saw Beric returned from the dead, it convinced me that the Lord could do anything. Alas, times have changed, my lady. Now I see what the lord has done, and I have only one question: why? Why bring her back, when all she wants is vengeance? What is her purpose? What is our God’s lesson?”

“We may never know,” said the woman, “I—” Suddenly she stopped short. “Wolves.”

Arya woke then, not with a start, but with the dream slowly dissolving into nothing. “Red priests,” she said aloud, “I saw red priests.” Where? “In Westeros.” What were they saying? “They... they were talking about a saviour.” She shook her head and cleared her thoughts. She didn’t believe in saviours. She didn’t believe in anything, not anymore. What is our God’s lesson? the red woman had asked, but Arya didn’t think there was a lesson at all.

She crept to the door and opened it a crack, just wide enough to see through. All she could differentiate were shadows and light. Black and white. Valar morghulis, valar dohaeris. Arya felt the need to keep quiet, though she could not say why. She felt as though a part of her remained with the wolf, back across the Narrow Sea, and in this moment her hackles were rising, warning of danger ahead.
The Nightingale opened the door so suddenly that Arya stepped back, gasping involuntarily. She was looking round for Needle when she realised that there was no danger here.

“I heard you wake,” said the Nightingale. “Did you have sweet dreams?”

“I didn’t have any dreams,” Arya lied.

The Nightingale smiled. “Everybody dreams, child. How else would we stay sane?”

“I didn’t dream. Not of anything in particular.”

“You lie.” The Nightingale went to the window, and Arya felt compelled to follow her. “I know you are lying,” the courtesan said. “But I have lied to you, too, so we are even, I suppose.”

“When did you lie?” Arya had to ask.

The Nightingale looked at her; there was something very different in her eyes that had not been there a moment ago. They seemed bluer, brighter and darker at the same time, older and wiser, and all-knowing. *The eyes of a god, or the eyes of someone who has seen far too much.* “I said that girls become courtesans to attain fame. But that isn’t true. They do it for the same reason as anyone else, for the same reason anyone does anything. For love. They want to be loved. Just like me, or like you, Arya Stark of Winterfell.”

Arya took a sudden, hurried step back. She’d suspected as soon as she saw the Nightingale’s eyes, but now she knew. *The Faceless Men did not chase me because they knew where I was going.* She moved for Needle, but the Nightingale spun around impossibly quickly, grabbed her hand, and forced it to her side. Arya tensed, ready to spring. “You’re a Faceless Woman,” she said through gritted teeth.

The Nightingale did not even deny it. “Yes, I am a Faceless Woman. In the same way that you are.”

“Not anymore.”

“No one leaves the Faceless Men, child, no matter how hard they try. You drank the water, same as I did. You changed your mind, and you ran, same as I did. You can try and leave, and they will let you, but you will always end up going back. There is only one God, and once you know his name, you cannot defy him.”

“I will,” said Arya. “I will defy him.”

The Nightingale shook her head. “You can try.”

A long pause followed her words. “Are you going to kill me? Or are you going to give me to them?” She was not afraid. *Fear cuts deeper than swords, and I will not go down without a fight.* She could get to Needle in time, if she was fast enough—

But that did not matter, for the Nightingale said, “No.”

“No?”

“No. I will not do either. I am going to let you go. Your fate is in your hands, Arya Stark.” Her smile was full of sadness. “It is kinder to let you believe that, I think.”

Chapter End Notes
Long story short: I'm not making the big dramatic story cuts that I promised - not all of them, at least. True, things have been condensed, but it was impossible to get it down to 103, so I'm going to keep it as I intended. Probably.

Not much to say on this chapter. It wasn't my favourite to write, but I liked having a two-hander between Arya and the Nightingale instead of shoehorning in Tyrion and Penny and Jaqen and everything.

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Next chapter:
The Sky on Fire

written by SerGoldenhand
The Sky on Fire

Chapter Summary

War is a language we all speak.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TYRION

Each minute seemed to last an hour. At the rail of the Brightfish, Tyrion Lannister stood still and silent as a gargoyle, one black eye and one green eye fixed on the moon. By her violet-tinged light he could see all the ships of Moredo Prestayn’s fleet: Salladhor Saan’s thirty-seven caravels and carracks, the trading cogs and trawlers that had once belonged to Ferregio Antaryon, the few galleys they had that were suited to war. The Brightfish was among the bigger ships in their fleet. Aboard it were three of their most distinguished and necessary generals: Ser Justin Massey, a fool’s knight with nothing but honour to his name; Salladhor Saan, infamous rogue of the Narrow Sea, who lived for gold alone; and Tyrion Lannister, Lord Tywin’s least-loved son, with a heart as dark as the night they were sailing into. A sorry company of saviours for the Free City of Braavos.

They had chosen a foggy night hoping that it would allow Saan’s ships to get closer before their trap was sprung, and so they could use it to hide their smaller vessels from the hulking war galleys commandeered by Tormo Fregar and his allies.

Streamers of purple cloth flew from their sails, though they looked mostly black tonight. Beneath those banners of unity the lords had pinned their own sigils: Antaryon’s bronze trident and net, Vynelion’s fiery red flower, Ahryl’s nymph in her cloak of lightning. Hotassar, Anerin, Ostos, Faenel, Phassios. Some of the banners were Targaryen and Baratheon (at Ser Justin’s insistence), and a small number bore the devices of the Seven and the Lord of Light and the Black Goat and all the other godly men Tormo Fregar had driven from their temples.

They had two hundred ships in all, including those they kept in reserve and well away from the fighting. In the Seven Kingdoms that fleet would have been enough to conquer the Iron Throne, but their foes across the lagoon had nearly four hundred, and only the defenders’ control of the Titan of Braavos had kept them from attacking many nights ago. Yet the Titan would not resist a siege forever. Their attackers must be broken tonight.

Tyrion waited with Salladhor Saan and Justin Massey as the Brightfish drifted gently forwards to join its sisters in their advance. The knight was in plate armour, while Saan remained garbed like a merchant in fox fur and quilted satin.
Massey shifted irritably from one foot to the other. “How far now?”

“I don’t know,” said Tyrion. “The fog is still between us and them.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“It is if you don’t want someone putting an arrow through your eye at a thousand paces.”

Saan laughed. “Well said, my little friend. But a thousand paces? Surely that is not possible.”

“I know some people who are rather good with a longbow.” He was thinking of his old squire Tygett Sarsfield. If Tyg lives up to his promises, he may well be the finest archer in the Seven Kingdoms someday. “It helps to have friends in high places.” Tyrion smiled and Salladhor Saan laughed.

Friends you can trust. Tyrion did not really think he had any friends like that. Friends could mean your death in King’s Landing, whether by their betrayal or by the vulnerability they posed. He thought of Shae. On the night before the first battle of the Blackwater she put her lips against his cheek and her hands on his chest and brushed her hair against his bristly beard and guided him into her. My lion. My giant of Lannister.

And then there she was again, lying dead on his bed, Cersei’s parting gift. A chain of golden hands for you, my sweetling, and my sister’s fingers twisting in the links.

For hands of gold are always cold, but a woman’s hands are warm. He hardly remembered Shae, but he remembered the song.

“I have placed a lot of value in those ships, Imp,” said Salladhor Saan.

“And I have offered you a lot in return. Two million golden dragons, or have you forgotten?”

“Their sentimental value far exceeds that.” Saan sucked in his breath. “I want three.”

“You may have whatever you want.” I am not intending on giving you it, though. As a known pirate, Saan could hardly go chasing Tyrion to King’s Landing to get his gold. A Lannister always pays his debts. When they are worth paying.

“I hope you are not intending to cheat me, Imp.”

Oh, not deliberately. “If I was, do you think I would tell you?”

“You might, if you were the fool that your raiment suggests.”

It was a fair point. “I should have followed your example, my lord. Wear silk and fur instead of leather and chainmail, and they may yet spare me.” Instead they had fastened him into the sort of leather armour a child might have worn to practise his swordwork, complete with crimson and gold fastenings in a seeming mockery of his House. Should I have asked for a little cape as well? With a little gilt lion cub embroidered on the back?

They would have laughed at me, Father. No one laughs at a Lannister. You taught me that.

The archers were out in force along both sides of the Brightfish. Scorpions ranged along the decks, huge steel quarrels in their jaws. Though the mist was thick, Tyrion could still make out the vague outlines of the high-up constellations: the Shadowcat and the Sword of the Morning, the Ice Dragon and the King’s Crown. But it was the Ghost that was out tonight, a spray of pale blue, shivering
stars. Tyrion wondered if that was a good omen.

The drums started up and he knew that the time had come. Behind them, all along the ramparts of the Arsenal, and up in the crow’s nest towers of the ships, archers nocked flaming arrows to their bows, and the strings and pulleys of ballistae and catapults were checked one last time. War is a language we all speak, Tyrion thought. In Braavos and in the Seven Kingdoms alike. They shout “nock, draw, loose” in different tongues, but the flight of an arrow always means the same.

“You know,” said Ser Justin, “when you did this on the Blackwater, I felt this same sense of foreboding. It was too easy. King Stannis said as much. ‘The dwarf has some trick up his sleeve,’ he said.”

“He was right.”

Massey’s eyes glowed. “I lost good friends that day, Imp. And a cousin too, a good man. You killed thousands.”

Should he apologise? “If I had not done what I did, King’s Landing would have suffered worse.”

“Someday you will be judged for it.”

Tyrion said nothing. The drums stopped. The arrows burst free of their bows and soared into the night sky. As they fell, he thought of Phario Forel’s play, with its cruel mockery of all those deaths:

“I am wretched, ay, but my cunning’s higher.

“our boats are wood, and my flaming shafts,

my lord, as you’ll see...

are tipped with points of wildfire!”

They fell screaming upon the enemy armada and Salladhor Saan’s fleet of black wooden ships, and the ropes that bound them together, and burned.

A moment passed, calm as still water. Then demons were dancing on the river, and the sky was on fire. Bright yellow lights flared through the mist. The breath went out of him very suddenly.

“Mother have mercy,” said Ser Justin Massey, forgetting his king’s religion. The plumes of fire burned sharpest at the bottom; as they rose, grey smoke mingled with the hot yellow-red ash and filled the night above them. Far off, Tyrion could hear screaming men. Slowly, as a lion approaches its fatally wounded prey, they advanced into the Stranger’s clutches.

Tyrion stepped away from the rail. “I’m going down below,” he told Ser Justin.

“Looking for your little wife?” Massey called sneeringly after him.

In a sense. Tyrion had grown tired of telling people Penny was not his wife. They seemed to think that dwarf could mate only with dwarf, that anything else was akin to bestiality. And how wrong are they? Only a beast would let his lovers meet the fates of Tysha and Shae.

Numbers – or Gerion, Tyrion reminded himself – was below decks with most of the crew. Casks of
ale and rum and cheap sour wine had been opened by the men, and they were cheering as they watched the fire through the portholes. Numbers had a cup for himself. “For courage,” he said, indicating it to Tyrion.

“In that case, I could do with a whole cask.” Tyrion had tried to stay off the wine today to clear his thoughts, but now he was trembling with nervous energy. “Oh, the Father Above will forgive me if I take a cup.” He gave us the grapes, after all. Why else but to make wine?

For a while they stood in contented silence. The air smelled of sweet steel and the marks left behind by nitre and phosphor and powder on men’s fingers. They were unfamiliar smells; they did not fight with these queer eastern armaments in the Seven Kingdoms. But the other smells – sweat and fear and blood-lust – were ones he knew. The drums beat out different sounds, but they play to the same rhythm.

Tyrion squinted out the porthole. Wait. “Can you see black sails out there, or is it my imagination?”

“I can’t see any ships, my lord,” Numbers reported. “Only fire.”

“Oh, good. I must be going mad with fear, then.”

“Some... sometimes my eyes aren’t that good, my lord.”

“Your eyes.” Tyrion looked at him. Your Lannister green eyes, he thought. “No. Your eyes are younger than mine, and far less likely to lie. Forget my question. Life has left me with an unhealthy habit of seeing enemies in every shadow. Let it be. Where’s Penny?”

Numbers looked ashamed. “I shouldn’t have let her—”

“The girl is as stubborn as a crone with a codfish. I am certain you did all you could. If she is killed, it is no fault but her own.” Harsh words but true.

Penny was in his cabin, curled on a wooden shelf and buried in scratchy wool blankets and cushions. One round eye peeked out. “Who’s there?”

“Only us,” Tyrion called out. “Here to watch the fireworks. They’re all on fire out there, if you want to look.”

“I thought you would stay with the others,” she said.

“With Salladhor Saan and Justin Massey? Hardly worthy company for a Lannister of the Rock, wouldn’t you say?”

“And you think I’m better?” Penny squeaked.

“Judging by your heart, almost certainly. Saan is a rogue and Massey is a cunt. If the gods are good, neither of them will see the end of tonight.”

“If they die, won’t we die too?” Penny picked at the blanket.

“No one’s going to die, Penny,” said Numbers. “Well, none of us.”

Is he so naïve to believe that, or is he being sweet only for her? That night, after Numbers’s nightmare, Penny had been far kinder to the boy than Tyrion had, bringing him warmed wine and new blankets and sitting by him till morning as his sobs subsided.

“How can you know that?” Penny asked.
“I just... do.”

“Your father was much the same,” Tyrion heard himself say.

The ensuing silence was absolute. They had not spoken of it since that night. As though they could make the fact fade out of existence. “M-my lord?” said Numbers.

“I...” Already he wished he had said nothing. “I said that your father was like... uncle Gerion never judged things on their merit in that way. He had his own sort of intuition. Like you. He just... knew things, somehow.”

He could not quite bring himself to meet Numbers’s sad eyes. Tell me more, those eyes probably said.

“I remember him fondly,” Tyrion muttered. “He was always my favourite uncle. I think I might have been his favourite nephew, if only to spite my lord father. Uncle Gerion was never too concerned with what Father thought, even though he was his liege lord. My aunt Genna said something to that effect, once: Uncle Kevan was Tywin’s loyal shadow, and he will always be in that position, never higher. Uncle Tygett tried to escape that shadow, but he failed dismally, and succumbed to anger. Uncle Gerion laughed at the games they played. He told jokes and stories and remained an adventurer at heart. Oh, he had some loyalty to his family, and a great deal of gratitude for the opportunities it had given him, but nothing more than that. He certainly didn’t have my father’s reverence for his legacy.”

“He might have,” said Numbers. “He left me. Perhaps he didn’t want to go home with the shame of a bastard son.”

Come to think of it, that was odd., Especially since Uncle Gerion had a bastard daughter at the Rock, Joy Hill, whom he had openly acknowledged. “Perhaps he did not know of you,” he said. “Uncle Gerion was not married. He had no wife to appease.” Tyrion smiled. “You have his eyes.”

“Which eye?” asked Penny from her pile of cushions.

“What?”

“Which eye?” She jerked a stubby thumb towards Numbers. “His eyes are different colours. One of them is really green. The other is more... blue, sort of.”

Tyrion leaned across to look, but Numbers turned his head away. “It’s just a strange thing, that’s all. Another strange thing about me.”

“It’s magic,” said Penny stupidly, “that’s what it is. You’ve got magic eyes.” She squeezed Numbers’s hand.

Which eye? Tyrion thought. He opened his mouth. Then the Brightfish veered suddenly, violently to starboard, and he stumbled, biting his tongue, his mouth filling with blood as he crashed against the wall. His fingers scrambled for his dagger. Nearby he could hear shouting and stomping on the boards above their heads. “My lord.” Numbers crouched above him. “My lord, are you all right? We’re under attack, I think someone just rammed us.”

How? We burned them all. Tyrion nodded groggily and forced himself to stand. “Penny? Where’s Penny?” He saw her then, hiding beneath the blankets, chewing her thumb and muttering, “it came from outside, it came from outside, it came from outside,” like a prayer.

“P-Penny.” Tyrion coughed out soot. “Penny, we have to go. The ship’s under attack. We should get
somewhere... safe.” *But where is safe, if we’re in the middle of the battle?*

Penny pulled the blankets up to her chin. “I’m s-s-scared, my lord. I’m... I can’t... I...”

Tyrion slapped her.

Not hard, but certainly hard enough to make her look up, her eyes wide with more shock than fear. That was good. At least she was alert. “Get up,” Tyrion growled. “Get up, Penny, before I hit you again.”

She got up. “W-what’s going on?’’

“We’re under attack, that’s what I said.”

“B-but you said they wouldn’t—”

*Damn it.* He could leave her here, he supposed. “Fine,” he spat out, “I’ll go up alone. Numbers, stay here with Penny. Try not to die.” Tyrion drew out his shortsword – it would have been a dagger for a bigger man, but it served for him – and stumbled out into the corridor. The ship was rocking and swaying from side to side like a man in his cups. Up above he heard the sounds of fighting and breaking wood. *Faster,* he willed himself, *faster, faster, f—*

The *Brightfish* crashed to port this time, buffeted by something else. “Ram!” he heard a man shouting, as he clawed a way through the press of men, ducking under legs and arms in his haste. He still did not understand.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he saw that the deck was on fire. *No, that’s wrong, we set them on fire, not us.* A huge piece of the broken ship’s mast came crashing down on his right, breaking through the stern, and the sail was ablaze. Enemy soldiers were up in the rigging, climbing over the sides of the boat from the two ships that had rammed them, one on either side. Tyrion remembered the bridge of burning boats at the Battle of the Blackwater; this was not too different at all, only this time he was in the middle of it all.

The deck was swirling, shifting, writhing beneath his feet; all the while the rain scythed down, making the wet boards even wetter still. Not only rain, but blood and ashes too. And out in the black mist...

*Our other ships are burning. And their fleet... it is all still there. How? How?* He wanted to scream.

The enemy galleys were out in force, streaming in from starboard and further off to port. “But we burned them,” Tyrion said stupidly. He had no time to consider; a great black wave washed up over the deck, and he had to grab the rigging to stay on his feet. The wind wailed, blowing fingers of fire towards him. A brazier rolled down the deck, spewing sparks. Tyrion could see Ser Justin Massey with his longsword out, slashing this way and that, surrounded. Some heroic impulse took Tyrion. “Forward!” he yelled, not knowing if anyone heard him. “Forward, that way!”

*The last time you did this, you lost your nose,* some voice warned him. Tyrion raised his shortsword up high as he charged, thrust it into the meat of one man’s leg, and was spared the rest of his fight when the deck shifted and the man spun away from him, crying out, falling. He steadied himself, and forced himself onwards, chasing after Ser Justin. A great fiery beam crashed down on his right side, shattering the floor and the deckrail on the starboard side entirely. *If I fall in there, I will drown,* Tyrion knew. Rain lashed against his cheek. Was it water, or blood?

Ser Justin — where *was* Ser Justin now? He turned round, tripped, lost his footing again, became tangled in some tackle; the *Brightfish* lurched left, swung right —
And then the mast burst. Just like that. A knife of wind cut through the sky, blooding his cheek. Tyrion smashed his arm into a low-hanging boom and the air was splinters, splinters, all splinters. The mouth of hell had opened beneath him, its throat black tinged with orange flame. Somehow he kept his footing; now a boy’s voice was screaming, “My lord, to me, to me! Take my hand!” His fingers fumbled with Numbers’s, both of their hands sweaty; eventually he clung to the sleeve of the boy’s tunic and together they fell backwards onto the keening deck. *The ship is about to break up,* Tyrion thought, and then, bizarrely, randomly: *Penny.*

*I cannot leave her.*

*Why not? You can still save yourself.*

*I must not leave her.*

“Where’s Penny?” he bellowed over the firestorm. But by then he was already on his way down the stairs. And Numbers – the Seven bless him – stumbled loyally in his wake, down into the cabins. Water was pouring in through the jagged rents in the belly of the ship, filling it up. Tyrion splashed through in earnest, screaming “Penny! Penny! Penny!” until he was hoarse.

Over the fire, he heard the faint answering wails, getting mercifully closer and closer. When she crashed into his arms she was sobbing and shaking with fear, snot running down her nostrils, her face red and blotchy. *You beautiful stupid dwarf girl.* She made to hug him, but Tyrion shoved her behind him, back up the stairs, up. “Go!” His voice rasped out into nothing; Numbers led the way, then Penny, then Tyrion himself. “Be brave,” he shouted out, as much to himself as to her, “be brave, damn you!”

Penny nearly broke again when they emerged on the deck and she saw the hellstorm that surrounded them. The foe’s ram had broken the stern almost entirely now, rigging and masts lay burning on the decks and the ship was half on its side. *Like some mad god’s nightmare.* All around them men were burning, bleeding, screaming, dying. “Where do we go?” asked Penny.

“Where can we go?” Tyrion rasped. “The islands.” He did not even know if there were any islands. “The islands in the lagoon. Or... surrender.”

“How?”

“The...” A bubble of blood burst from Numbers’s lips. The boy convulsed a little. Tyrion saw the hand pressed to his side, wet with blood. *Damn you. Damn you.* “You’re hurt.” He forced Numbers’s wet, pale hand away from his side. A wooden splinter was sticking out, only a small one, about the size of his finger. Numbers was shaking his head. *That won’t kill him.* The gods would surely not be so unjust.

*Surrender. Surrender the battle, and save the boy.*

It was a strange hope. A mad one. But they would save Tyrion Lannister, wouldn’t they? Why else would they have knocked him out at Forel’s theatre, instead of killing him?

Those were all his hopes. Tyrion took Penny’s arm in one hand, Numbers’s in the other. *And pray to the Mother that my breastplate does not drag me under—*

The deck wailed one last time. It was all or nothing. Tyrion Lannister ran to the starboard side – towards the blackest, deepest, least burning part of the water – whispered a silent prayer to a god he did not believe in, and jumped.

A half-second of sheer weightlessness, and then the lagoon hit him hard in the chest, driving the air
out of him, and the weight of his boots and boiled leather was threatening to drag him under. The water swirled around him, all black and white and bright orange flame, and then above him, and he had Numbers’s hand and Penny’s hand and he could not hold them both any longer, his fingers slipping, slipping...

His fingers locked around something hard and heavy. A piece of wood from the burning ship, mayhaps, a piece of the mast and rigging. Tyrion pushed Numbers and Penny into it and gripped the ropes as hard as he could, so tight they burned his fingers. “Hold on!” he shouted over the raging flames, “bloody damn you, hold on!” They managed to make their way up onto the wood, and there they clung, the three of them together, the Imp, his cousin, and the little dwarf girl.

Somehow they made it through till morning, clinging to that fragment of the destroyed ship. By some miracle of the gods, they survived it all. They had lost, but what did it matter anymore, so long as they survived? Justin Massey was dead. Salladhor Saan was dead. Moredo Prestayn and Qarro Volentin had likely gone the same way. The lagoon was on fire, and the heroes of Braavos had burned. But they were alive.

It was Penny who first saw the ship cutting through the water towards them. “Isn’t it beautiful?” She was far from cheerful, but her eyes lit up, and she seemed so innocent again. Tyrion shivered, and hoped that the ship’s captain would not begrudge him a change of clothes before he was clapped in irons. Numbers had gone quiet, and rather pale, but he was still breathing, and the splinter in his side had served to seal up the wound. *Though that will not spare him infection... how long did we spend in the water?*

A rowboat was drifting towards us now. The light at the bow was green, glowing hotly through the mist. “It’s an enemy ship,” Penny said. “But it’s hope, too.”

Tyrion kissed her. Not out of passion, and only on the cheek, but he had to do something. Numbers’s eyes blinked blearily. “We’re safe now,” he said, as if that would make it true. The rowboat drifted closer still, and Tyrion looked up at their saviour... and felt his heart sink. *Of course. Who else would it be?*

“Well,” said Ser Bronn of the Blackwater smugly. “Isn’t this my lucky day? A very lucky day indeed.”

Bonn offered him a hand up into the rowboat, but Tyrion had too much pride to accept his offer. Instead he scrambled up over the steep wooden side. Penny followed, and Numbers went last. when Tyrion grabbed his hand to help him up, the skin was clammy and cold as ice. *Damn it.* Tyrion swallowed. “Bonn,” he said, “you may be an irredeemable bastard, but the boy has done you no harm. Do you have a healer on your ship?”

Bonn felt Numbers’s brow and lifted his tunic to look at the messy wound under his arm. The boy let out a frightened little moan. “He isn’t in a good state,” said Bronn. “The chills might take him, if he’s as frail as he looks.”

No. Tyrion squeezed Numbers’s hand and helped the boy to a sitting position. “He’ll live,” he said adamanty. He felt a responsibility to both Numbers and his dead uncle Gerion. “If we get him to a healer, he’ll live. But he needs one now. Do that for me, and I’ll give you whatever you want. Whatever you need.”

Bonn smirked, and picked up the oars, turning them back towards the ship. “And what makes you think you’re in any position to negotiate? Come on, little lord. Magister Illyrio’s waiting for you.”
Hurray for the anticlimax!

It was hard to balance the necessary dialogue in this chapter with the very fast pace of the action, but I think this worked, for the most part. Of course, there are still a lot of things unsaid. I left Tyrion's interactions with Bronn and Illyrio Mopatis until his next chapter... which takes place in Blackwater Bay...

A few more clues here on the Numbers front. Some of you may find the way I handled this a little odd - notably, Numbers is still referred to by that name, rather than as Gerion. I have my reasons, but I'm not going to share them with you.

I think you can make your own conclusions about how Tyrion and his allies were defeated after all that buildup. Let's just say that the same trick rarely works twice, and remember that Bronn was at the Blackwater.

Interestingly, unless we include Aegon's siege of KL, this is the first time Tyrion has been defeated in a pitched battle. Which may lead him to reconsider some of his choices about war. Or not.

You may recognise this chapter as being very similar to ADWD Tyrion IX in the way it played out, right down to Tyrion sort-of-kissing Penny at the end. Nothing too significant about that, but it was a reasonably good model for this chapter, and a lot of GRRM's influence got through.

Next chapters:

"Sanctuary"
"Home"
"The Lies of Gods and Men"
Sanctuary

Chapter Summary

*Close the Wall. Fill the gates with stones and wood and let them freeze over to block the way. Close the Wall. We will not be going north again.*

Chapter Notes

The first Jon chapter in quite some time. If you need an update, Jon's last chapter is 'Last of the Giants', which ended with him and Val fleeing from the Others.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JON

Only a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch could open the Black Gate. Jon Snow stood before the weirwood mouth with Dolorous Edd and Pyp, chanting: “I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men—”

The Black Gate made a sound somewhere between a screech and a yawn, the mouth twisted and warped, and stretched, and stretched... till with a sound like the tearing of skin it tore open, a bloody mouth dripping weirwood sap down from the toothless gums above.


“Less grim than the Others, though,” Jon replied. He folded his fingers around Longclaw’s hilt. “Come on. Let’s not waste a minute. Edd, Pyp, to your duties.”

Jon stayed at the mouth as his brothers ventured into the cave. He could just barely make out a tunnel curving upwards, and while the path looked safe, he could not help his growing unease. The tunnel reminded him eerily of Bloodraven’s cave, and that memory brought nothing good.

“And now we forge on bravely into darkness,” said a voice behind him. “Forgive me, but I thought we were escaping from the darkness.”

“Better the darkness ahead than the darkness behind us, Lord Bolton.” Jon turned to face him. “Better to put the Wall between us and them.”

Ramsay looked up at the ice. “It will not last forever, you know.”
“The Others cannot get through,” said Jon.

“But the wights can climb the Wall. It will take them many hours, even days, but dead men do not sleep.”

_The night is dark and full of terrors_, Jon thought. “Have you seen Crowkiller and Big Bucket?” He had kept Lord Wull with him, and some of the wildling chieftains. It had seemed better to separate the wildlings out; with Mance dead, they had no leader to keep them together, and so Jon had to assign them command duties far and wide to satisfy their pride. Alfyn Crowkiller and Young Halleck were acting as his lieutenants, alongside the Bastard of Bolton, who was too dangerous to be sent away from him.

“Crowkiller?” asked Ramsay. “Somewhere near the back of our baggage train, I think. I’ll send Damon down to fetch him for you.”

“No need. You can go yourself. You’ll need to work together if we’re to get everyone through by nightfall.”

Ramsay smiled. “As you say. I suppose I could find out how many died last night, too.” His smile possessed not a shred of comfort or sorrow or even anger. _Does he feel nothing for everyone we lost?_

Dolorous Edd emerged from the mouth of the Black Gate behind him. “There’s a way,” he said. “Comes out into a big stone kitchen. Whole place is deserted; Pyp reckons there’s ghosts up there.”


“Make sure they spread themselves out,” he said.

“That shouldn’t be too hard; it’s a big castle.”

_And a far better prize than the Bastard of Bolton deserves._ Still, leaving Ramsay here was a better plan than bringing him back to Castle Black. And Jon thought giving Ramsay command of the Nightfort had a certain poetry to it. Every child in the North had grown up on stories of the Rat Cook, who had broken sacred guest rights, and the Night’s King, who engaged in dark and twisted rituals to sate his Other bride. The same Other bride, who, if Coldhands had the right of it, was still locked in the crypts beneath Winterfell.

“M’lord?” Edd frowned. “You were wandering again.”

“There’s a lot to think about,” said Jon. He glanced back down the line. Alfyn Crowkiller and Ramsay were leading the column up to the Black Gate. “Edd,” he said, “you have command of the stewards on the other side. Make sure the sick and the wounded find healers, and get the kitchen fires burning.”

“And stew, m’lord. We could do with some stew.”

“Fine. And you’ll want to unpack some provisions too, and it wouldn’t hurt to check the larders either, though I doubt there’s anything in there. Then you’ve got the horses to do. See that they’re watered and fed, especially our garrons. They’ve got a hard ride ahead of them tomorrow.”

“Oh, Mother have mercy,” said Edd. “Why couldn’t you make someone else the Lord Steward?”

Jon managed a weak smile. “You’re the best man for it.”
“We must be severely lacking in good men, then.” Edd returned to the Black Gate mumbling.

Jon turned back to find the column. They looked half like wights themselves, their grey and brown rags crusted with frost. The first were women and children and the very old, mostly comprising what few folk had survived the trek down from Hardhome.

“It was no worse than the night before.” Ramsay did not need to explain what he meant. “But what were you expecting? I told you that we would have done better to leave the old and sick behind and strike for the Wall with full haste. We would have been here two days ago—”

This was an old argument. “Mance promised them all safety. I will not dishonour his memory by reneging on that promise.”

“How very noble of you,” Ramsay’s ice-pale eyes flashed. “But honour has been the downfall of many a Stark. And no man can keep an impossible vow. Not even the great Lord Snow.”

I will not let him provoke me, Jon told himself, squeezing his right hand into a fist. I will not let him have the satisfaction.

“Of course not, Lord Bolton. But my father taught me that a man is only as good as his word.”

Ramsay raised an eyebrow. Yes, it said, and what did that do for him?

Enough of this. “We should get started,” he said, turning to face the assembled wildlings. “The way through the Wall is ahead of you. Move quickly and quietly, if you can. We do not have the time to clear blockages from the tunnel if you are all to be through by nightfall. On the other side, my Sworn Brothers will direct you to warm halls where you can rest. Those of you who have skill with healing herbs or needle and thread, report to Lord Steward Eddison Tollett in the kitchens. The same goes for those of you who are willing to help us fetch water or clear snow from the ramparts. The sick will be treated and you will all be fed. The rest of your provisions will be decided tonight.” Jon stepped neatly back, to allow Alfyn Crowkiller, Sweet Donnel Hill and Tumberjon to lead the wildlings towards the Black Gate. When the first of them had disappeared into the mouth, Jon let out his breath and moved down towards the camp.

The day stretched on without an end in sight. It seemed that the trail of wildlings would never end, either. Jon had counted three thousand of them, scant two nights ago, but here they seemed to number far more. Two by two they shuffled towards the Black Gate, and vanished into obscurity beyond the mouth. Their movements were jittery and spasmodic, and did not hide the fear that lurked in the hearts of even those who pretended to be bravest. Onwards they came, in woollen rags and leather armour, some in dinted helms and splintered armour, some wielding axes and swords caked in rust. Blond and brown and red-haired, tall and short, most of them thin and wasted. The sun was high and cold in the sky. Jon shoved his gloved hands into his pockets and shivered. “Keep an eye out for any wights,” he told Ramsay, when he had long grown tired of standing with the man. “We can’t afford to have them sneaking up on us.”

There were no wights that day. That was a mercy they probably did not deserve, but it was one they needed. As the hours wore on, progress through the Black Gate grew slower and slower. They got the women and children through early, and most of the men as well, but the light was growing dim by the time the laden garrons and their wagons trudged towards the gate. The Black Gate was not as wide as most of the ways under the Wall, so once or twice the horses got stuck leading their carts through, and had to be rescued with ropes and ice-axes. Come sunset, only a few of the wagons remained, and the general murmuring of those who thought that the last of their things would be better left abandoned to the Others. “Just be thankful that we didn’t have any mammoths,” Iron Emmett said. “That’d be a right bloody nightmare.” The giants and their herds had headed further down the Wall under Soren Shieldbreaker’s command, to take passage through the gate at the
Shadow Tower.

If they made it to the Shadow Tower, that was.

All that remained of the wildling camp now were a few wooden stakes and the slushy ground over which men and horses had walked. The few remaining free folk were trudging closer and closer to the Wall, desperate not to be the last through. They needed not to fear that, as Jon would be the last to go through, and the man to close it behind them. He climbed to the top of a mound of clumped snow, Ghost growling at his heels, and glanced out towards the haunted forest. The trees grew close to the Wall here, yet Jon could barely see ten feet into the foliage for all the mist. They could be a hundred feet away, and I would never know. All he knew for certain was that there were Others out there. And likely some of our own men too. There were those who had fallen behind on the march from Craster’s Keep, the wounded and the weary and the lost. Like as not, most of them were frozen corpses in the snow, but some...

Some of them will be pressing on through the cold, desperately trying to find a way back to the Wall before it is too late. And I am about to close the gates on them... When they had parted ways at Whitetree, Jon had given commands to Tormund Giantsbane, headed to Queensgate, to Lord Harclay who was bound for Greyguard, to all the other commanders. From Craster’s Keep they had sent ravens, bound for Castle Black and the Shadow Tower and Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. Close the Wall, their letters read, fill the gates with stones and wood and let them freeze over to block the way.

Close the Wall. We will not be going north again.

Back at Castle Black, Bowen Marsh and Othell Yarwyck had called his ranging to Hardhome a folly. In his heart, Jon had understood their qualms, but he knew it was his solemn duty to save as many as he could from the advance of the white walkers. Yet here I stand now, about to do as they did.

Kill the boy.

Jon turned back towards the Wall. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. That was the distinct feeling of being watched, he knew, but what of it? It was no longer strange to him. The sound of his own voice was strange when he said “We’re done here,” and took a step towards the Wall. Stranger still was the feeling that, for the first time in nearly a year, he was heading home.

“Done, my lord?” asked Iron Emmett. “Are you certain?”

No. “Yes.”

Ramsay Bolton and his men were heading through as Jon, Ghost and Emmett headed up towards the gate. For the last couple of minutes they waited in the lonely cold with their swords and torches, wishing for mead and meat and a hearthfire to warm their chilly bones.

Kissed by fire...

Yet some part of Jon Snow remained grounded here. The boy who might have been a wildling, the man who had loved Ygritte and respected Mance Rayder and had seen wonders of myth and magic in Bloodraven’s cave. The mist over the haunted forest seemed to fade, and he thought that the black plateau on the distant horizon might well have been the Fist of the First Men. And up there are the ghosts of Lord Commander Mormont and Qhorin Halfhand and everyone who died there. “Here I stand,” Jon murmured under his breath, as they passed from open sky into the close humidity of the tunnel. He brought up the rear, alongside two of his Sworn Brothers with torches.

The passage was unexpectedly warm. Unlike the ice tunnels along most of the Wall’s length, the
walls of the Black Gate were made of bark and wood, and it was like climbing through the roots of a tree. *Exactly like Bloodraven’s cave.* As Jon looked round, he could see branches stretching off the main route, away into the darkness. One of them might very well lead back to the cave of the three-eyed crow. Or down into the earth where Gendel and his children waited hungrily.

And then they were through. When Jon glanced back behind him, the tunnel seemed much smaller than it had been, as though it had sensed the passage of the last watchmen and had decided to close itself. It unsettled him to think that the Gate was alive... but at least the Others would not be passing through it.

They were at the bottom of some sort of well, with a ladder dug into the side. Iron Emmett helped Jon over the lip, and out onto a cracked stone floor with weeds growing through it. A massive ancient oven glowed in the corner of the room. Dolorous Edd stood at the threshold of the kitchen, downcast as always. “There are rats here, my lord,” he warned. “They say the Nightfort has been abandoned for centuries, and that nothing lives here, but there’s rats. There’s always rats.”

“I need to assemble a council,” Jon said. “Gather the chieftains and the lords. Ramsay Bolton included.”

“Where, my lord?”

“Somewhere warm.”

“Will tepid suffice for you? In that case, I can recommend a lovely wine cellar over yonder. Smells a bit sweaty, mind.”

“Something a little grander than that, I think.” Jon pointed through the broken window. “Surely one of those towers must have a hearth or something?”

Edd went off grumbling in his search for peat and coal and stewards. Iron Emmett moved to Jon’s side. “What will we do now, my lord?”

“Prepare ourselves for the ride back to Castle Black, I expect. This is an evil place. I don’t intend to stay here any longer than we have to.” And I don’t intend to return either, not while Ramsay Bolton is commanding here. “If you’re looking to be useful, Emmett, you can go and tell the men what I’ve just told you. We will leave on the morrow, if everything goes according to plan.”

Iron Emmett would make a suitable First Ranger, Jon mused. Black Jack Bulwer was dead, and the man who replaced him would need to command both the respect of the other officers and that of the men under him. And the other officers would be a problem too. Jon resolved to make getting rid of Bowen Marsh and Othell Yarwyck the first thing he did when he returned to Castle Black, whether it was by sword – as he’d disposed of Janos Slynt – or by banishing them to some faraway part of the Wall to die. Both Yarwyck and Marsh were good men, but they’d mutinied against his orders when they heard false news of his death, and Jon could no longer afford even the slightest disloyalty.

He wondered what progress Bran had made with the Watch. His brother was surely back in Winterfell now, which left the question of who he’d left to command at Castle Black. Jon trusted Bran’s judgement enough not to worry, though he would do well to send a bird to both Winterfell and Castle Black as soon as he could bringing news of their survival. And similar letters to the Tullys, the Arryns, the Baratheons, the Targaryens, anyone who would hear them. *Even the Lannisters. A day may come when I have to stand back-to-back with the Kingslayer to stand a chance of saving all our lives.*

But right now there were other things to think about. The chieftains and lords had to be convened.
and courted and conciliated. With the common threat now behind them, they had to find some way to hold their alliance together against the return of the Others. They will come. There was nothing Jon was more certain of. They will come in their tens of thousands, and our own dead will rise up and march with them. He clenched his fingers tightly around Longclaw’s hilt.

An hour later, Dolorous Edd conducted him to an old fat tower on the southern side of the castle. It was drafty, but at least it had a roof, which was more than you could say for some of the other towers. The chiefs and lords stood in a semi-circle around the huge stone hearth and passed round a flagon of hot spiced wine, while Edd and the stewards apologised for the poor hospitality. Jon stood on the raised dais away from the hearth. “Friends, brothers,” he began, looking into the crowd and finding only the unsettling eyes of Ramsay Bolton. “We have come a long way, but there is still further to go.”

“Only to Castle Black,” said Alfyn Crowkiller.

“Aye. But even at Castle Black, the war will continue. They will come again, night and day. The Wall will keep the Others out, but not the wights. We need to man all nineteen castles if we want to stand a chance of maintaining strong defenses. Which means that some of you will need to take up command. Halleck, I’m sending you down to Icemark—”

“And who are you to tell me that, Lord Snow?”

“The Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. This is our Wall you are hiding behind.”

“You are hiding behind it too,” said Halleck.

Big Bucket Wull frowned. “Give him what he wants. A castle is more than you deserve.”

Halleck grunted. Jon nodded gratefully to Big Bucket. “Lord Wull, I need you as well. I want you to go back down to your mountains, and bring up all the men you can find to Castle Black and the Shadow Tower. Even your green boys and your greybeards. They’ll be extra mouths to feed, aye, but we need every man we can find to help the builders on the Wall, and it is better to enlist them now – they won’t be safe when the Others come, anyhow.” Next he turned his attention to Rickard Ryswell. “Lord Rickard. Your aunt Barbrey is lady of Barrowton, and your father is lord of the Rills. Again, we need all the men we can find. I think you would serve us best there.”

There was a time when men like Rickard Ryswell would have spat on Jon, calling him an arrogant bastard, and rightly so. But now, having seen what he had seen, the Ryswell knight acquiesced. “Very well,” he said shortly. “I’ll leave tonight. This is a strange castle, and I don’t mean to stay here much longer.”

“Lord Ramsay,” said Jon darkly.

“No. I want you to stay here. The Nightfort is yours.” Jon would not have Ramsay Bolton free of his leash; here, everyone had heard his command, and Ramsay would not be able to defy it. “As you wish, Lord Snow,” said Ramsay, his pale blue eyes faintly shining.

The worst was over. Jon decided that Alfyn Crowkiller would travel back to Castle Black with him, and then report to one of the castles further down the Wall: Sable Hall, mayhaps. And as First Ranger, Iron Emmett might take command of a garrison of his own, though Jon would sooner have him stationed at Castle Black. For a few hours they talked strategies, and Jon summoned Alf of Runnymudd and Young Henly to discuss the condition of defenses atop the Wall: the catapults and
cranes that would help to keep the dead at bay. He told them all to sort the rescued wildlings and Northern soldiers as they would members of the Night’s Watch: into rangers, stewards and builders. The womenfolk and young boys under twelve would return to the Gift to build homes and establish communities for the free folk. Normally Jon would have had more concerns about allowing the wildlings to settle so liberally, but there were more important things to worry about.

By the time that was all done it was nearly midnight. Jon returned to his chambers, in an old broken tower conveniently close to the kitchens, and lacking entirely in any other comforts. Dolorous Edd brought him a bowl of hot beetroot soup and a message from Tormund Giantsbane. Tormund could not read or write, so while the words were plainly his, they were written in a maester’s hand.

*Safely at Queensgate. Attacked as we went through your gate. Nine in ten survived. Seeing to the wounded before heading to Castle Black. Toregg leading a party down to the Gift. Try not to die, Lord Crow.*

“Good news?” asked Edd.

_Nine in ten survived. And one in ten died._ “Better than it might have been,” Jon allowed.

“But not good.” Edd shook his head. “You should set your expectations lower, my lord. You’ll get far less surprises that way.”

“Sound advice,” said Jon acerbically. “Go and get some rest, Edd.”

“You too, my lord.”

Jon knew that rest would not come to him now. How could he sleep, knowing that the Others might be lying in wait just out of their sight? Instead he went outside and over to the lift and the base of the Wall.

Even after last year’s repairs that had been made to accommodate Stannis Baratheon’s host here at the Nightfort, the winch lift to the top of the Wall was old and rickety and took an age to reach the top. Still, it was a preferable option to the narrow stairs that had been cut into the side of the ice. By the time Jon stepped out onto the top of the Wall, it was full dark, and the only light was the silver spray of stars across the northern sky. The battlements up here were wild and untamed; great piles of snow had drowned the guardposts and weeds and mountain plants poked eerily through pieces of long-abandoned siege equipment and worm-eaten hoardings.

Val was at the edge of the Wall. “Did you know that I’d be here?” she asked as Jon came to stand beside her.

“I suspected.”

“Hmm. You know more than you think, Jon Snow.”

“Ygritte used to tell me very differently. You know nothing, she said.”

“Perhaps she was right.”

“But you said—
Val turned to him. The light from her torch made her cheeks swell with bright colour. “You know nothing about some things, Jon Snow. And too much about others.” She glanced back over the edge. “There’s so much out there,” she said. “So much that we’ve left behind. Forever.”

“Yes,” said Jon.

“Winter and whispers and wild things,” Val went on. “Waterfalls crusting over at the first touch of frost, trees that rustle to the song of lonely wolves and the laughter of children. And spring flowers always trying to find a way through, poking up from beneath the stones of our ancestors. Unrestrained and free, like us. Never quite making it, but always trying. That’s the real north.”

_All beneath an unending sky, sometimes kissed by fire, sometimes brightened by snow._ Flakes were starting to fall from the west, from the direction of the Shadow Tower.

Val shrugged. “That’s just something Mance once said. He had a way with words.”

“That he did.”

“He also said ‘words are wind’. A lot of the time, that’s true. But not always.”

There had never been a better time to kiss her. And he might have done, but Jon did not have it in him to love her and lose her, as he had Ygritte. _Maybe some other time, when the war is done... maybe..._ 

But for now they only stood together at the edge of the Wall, the lord commander in black and the wildling princess in white, and side by side they watched the snow fall.

Chapter End Notes

I think it's definitely open to interpretation whether or not you choose to view this chapter's title, "Sanctuary", as ironic or not. Now, Jon and his allies have literal sanctuary as they are behind the Wall, but the Others are coming, and they are far from safe. I think Jon's reaction to Tormund's letter pretty much encapsulates the mood of this chapter:

_Safely at Queensgate. Attacked as we went through your gate. Nine in ten survived. Seeing to the wounded before heading to Castle Black. Toregg leading a party down to the Gift. Try not to die, Lord Crow._

“Good news?” asked Edd.

Nine in ten survived. And one in ten died. “Better than it might have been,” Jon allowed.
Then there's the final piece of imagery that I really liked, of Jon and Val atop the Wall:

“Winter and whispers and wild things,” Val went on. “Waterfalls crusting over at the first touch of frost, trees that rustle to the song of lonely wolves and the laughter of children. And spring flowers always trying to find a way through, poking up from beneath the stones of our ancestors. Unrestrained and free, like us. Never quite making it, but always trying. That’s the real north.”

I wrote this to deliberately reflect the end of Season 3 Episode 6, "The Climb", where Jon and Ygritte stand together and we get their romantic theme playing over the end credits, and for once, a GoT episode ends without people being brutally disemboweled. Obviously, Ygritte is now dead, and Jon has come a long way since then, so much so that he chooses to forego any sort of relationship with Val as he fears losing her. But at least he has someone, or something like that.

So you can take that as you like. It's a test of optimism and pessimism... just with quite high stakes.

Anyway, the next Jon chapter (which hopefully isn't far away) will see Jon, Val, Tormund and all his allies back at Castle Black. As for the next chapter chronologically, it may just be the creepiest, most unsettling chapter of all in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. It's called "Home", and the title in this case is definitely ironic.
Home

written by SiaCohenFeld
His mouth tasted of blood. The bitter taste would not go away, no matter how hard he tried. The memories would not go away either. Dark dreams. The ship had gone under in a storm, black water swirling above their heads, while dead things screamed down below. He remembered ropes of seaweed reaching out to him, the long, graceful fronds brushing his cheek. And waving beneath the dark green water were the pale arms and legs of drowning men or maybe the tentacles of something far more sinister.

And now he was here. Where am I? Theon moved his hands in front of his face, and heard the familiar clinking noise of chains. Ramsay chained me. He bit his lip hard, and it burst, and dark blood dribbled down his chin. The light was very faint. He could barely see a few feet ahead of him. It was as though they had gone back to the storm again...

The storm. Asha. Where is Asha? Had she still been on deck when he went overboard? How long had it been before she followed him into the swirling black waves? He had seen the Quicksilver breaking up as his head was forced under the water for the third time, prow and stern shattering into a thousand pieces and being swallowed by the mouths of the rocks below.

But there had been no rocks. There had been no storm, either, and the day of their intended arrival had been strangely bright and clear. “The Drowned God is smiling on us, for once,” Asha had said. “We should be ashore by noon.” Theon had stood at the rail, letting the sunlight beat down across his face, feeling the bite of the wind on his cheeks. Everything changed when they approached Harlaw Isle. It was as though the Drowned God had heard Asha’s words and had seen fit to curse them to the ends of the earth. The wind drowned out everything save for the screams of dying sailors. Theon huddled below decks behind a spool of rope, put his head between his knees, and rocked, laughing and crying alternately. It wasn’t fair, but did he really deserve fairness? Him? Theon Turncloak?

And yet here he was. Perhaps the only survivor. The only thing down here, save for the lantern that was throwing its drunken light across his face, across the port window, into the distant darkness ahead of him. The light grew weak and spasmodic as days and nights rolled by unseen.

They were going somewhere, but he could not say whether it was north or south, west or east. Theon did not know who ‘they’ were, and he certainly did not know why they had left him alive. They did not tell him either.
As he lay there in the dark, Theon tried to recall who had rescued him from the water. He did not remember them being rescued, but he supposed he must have been, else he would be lying dead at the bottom of the sea somewhere. *I was rescued... but they have chained me up.* Had they realised who this was? Were they taking Balon Greyjoy’s last surviving son back to the Iron Islands as their prize? Or perhaps they were from the Seven Kingdoms proper, and meant to force him to make concessions on behalf of House Greyjoy. Or maybe it was a Northern ship, and they were just bringing him back to the Wall to be executed in the sight of gods and men.

His thoughts drifted back to Asha. She would not have allowed herself to be rescued. She would not stand by like some meek maiden and allow herself to be indebted to her saviour. She would have fought for life on her own terms. And maybe she had died trying. Leaving him alone in the world once more.

*You have to know your name,* he thought. *My name is Theon.* He said it aloud. “Theon Greyjoy. It rhymes with... it rhymes with...” He could not think of anything.

Later, a boy knelt down beside him, and brought a jug of some liquid to his lips. It smelled sharply of vinegar, but tasted of nothing at all. Theon drank it hurriedly, for there was nothing else, was suddenly sick, and then drank some more. “Almost as if he craves it,” said a voice that seemed to have no source in the darkened room, but rather came from *everywhere.* “The potion does curious things to mad men, it seems. Go to sleep, Theon. Go to sleep, and seek the crow for me.”

Theon did as he was told. *The crow,* he thought sluggishly. *I must seek the crow.* He had no idea what that meant, but he searched anyway.

He dreamed he lay on a bed of piled black silk, floating along through an abyss without a care in the world. Down he sank into the darkness below, deeper and deeper... and his world was reduced to rippling shadows and sunlight. When he breathed out, he was underwater.

“Theon,” whispered a voice. “Theon...”

A crow cawed. *How can there be crows underwater?* Theon faintly remembered something that his uncle Aeron Damphair had told him. *Crows are the servants of the Storm God.* The Storm God was the sworn enemy of the Drowned God. *Where am I?*

“In the place where all roads meet,” said the crow. It turned to look at him, and he saw that it had *three* eyes. “In the places where all stories begin. In the place where all men are journeying.”

*That makes no sense.*

“It will, in time,” promised the crow. It spoke in an ageless, unknowable voice. “You have much to learn, Theon Greyjoy.”

*Seek the crow for me.*

He opened his eyes.

Everything was still dark. There was something over his face, some sort of woolly hood, and his manacled feet were clanking together, and his bony hands shook; the cuffs dug into his skin. The hallway pitched a little, and Theon stumbled. Someone shoved him forwards, up a flight of stairs. He felt wet rain on the hood, but nothing else. Men were moving about, floorboards were creaking, but he could not see any of it.

Now they were inside again. Yellow light flickered above him. And a voice said, “Take away the manacles. He will not need them here.”
The hood was whipped away. The blackness opened. Theon stared back into one bright blue eye, and another covered by a black patch. That was enough for him to realise where he was. No one ever spoke to me... because they have no tongues. “The Silence,” he said with mounting horror. But where else could it have been?

“Welcome aboard, beloved nephew,” said Euron Greyjoy, the Crow’s Eye. “It has been far too long. Hasn’t it?”

Theon’s mouth was dry. “Ten years,” he said hoarsely. He had not seen his uncle since he’d left Pyke for Winterfell.

“And look how much time has gone by. When I saw you last, you were practically a babe, still sucking at your mother’s teat. Now, you are a man grown. A man grown old, from the looks of you. And maybe not a man at all, if the things I have heard are true.” Euron’s breath was so cold it misted as soon as it left his lips.

Theon shivered. “I... you said... Mother...?”

“If it is any comfort to you, Lady Alannys was quite insane when she died. I treated her kindly at the end. She was rather useful to me, in disproving the theory that madness doesn’t always open doors to a new world. You, though, are something rather different, Theon... you found the crow.”

My mother is dead. He ought to feel something, but he’d known that all along, hadn’t he? Everyone on the Iron Islands died a long time ago in my eyes.

“The crow,” Theon rasped. “You saw that?”

Euron ignored that. “You are strangely calm about all this. But then you have seen a lot of things, haven’t you? The gods have a way of balancing things, I’ve found. I get wonders and you get horrors. Aren’t the gods unjust, beloved nephew?”

If the gods were just, I would have died at Winterfell. A coward’s death, but it would have been better than a coward’s life.

Euron leaned close to him, breathing cold in his ear. “Aren’t the gods unjust, eh?”

Theon’s shivering teeth made a vague noise of assent.

“Oh, they are.” Euron nodded spiritedly as one might when agreeing with a very young child. “That’s alright. In my world, the gods won’t trouble you or me. They always talk about gods.” His eye softened; now he was an old man remembering the long-distant past. “Some of them pray for protection. Some of them promise that the wrath of their gods will befall me. The Lord of Light. The Storm God. The Drowned God. The Pale Child. The Lion of the Night. Dragon gods and sky gods and snow gods. Shepherds and kings and maidens. The Silent God. The Stone Cow of Faros, one of my favourites. The Black Goat of Qohor. The Weeping Lady. Even the Seven – the weakest and feeblest of the lot. But I see none of them here, Theon. Tell me, what do you see?”

“I see...” What did Euron want him to see? This was a dangerous man, and he would surely kill him without a second thought. But if he wanted that, I would be dead already...

“...you,” he finished. “I see you.”

“Me,” said Euron. “And only me. I wonder, does that make me the only god? Damphair thought not. But now Damphair rots in the darkness with you. Have you seen him from your cell? Heard him? He will not see you. He will not hear you. He begged me to give him to the Drowned God. Now he
prays to me. He used to call me unholy, but now... would an unholy man have such a devoted disciple as Aeron Damphair? I think not."

Theon dared not say a word.

"You smell of fear, nephew," said Euron. "Where is your fighting spirit? Where is your ironborn heart?"

“What is dead may never die,” Theon mumbled.

“But rises again, harder and stronger. I know this well, nephew. I wonder: do you?"

“Asha.” Her name blossomed onto his lips and burst, like a tiny bubble of air surface and then dwindling away. “Where...?"

“Asha is unharmed,” said the Crow’s Eye. “At least, as unharmed as possible. She was not easily tamed, I admit. Nearly bit off Ser Harras’s ear. It was the shock of seeing me again, I’m sure. Did you ever play that game where you drop frogs into scalding water, Theon?” Euron smiled; his lips were dark purple, almost black. “No? I suppose not. But it was very much my sort of game when I was a child. When you drop a frog into a boiling pan, it jumps out at the heat. But when you lower it in gently...”

“...the frog cooks.”

“There you go. I learned as much from my attack on Oldtown. I thought I had made plans for that... but my sweet brother Victarion returned and turned them all on its head, and that was that. I threw everything I had at them, and failed dismally. But this time, the frog will cook."

The Crow’s Eye scowled at him. “There is a question on your lips. You want to ask me something. So ask away, dear nephew.”

It was as though he had read Theon’s mind. “Y-you know my question already,” he dared to say.

Euron beckoned one of his mutes inside, bearing a flagon of wine and two cups. When the cups were filled, Theon saw that the liquid inside was as dark and endless as the black void of hell. Is it —?

“—poison?” Euron drained the wine in one long draught, turned his cup over, and laughed. “No. It is shade-of-the-evening, the wine of the warlocks of Qarth. It allowed them to see far away, and into the past, and into the future, but I have seen further than any of them. Would you like to know what I have seen?” He was playing with Theon’s hopes and thoughts like a child playing with puppets. “I might tell you... but I think I will save that story for some other time. Instead I will tell you what you want to know. How did I survive the battle at Oldtown? I suppose even the cold and frozen North has heard the tales of my death.

“I came close to dying, you know. Closer than I would care to admit. I fell back into the black sea and the waters closed over my head, and I was still. I could have died, then and there, only I chose not to. I did it all myself, Theon. Not through the intervention of gods, or through that of men, but by my own will, and nothing more than that. My body was broken and drowned and dead when I changed my mind about dying, already claimed by the shells and the seaweed at the bottom of the Whispering Sound. I glimpsed the blackness, Theon, the speck of blackness at the end of the world. I saw the Drowned God’s watery halls, and I walked through them, and I met Urras Greyiron and Qhored Hoare and Black Harren. I saw the Grey King on his throne of Nagga’s bones, and lastly, I saw the Drowned God himself. His mermaids were old crones whose milk had run dry centuries
ago, his champions old men too weak to even hold up their shields and spears to prevent my passing. Yes, they were all dead. They were withered, ancient husks, Theon. When I touched the Drowned God, his flesh turned to grey paper beneath my fingers and flaked from his skin. I pushed him aside, off his throne. His bones crumbled into dust before they even met the floor.

“The throne of the Grey King was there before me, and I could take my seat. But any fool could rule over the forest of the dead? I seek a different world. And so I rose. The Damphair’s Drowned Men saw it, and the crew of the Silence saw it, and those men who had betrayed me by sailing with Victarion saw it. I rose from that black water, Theon. I rose.

“Now: why am I telling you this?” the Crow’s Eye said. “Because I think you understand me, nephew. You have risen too, haven’t you? Do you understand?”

Theon could not stop his teeth from chattering. It had been cold in the cabin before. Now the blood seemed to have frozen in his veins. He was dead. As was I. Yet here we sit.

The Crow’s Eye said. “He was dead. As was I. Yet here we sit. He swallowed. “I-I came out of Ramsay’s dungeon.”

“Now, no. More than that, Theon. Before, you sat at Robb Stark’s right hand. Now you sit at mine.”

Theon glanced away from Euron’s eyes. He had a terrible feeling about the eye that lurked under the Crow’s Eye’s patch. Asha had said it was black and diseased, but Theon wagered that it was a different colour entirely. He looked away, towards the porthole window of the Silence, into the sun.

“Where are we going?”

“East,” said Euron. “East of the Iron Islands, again.” He clicked his fingers, and the mute re-entered the room to pick up Euron’s empty silver goblet and Theon’s one, still brimming with liquid. “I sent Victarion east, before.” Euron grabbed the mute’s arm. “Didn’t I, Victarion?”

The mute looked up. Theon started in horror. It had been two years since he had last looked upon that face, but he remembered it. Victarion Greyjoy was not a man you could forget easily. “Yes, Your Grace,” said Victarion, and Theon knew that this was not his uncle, whatever it was. He was no mute, but he was no man either, not with black eyes like those.

“I sent Victarion to fetch me a bride,” explained Euron. “A bride of fire, with silver hair. He disobeyed me, as I’d known he would.” Here he gestured across the bare cabin to one of the few ornaments there, which appeared to be a candle of sharp black glass, burning with a ghostly white flame. “Nonetheless, it did not matter. I was a fool, seeking a bride of fire. I should have been seeking a bride of ice.”

Theon’s blood went cold. His eyes moved around the cabin further, and found a second ornament: a black runic horn, with bands of silver and cold, blue mist curling softly from its mouthpiece. “A bride of ice,” said Euron. “I seek another bride. An Other bride. And with your help, Theon, I will find one.”
The Princess Who Waited

Chapter Summary

“No one’s innocent any more.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARIANNE

On the stairs outside the queen’s solar, Arianne came upon the sellsword captain Daario Naharis, descending. “Her Grace is in a sour mood, I fear,” Naharis said. “She is always in a sour mood nowadays.”

“I am to sup with her,” Arianne told him.

He smirked. “Then I pity you. A word of advice: try not to say anything remotely inflammatory. For a dragon, Her Grace is easily burned.” He went past her, and Arianne was left even more anxious than she had been already. I am in the jaws of the dragon now, she thought, as she climbed to the final landing, where Ser Barristan Selmy waited outside the queen’s door.

“My lady,” the old knight said. “The queen will be one moment, if you please.”

Arianne was certain that Daenerys had deliberately made it so she arrived early. Now her worries would only grow. She considered talking to Ser Barristan to take her mind off things, but given that his spell in her father’s dungeons, she doubted Selmy would be keen to return the conversation. So she lingered there in awkward, stilted silence until the queen came to the door. “Princess Arianne,”

Queen Daenerys made sure to emphasize Arianne’s inferior title. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“I wait at Your Grace’s pleasure.”

“Yes. I’m sure you do. Shall we?” Daenerys pointed the way inside.

The queen’s solar was high-ceilinged with windows that made the most of their view over Blackwater Bay. “Did you see Captain Naharis on the way up?” asked Daenerys as Arianne took her seat. “Did he have anything to say to you?”

“No, Your Grace.” Nothing she could mention, anyhow.

“I am surprised. Daario is not one to go quietly. He will be cursing my name to everyone who is
willing to listen, I think.” She was laughing, but Arianne was anxious about joining the joke. “There is some advice for you, my lady: do not expect too much of sellswords. They always manage to disappoint you somehow.”

They began with a soup of chestnuts and mushrooms. “I am not fond of this heavy sort of food,” the queen confided. “In the Free Cities and in Meereen, we ate only lightly.”

“It is the same in Dorne,” Arianne said. “And the winters too... I had never seen snow until this year...”

“Ser Jorah tells me I should go north if I really want to see what winter is like,” the queen said. “It is strange to think how little of my kingdom I have actually seen. Even now, I am getting letters from Lord Stark and the Night’s Watch, speaking of wonders beyond belief. Perhaps I will see the Wall someday...”

“You have dragons. You would not need an escort.”

“Indeed. And I am fortunate to have a nephew in King’s Landing who has shown himself to be capable of ruling in my absence. Such is the advantage of having a king and a queen.” Daenerys said the last somewhat sarcastically.

“Perhaps the triarchs of Volantis have the right of it,” Arianne suggested. “Three rulers can often do what one cannot, my father told me.” Prince Doran had also said that two rulers would only lead to stalemate, but she did not mention that.

“My brother said the Volantenes have had civil wars beyond counting. Then again, I do not think Viserys ever really knew anything.” She looked searchingly into her wine cup. “I am told that there was a marriage contract between you and him once, my lady. We might have met under very different circumstances.”

“It is true,” Arianne said. “I was contracted to your brother, by an agreement between my lord father and the Archon of Tyrosh, and Ser Willem Darry.”

Daenerys made a thin smile. “Friends all across the Free Cities. I always thought that we were abandoned and alone, but there were those who were willing to help us. The Archon, like you said, and Magister Illyrio Mopatis. And the Sealord of Braavos, too. I doubt they did it out of kindness, though. They still expect some form of payment in return, even now.” Arianne realised that the queen was talking to herself more than she was to her.

*We might have met under very different circumstances, indeed.* After the plan to marry Arianne to Viserys had fallen through, her lord father had considered sending Quentyn to Meereen with an offer of marriage for Daenerys. But with the situation in King’s Landing not resolving itself as they had intended, her father had remained patient, as he was wont to do. And so they had waited for Oberyn to return with news of Aegon before making any move.

“What was your brother like?” asked Arianne.

Daenerys sighed. “You have heard King Jaehaerys’s saying, no? Well, with Viserys, the coin landed on the wrong side. He was weak-willed, foolish, vain, arrogant. Yet I have been thinking lately that... perhaps it was not always so. When you put a crown on a young child’s head and convince him that he is King Viserys, the First of His Name, and that all the world owes him his fealty... when you raise a boy in riches and then reduce him so suddenly to rags, the way it was when Ser Willem Darry died and his servants threw us out... the crown they gave him was only ever a crown of thorns. And he did love me. Without him, I would have surely perished.” The queen sighed and refilled her
“Viserys would have made you a poor husband, and a worse king. Either way, you are better off with Aegon.”

Another pause. Then the inevitable: “But I did not ask you here to talk about the past. In two days’ time you will marry my nephew. I want to hear your thoughts on that. It… it is not so long since I was forced into marriage myself. And though I grew to love my khal in time, it was never a marriage I wanted. I think you are in a similar situation.”

*Does she want me to lie? Would it be easier that way?* “I am not sure I have ever been presented with a marriage proposal I wanted to accept, Your Grace.”

“I thought as much. You and I are alike in that we value our freedom, my lady. We may come to love our husbands, but they will always try to restrain us.”

“Not for you,” said Arianne. “You are the queen.”

“And you were to be the Princess of Dorne, once.” The queen’s tone was somewhere between pity and mocking. “You look like a Princess of Dorne, but more than that, you act like one. I suppose you must harbour some resentment to this match. It will make you a queen, yes… the sort of queen who has been consigned to a place at her husband’s side.”

“Queens have held power before,” she answered. “Look at Rhaenys and Visenya, at Alicent Hightower, even at Cersei Lannister. They all wielded power that their husbands did not.”

“And look at all the queens who did not. Queens who are consigned to maesters’ history books. The world is not kind to our sex, my lady.” Then there was a knock from down the hall and the queen rose to greet it. Arianne watched as Ser Jorah Mormont entered. “As you had suspected, Your Grace,” she heard the knight say. “My doubts about Brown Ben…”

Brown Ben Plumm was one of the sellswords who had come to Aegon’s camp, Arianne recalled. The Dothraki, the Second Sons and the Stormcrows had come riding in on the second day after Aegon met them on the Blackwater. Their captains had spent a great deal of time in the king’s tent, more than Arianne had, even. Now the captains had returned to King’s Landing, but their men remained encamped with the rest of Aegon’s host across the Blackwater river, about eighty thousand men all counted. It was the greatest army assembled in the Seven Kingdoms since Renly Baratheon’s host at Bitterbridge, a city unto itself. Truth be told, Arianne preferred the openness of the camp far more than the Red Keep. It had fewer comforts, but the stiff formalities of the castle and its rituals made her feel queasy.

Arianne had always had an adventurer’s spirit. “It came from your mother,” Prince Oberyn told her. “Mellario has always been a little restless, a little too restless, your father might say.”

“Well,” Arianne had replied, “it certainly did not come from my father.” She pictured what Prince Doran might be doing at this moment. *Sitting in his chair in the Water Gardens, most like, watching the blood oranges burst against the flagstones, while Areo Hotah stands by with his axe, defending him from invisible foes.* The pools in the Gardens would have turned cold by now, and the blood oranges would be withered and leathery. Her friends in Dorne wrote that snow might actually be a possibility, for the first time in hundreds of years. *Did you plan for that, Father?*

She thought of her brother Quentyn, too, in Casterly Rock. On the same day they’d announced her betrothal to Aegon before the court, Lord Connington had read a letter from Quentyn aloud. *The West is nearly ours.* That could mean anything. Arianne did not understand Aegon’s insistence on trying to reconcile with the Lannisters. *They did not spare his sister, they did not spare his mother, they did not spare Trystane. If they intend to burn, let them burn.* Perhaps she and Daenerys had
more in common than either of them knew.

The queen returned to the table. “I apologise profusely,” she said, “but something has come up that means our supper must be interrupted.”

Arianne was only too happy to be away. “I understand.”

“I will have Ser Jorah escort you back to your chambers.”

“There is no need. I know the way.” She excused herself before Daenerys could say another word.

Her walk back to the Maidenvault was strangely comforting. Sylva, Tyene and Elia Sand were waiting in a downstairs sitting room. Arianne took her seat among them. “We did not think you would be back so soon,” said Tyene.

“The queen had to cut our meeting short. Matters of state, she says.”

Tyene nodded. “Speaking of matters of state, Father and the others are still at the small council. I think you could join them, if you wished—”

“No, thank you. I need a break from matters of state.” There was a platter of olives on the table; Arianne popped one into her mouth and took great pleasure in spitting out the stone. A queen would never be allowed to spit out the stone. Instead, she must swallow it down and let it sit in her stomach for years, growing dark and cold inside her.

“Only two days now,” she muttered.

“One,” said Sylva. “The second is the wedding.”

“I would sooner you had not reminded me.”

“What will we do when you’re married?” asked Elia Sand, who was younger and less easily restrained than the others.

“The same as you are doing now,” Arianne said. “Someone has to keep me sane.”

“Will we be your ladies-in-waiting?”

“I suppose so.”

“I don’t want to be a lady-in-waiting—”

“Shut up,” said Sylva crossly. “I can’t be bothered to contend with your whining, Elia. Not at this time. Go and find your stableboy and fuck him behind the sept, or whatever it is you normally do at this hour.”

“He’s a squire, actually,” Elia said. She crossed her arms before storming off.

Arianne watched her go. “Fucking a stableboy? She’s only—”

“—fifteen,” said Tyene Sand, looking up from her embroidery. “She’s older than we were when we started, Ari. No one’s innocent any more.”

Least of all any of us.

“Visenya’s Hill is brightly lit tonight,” noted Tyene, pointing to the west. “Our friends the sparrows
Arianne frowned. "I would not like to be in the city tonight. Not with hundreds of sparrows and hundreds of sellswords roaming the streets." There were brawls every night now, for any and every discernable reason. The sparrows abhorred vice; the sellswords revelled in it. There could be no compromise, reported Tyene, who disguised herself as a travelling septa to visit the sept every morning. So far she had been unsuccessful in finding a way into the leadership of the sparrows, but she was resourceful and she would keep trying.

"There’s more happening over on Rhaenys’s," said Sylva, with a hint of a smile. None of them had seen Daenerys Targaryen’s dragons, but the word was that the white one and the green one were mating day and night, under the guard of the Unsullied. Elia Sand had been only too intrigued to learn that the queen’s dragons were apparently fucking. "If only the dragons in the Red Keep got along nearly so well," Ser Daemon Sand had japed.

A door opened across the hall, and the sound of a cane followed. "Already?" Arianne rose. "I did not think he would send you," she said.

"He didn’t," Lord Willas replied. "I volunteered."

She nodded at his leg. "Isn’t that unwise?"

"Come now. You know that I am faking my newfound feebleness." He grinned and put on a voice. "Oh, my leg pains me so. Will you help me down the stairs, my lady?"

Arianne grinned despite herself. "You can help yourself."

"Very well. But if I fall and shatter my leg, I will blame you."

She turned back to Sylva and Tyene. "I am going to see what my uncle and the others have to say. If any of Daenerys’s messengers come by, tell them that I have gone to bed."

The last thing Arianne saw as they rounded the corner was Sylva’s slightly indignant look. "They wanted to come with you, you know," said Willas as they started down the walkway between the topiaries.

"Of course they did. Especially Tyene. But like you, they have chosen to hide their talents from Daenerys and her men. You limp through the corridors looking weak and feeble, while they gossip airily as handmaidens and ladies-in-waiting are expected to do. I do not envy them."

"Pretending to be stupid is difficult," Willas agreed. "Fortunately, my father perfected the art of oafishness, so I am merely following his example. I am sure Daenerys and her councillors pity me greatly, a cripple who lacks the wits to make up for his shortcomings." He smiled ruefully.

"I doubt you have fooled all of them."

"Of course not. Archmaester Marwyn came up to me only yesterday to talk about Septon Barth’s Unnatural History. I feigned ignorance for quite some time. I asked him, who is Septon Barth? How was he both Hand of the King and a septon? What makes his history so unnatural?"

Arianne laughed. "You are a good actor, my lord."

"Unfortunately, I failed to keep a straight face throughout most of it," said Willas. "In the end we had a rather intellectual conversation. Our friend the Mage has a considerable interest in dragons. He wondered if we might have any records from the Field of Fire in our library, given that we Tyrells..."
owe so much of our current position to the stupidity of a man who decided to ride into battle against three full-grown dragons.”

Arianne tried to laugh, but found she could not. *I will not be laughing if something like that becomes a reality.* Instead she diverted the subject. “How was the council meeting?”

“There were lots of angry voices,” said Willas. “Lord Connington is still displeased by Aegon’s settlement with the Northmen, even though he tries to hide it. The whole business with the Tullys unmans him.”

“Connington is being paranoid as usual, then. Why is he so concerned by Edmure Tully? Aegon has a writ of his allegiance, I have seen it with my own eyes.”

“A writ of allegiance and a sworn vow no longer means what it once did,” Willas said darkly. “Joffrey and the Lannisters saw to that when they murdered Robb Stark at his wedding. The Northmen might have said some words, but they do not have the same alliance with the Iron Throne as they did when Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon were alive. There is no love lost between the north and the south, Arianne.”

“Prince Rhaegar,” she said. “Eddard Stark and Hoster Tully were at the Trident.”

“Not to mention that Lord Connington still harbours a great deal of bitterness over the Battle of the Bells. Twenty years have passed, yet I’ll wager he weighs up his losses every day. The sting of failure never leaves a man.”

They climbed the front steps of the Tower of the Hand. Aegon and his supporters had crowded into the middle bailey, which housed the Tower of the Hand, the Maidenvault, and the royal sept. “I do not like this castle,” Willas muttered. “It is much too drafty and its history is much too bloody.”

“My feelings exactly.”

“And I do not like having my army on the other side of the city.”

“Well... your brother... doesn’t he...?”

“I’m starting to wish I hadn’t brought Garlan with me. He... I should have left him in Highgarden. With his family, with Leonette and Alysane and Osmund. I can’t lose him like I lost Father.” He sighed.

“Willas,” said Arianne. “Why did *you* come to King’s Landing? Forgive me if I am being a little forward, but—”

“You thought I would have stayed in Highgarden, crippled as I am, and sent my brother alone. Aye, that certainly would have been a lot easier. You might even argue that I would be taking responsibility for my people by staying there. But the real war is here, and it is my duty to be on the frontline. And I suppose... well, I wanted to escape, in some way. Maybe it was naive, but I wanted to see the world... I wanted to search for... something. I keep thinking that might be why Sansa left me. Because she saw me as a cripple with nothing to offer her but a life of loneliness and solitude. I would have kept her prisoner without even knowing that I was doing so.”

Arianne did not think he wanted her to pity him. She said nothing, and they followed the winding walkway to the Small Hall in silence. Inside the hall, among high ceilings, pale orange lights and wood-panelled walls, they found the newly returned council members sitting before a vast hearth that resembled a coiling dragon. Prince Oberyn sat apart from the others, lounging back in an overcushioned chair with a book in hand. Guardsmen stood at the doors and in the upper gallery, and
Aegon’s pale-haired squire Edric Dayne stood at the king’s elbow with a flagon. Arianne took the place that had been set for her between Willas and her husband-to-be. Lord Connington frowned crossly at her from beneath severe orange eyebrows. “We did not expect you tonight, princess,” the Hand said coolly. “And Lord Willas, I thought you had retired to bed.”

“Lord Willas was good enough to fetch me. He has told me all about your council meeting—”

“I doubt that,” said Lord Connington. “He might have told you the things that were said, but the things that were not said were just as important, if not more so.”

Oberyn leaned forward in his chair. “Perhaps you might be so kind as to explain it to my niece, rather than speaking in riddles, my lord Hand.”

Connington scowled. “I will. Do not overstep yourself, Oberyn.”

Prince Oberyn grinned at Arianne. “I would never dream of it. Well, go on, then. Tell us the unspoken things that were so blatantly obvious and went unseen even by my untrained eye.”

Connington flared a sudden, brief shade of red. “Do you mock me?”

“My lords, please,” King Aegon said mildly. “There is a lady present.” He tried to meet her eye, but could not quite manage it.

Arianne suddenly became aware that she was the only woman in the room. The rest were men of war; the Stormlords, the Reach lords, the Dornish lords, captains of the Golden Company, and so forth. But Nymeria Sand and Lady Selmy and Lady Jordayne were excluded from Aegon’s most private councils. With half of the room’s occupants clad in armour and mail, the Small Hall could easily have been mistaken for a war room. And perhaps it is, even if they pretend otherwise.

“And what of the Imp?” Connington was saying. “What of Tyrion Lannister? The dwarf has not sent word in nearly two weeks. He reported having procured six million dragons, but this is plainly a lie to buy him time to flee to Norvos or Lorath or somewhere we cannot reach. I warned Varys that we should not have—”

“As I recall, it was you who sent him back to King’s Landing in the first place,” said Oberyn. “And I warned you that the dwarf was not one to meekly swallow orders and stand by them.”

“We should have sent Haldon to Braavos.”

“What’s done is done,” Aegon said. “And what of it? It will not matter, so long as Varys keeps his word.”

Lord Connington frowned for the hundredth time. “I am loath to have a plan that rests solely on the loyalty of Varys.”

Arianne glanced at Willas, who shook his head subtly. I am not alone in being lost, then, the princess thought. Connington had told her the vague basics of the plan, but not the specifics. That made her worried, but there was nothing she could do about it, so she did nothing.

Someone had clearly decided that this was best not discussed in open council, for when Arianne looked up again Connington was discussing the queen’s neglect to mention the trade situation. He sent out a request for the fishing charters Gorys Edoryen had been managing, but in return he got a muddy-looking squire who sketched a bow and told the Hand that the queen would like to see him and the king, because the sparrows were outside their gates again and needed to be dealt with.
The table emptied quickly. Connington and Aegon went off without even a complaint at the summons, and most of the others with them. Oberyn chose to remain, and beckoned her over. “Why didn’t you go with them?” Arianne asked him.

“When a man has seen one sparrow, he has seen a thousand. Unless they start to grow wings for real and fly over our walls, I am content to let them continue with their pecking. You know, I might even sympathize with them, were they not so intent on leeching all the joy out of the world.” Oberyn paused, filled his wine-cup, and drained it all at once. “They want an end to fighting and drinking and fucking, Arianne, but that is not for me. I have a lovely night planned ahead of me that encompasses at least two of the three. You might want to... follow my example...”

“What?”

Oberyn leaned on his elbow. “It has come to my intention that our King Aegon is very biddable, especially where his beloved Jon Connington is concerned. Unfortunately, it has also come to my intention that his beloved Jon Connington may be somewhat unwilling to relinquish control over his ward. I cannot blame him. He has been both mother and father to Aegon since Elia died.” The familiar smirk returned. “I reckon he’d be more than willing to let Aegon suckle on his teat if he so wished. But a man of Aegon’s age should be suckling on yours.”

“Uncle!”

“Oh, don’t look so scandalized and innocent. We’ve never been anything if not frank with each other, Arianne. Aegon would not be the first man to suckle on your—”

Before she could make a reply, though, the doors at the end of the hall opened and in came Nymeria Sand, smelling faintly of horse and wet leather, her dark braid tangled with snowflakes. Oberyn rose to embrace her. “So, Nym. How are the fair streets of King’s Landing at this hour?”

“No fairer than usual.”

“Where have you been this time?” Arianne asked.

“A most unsavory place. A princess such as yourself might weep to lay eyes upon it.”

“A brothel?” she guessed.

“Close. A winesink, though the wine was close to vinegar, and there were far more naked breasts on show than you might expect. When I left the sparrows were arriving for their nightly brawl. The Second Sons will fight them valiantly, I’m sure.”

Oberyn passed her a goblet of wine. “And how is Brown Ben Plumm today?”

“Easy. Approachable. Somewhat drunk. I didn’t mention anything, in case he had a change of heart when he turned sober.”

“Plumm?” asked Arianne. “Ser Jorah was talking with Daenerys about Plumm. She said it was something important, confirming her suspicions—”

Nym and Oberyn shared a look.

Arianne sighed. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me what that means?”

Nym ignored her and changed the subject. “It does not matter. Anyhow, I brought a friend.” She nodded behind her.
The woman waiting there had the silkiest hair Arianne had ever seen, unbound and unbraided, a wave of dark ink that framed her lightly tanned face and only made her eyes burn brighter. Oberyn went into a bow. “Lady Ashara.”

So. This is Ashara Dayne. Lady Ashara who had faked her death, and come west with Aegon in a septa’s guise, and then disappeared into obscurity, or so Oberyn and her father told it. Disappeared where? “My lady,” said Arianne. “I am pleased to meet you.”

“And I you, Princess Arianne,” said Lady Ashara. “I hope we will have a profitable friendship in the years ahead.”

“I think it will be Arianne who profits most,” said Oberyn.

“I spent a long time with the prince – the king, rather – on the Shy Maid, sailing up and down the Rhoyne. I know him well, my lady. I know how to talk with him, how to entreat with him—”

“She will entreat him the same way any woman does,” Nym said sharply.

“I will not deny that Aegon has those appetites,” said Lady Ashara without pause. “But you may find him less experienced than you might expect, and possibly less inclined to it. He is quite like his father in his vision.”

She spoke of Rhaegar as though he were infallible, Arianne thought. So many of the court did, now, what with him being Aegon’s father and Daenerys’s brother, the dragon prince of fabled times gone by. The king who never was. Yet they forget his unkingly qualities, of how he succumbed to lust and ran to seek out Lyanna Stark, abandoning Princess Elia in the capital. “I will be grateful for your insight, I think,” said Arianne.

Then it was time for Lady Ashara to go. She did not say where, but she had a duty and she drifted away and it was as though she had never been there, nothing more than a fable. Hours later, Arianne was not quite sure if she had met her at all. Ashara Dayne should have been dead. Even now, with that disproved, she seemed to be not-quite-living, not-quite-real.

“Why is she here?” Arianne asked when she had gone. “And where has she been, anyhow?”

“Ask your father. Better yet, ask her about your father. You might get the truth that way.”

She frowned. “Or I could just ask you, couldn’t I? What aren’t you telling me?” A familiar feeling of anger rose inside Arianne, the same feeling she oft experienced with her father, when he refused to reveal anything of his plans.

“You would be better asking what I have told you. And my answer is: only what you need to know, Arianne. The clues are all there, but I will leave you to piece them together.” He smiled at her over his shoulder. “I bid you good night.”

Chapter End Notes

Hmm... I have decidedly mixed feelings about this one. It’s been a while since a chapter has left me this disappointed at the lack of THINGS happening - then again, I have been writing all the exciting stuff recently, so that’s to be expected. The good stuff is coming
very soon. Unfortunately we have to slog through the last few setup chapters like this to get to it.

Just to remind everyone, Ashara Dayne has been in this story before. She was Septa Lemore, and then she went away on business.

Chapter 97 is a big one, though. So big that it might take me a week between 96 and 97 to get it finished.
The day had been grey and sad and dark. Raindrops glistened like tears on the leaded glass of the window. Despite the cold and the damp, it was refusing to snow, and so the drab, dull hours would continue.

Sansa felt as though she had been sitting in this room for years, listening as her uncle Edmure and Littlefinger and the other men continued their relentless argument. “My nephew, Baelish!” Lord Edmure said for the hundredth time. “He plotted to poison my nephew, and your stepson! Lysa’s son!” He stared around, expecting outrage from the others, and receiving only blank stares. “My lord Mooton, if someone conspired to murder your own flesh and blood, you would respond in kind, no? Lord Belmore? Lord Corbray? Of course you would! Now do you see my predicament?”

“Everyone sees your predicament, Edmure,” said Littlefinger with a sigh. “But we can all see that the girl has reason to lie, too.”

“I never said to pardon her.” Lord Tully’s face was turning as red as his hair. “Both she and the Targaryen boy will answer to justice as equals.”

“And how are you going to bring the King on the Iron Throne to trial, nephew?” asked Brynden Blackfish. “Oh, make no mistake, we all want to see justice done. But we want to do it the right way. And without consigning us all to war.”

“We must make all the necessary inquires before jumping to rash action,” Littlefinger addressed the table. “All of you know that Lord Robert is not without enemies in the Vale. We all know their names.”

“This is not Bronze Yohn’s way,” said Ser Symond Templeton. “He would not poison Lord Arryn.”

“But if he did have that intention, do you think he would tell us?” asked Littlefinger. “Though I see your point. Royce is something of a stickler for his honour.”

“Redfort, though...” muttered Lord Belmore. “That man is more devious than he seems.”

“I have spoken with Lord Redfort,” said Lord Petyr. “I would not call our relations quite cordial, but...
if he is behind this, it would be a great step back in our efforts, and a great waste of time on his part
as well as mine. Truth be told, I do not think he has either the wits or the connections to formulate
such a plot. No, we are looking for a far more devious man, one whose reach extends across all
Seven Kingdoms..."

_Fools, Sansa thought. That man sits before you even now, whispering his poison in your ear. And
you drink it up so willingly._ But she held her tongue. "I can only think of one such man," Littlefinger
said, with a pause as though it had been some great effort for him to recall. "Lord Varys, the Spider."

Within seconds the other lords were murmuring and nodding their approval. "I suspected that all
along," said Ser Quincy Cox, "though I did not know if the Spider’s web reached so far."

“Oh, it does. Varys watches everything on both sides of the Narrow Sea. He watches you at your
table, in your bed, even in your privy. I try to be cautious in my actions, but I know he watches me
as well. The eunuch knows my intentions before I do, sometimes.” He paused again for effect. This
was a performance, and he knew it. “I suppose it would not have been hard for a man like him to
have spies in his king’s camp. This could have come independent of Aegon’s orders..."

“The girl said otherwise,” interjected Ser Harrold Hardyng. “She swore to tell the truth, in the name
of the Seven. She said Aegon conspired with her—”

“Women are fickle,” said Ser Lyn Corbray lazily. “Women lie, Ser Harrold. And the Lannisters are
hardly known for their integrity. It might have been a feeble attempt at shrewdness on her part, in the
hope that we would give her a lesser sentence if she seemed to be a pawn in some greater
conspiracy. Could it be...”

“No,” Edmure said, “whatever else that girl is, she is no pawn. Lady Sansa will tell you that.”

Sansa was almost drifting off by then. “Myrcella is not the feeble flower you might expect,” she said.
“She is Cersei Lannister’s daughter, yet... while she might have her mother’s cunning, I do not think
she has the same cruelty... I would not put such a thing past her, though.”

“What would be a fitting punishment, anyhow?” That was Ser Lyn again. His mouth had a cruelness
to it that suggested he would very much like to find out. _Ser Lyn is a simple man. All he likes is gold
and boys and killing._

“She will not remain married to Lord Robert, I promise you that,” said Littlefinger. “Even if Myrcella
is revealed to be Aegon’s pawn, we will have no choice but to banish her to the silent sisters. And if
this is truly some plot of her own making, then... she must be executed. And that is if Lord Robert
survives his sickness. Otherwise...”

“The Lannisters will not take kindly to that,” said Lady Waynwood. But no one heard her woman’s
words. This room was full of hot-blooded, angry men, and the few women present were but an
afterthought. The men would decide this.

Now, seeing Petyr turning these honest men against their previous convictions, slowly bringing them
to his side, Sansa saw how her father had been so easily tricked. _And I was tricked, too. I believed
him all this time. Worse than that, I thought he was honest, even when I knew what he wanted._

It was dusk when they finished. By then Littlefinger had quelled Edmure’s anger and had convinced
the Lords Declarant to leave the matter until the morrow. _That will serve him nicely, Sansa thought. It
will give him time to construct his next plan._

As the others were rising from their seats, Littlefinger called out to her. “Lady Sansa. Will you stay
awhile?"

She could not very well refuse him, and part of her was curious about what he had to say. Most likely it would be more lies, but you had to know your enemy. Littlefinger himself had taught her that.

Lord Petyr sent his page down for wine. “I have pages, now, Sansa, imagine that! And squires... which is odd, since I am not a knight.”

“But you are a very important man.”

“Oh, yes. But this means more than that: the noble lords and ladies of Westeros are now willing to trust a sellsword’s son with their darlings. It’s quite amusing to think that there was a time when I would have been unfit to even wait upon them, yet now they wait upon me.”

“You are the Lord Protector of the Vale,” said Sansa bluntly.

Petyr’s squire returned with a kettle of mulled wine, cups, and a tray of breads and cakes. “Lord Protector, yes,” said Petyr, spreading butter on a scone. “And Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, if you go by Lannister decree. King Tommen has graciously offered to make me Warden of the North. Of course, now that I have imprisoned his sister, he may not be so amiable towards me.”

*Enough with idle pleasantries.* “Why do you want to talk to me, my lord?”

“Would you believe me if I said it was out of kindness?”

“You taught me that there is no kindness in the world,” said Sansa. “And no justice either. Not unless we make it.”

“Justice.” Petyr flashed a smug smile. “I was wondering your opinion on all of this, truth be told. There were so many of Edmure’s loud cronies in the room that I never got to hear it.”

“I do not know, my lord. I would like to think that Myrcella did not do it... but she *is* a Lannister... still, I do not think her a killer... could... could it have just been some bad food?”

“That would be a pleasant thought, yes,” said Littlefinger. “Alas, the evidence against our princess is insurmountable. Ser Lyn found the poison, you must recall. No, someone is guilty.”

“How is Robert?” she asked.

“Better than he was, Maester Colemon reports. It seems likely he will survive, but...”

Sansa suspected that this private meeting was just a way for Littlefinger to plant ideas in her head, as though she were still a dimwitted little girl. Well, she would play that part gladly. She’d had more than enough practice. “Lord Baelish,” she said, feigning nervousness, “who... who do you think did it?”

“King Aegon seems a likely candidate, it is true. But I do not think he has the tact to have done this alone. As for a motive... well, I have one suspicion, but it is one I am reluctant to voice, Sansa.” He pursed his lips. “Who becomes lord of the Vale if Robert should die, sweetling?”

*Echoes of old, old conversations.* “Why... Harry... but Ser Harry would not. He is... he is too... too stupid.” She meant that honestly, at least.

“But those who support his claim are not. Lady Waynwood is a shrew, and she was among the most
vocal of the Lords Declarant opposing my stewardship of the Vale. The lords Hunter and Belmore are not without their dishonesties either, and any one of them could be in league with Redfort and Royce. That they would attack Lord Robert instead of myself... well, there’s an irony there, in that the honourable lords of the Vale seem to lack any honour whatsoever, but I am not entirely surprised.”

“You should invite them here,” said Sansa. Once the idea came into her head it seemed so obvious. “Bronze Yohn and Lord Redfort, I mean. Then you can make peace with them if you can, and arrest them if you have to. I’ll help you.” With that final statement she knew that Littlefinger could not refuse. *He is more predictable than he likes to think.* Now that she looked, his infatuation with her seemed beyond obvious. She’d long suspected something, of course, but up until Sandor Clegane’s revelation the darker rumours surrounding Littlefinger had seemed surreal. Now she knew them to be undeniably true.

Baelish frowned. “If Royce and Redfort did play a part in this, I do not want them anywhere near Robert.”

“You may never have a better chance to reunite the Vale, my lord. A common enemy made the Starks and the Lannisters fight on the same side during Robert’s Rebellion. If... if you intend to march on King’s Landing, you will need every man behind you.”

Littlefinger chewed on her words. “As always, you have the right of it, Sansa. And I suppose waiting for Bronze Yohn will delay Edmure from making any hasty moves.” *And it will give me time to plan,* went unsaid. “I will send a raven down to the Gates of the Moon. With luck, Lord Nestor will be willing to talk with Bronze Yohn.”

“They are cousins.”

“Yes, they are. But not all cousins share the bond that you and Sweetrobin have, sweetling. Did you know that Robert and Rhaegar were cousins? Or very nearly. Almost anyone would have made a better king than Robert Baratheon, yet he was the only one with the slightest claim to the Iron Throne.”

“Orys Baratheon was Aegon the Conqueror’s bastard brother.” Maester Luwin had told her that.

“Oh, indeed,” said Petyr. “A fact that isn’t well known, and one that Robert desperately tried to hide.” He smiled. “Baratheon, Tyrell, Lannister; no one wants to talk about their bastard ancestors. Bastards have a lot of mysteries and secrets, you see. Half the time you don’t even know who their parents are. As Princess Myrcella will no doubt decline to tell you.”

It was getting late. Sansa told Lord Petyr as much, and he seemed disappointed to let her go. Sansa, meanwhile, was only too happy to get away from him. As soon as she passed Ser Lothor Brune on the stairs, she allowed herself to relax into darker thoughts. *I need to find Brienne,* was the first. *Or the Hound. He’ll protect Robert, if I ask him to.* Sandor Clegane had taken up her offer of service on account of having nothing else to do. “Where the fuck else would I go?” The Hound’s coarse language betrayed his unsavory temperament. Sansa doubted that he would be of much use as a glorified guardsman, so she sent him to hunt down the Brave Companions who had fled the fight at the inn. But she would need him back soon...

Brienne was at the bottom of the stairs. “I am sorry to have left you waiting so long,” Sansa said. “I hope you did not...”

“Pod has gone inside to find a fire,” said Brienne. “But no, my lady, you have not inconvenienced me. I am honour-bound to serve you.” Some spark of life had gone out of Brienne in the recent
weeks, though her armour was too thick for Sansa to find out why.

Sansa pulled up the hood of her cloak as they stepped out into the snow. “Have you seen my brother?”

“He went into the Small Hall to eat. We may still catch him, if we are quick.” Together they set out across the deserted yard. The sky was blue turning black, and entirely starless. “The Blackfish wanted to know if you would have time to see him tonight, after supper,” said Brienne as they climbed the steps of the Kingspyre Tower.

“Did he say what it was about?”

“No, my lady.”

“No matter. I will make time for him.” The Blackfish’s companionship would do her good after her encounter with Littlefinger.

Log fires were burning in each of the Small Hall’s six hearths, and the air was thick with the smells of baking bread and burned bacon from the kitchens in the back. There was a high table on the dais, but no one sat there; there were clear divisions between the castle garrison and the knights they served, though. Sansa found Rickon sitting alone at the end of a bench, staring gloomily into a trencher of stewed meat and beans. “Have you been to see Robert?” he asked as soon as she sat down.

“Not since this morning. The inquest and the meeting took most of the day.”

“Did she confess to it?” When Rickon set his jaw like that, he looked quite a lot like Robb.

“She said it was King Aegon’s plan. She says she knew, but—”

“Then she should die.” Rickon tore an auburn strand from his hair, crushed it under his fingers as one might a beetle. “We should have her hanged.”

“You might want that, but we must give her a fair trial. Lord Royce is on his way from Runestone to act as a judge.” Sansa decided to change the subject. “How are your studies going?”

“I hate them.”

“I thought you might say that. But a lord must—”

“I’m not going to be lord of Winterfell. Bran is. I told you so. He told you so in his letter. He said we should go north.”

“And what do you think?”

Rickon chewed the heel of his bread. “Father said there must always be a Stark in Winterfell... but Mother’s words are family, duty, honour. And if it was the Lannisters who hurt my cousin, I’ll kill them. And if it was King Aegon, then I’ll kill him. Then we can go north.”

Sometimes Sansa wanted to take him in her arms and hold him as a mother might hold her child, but she would never be a mother to Rickon as she had been to Sweetrobin in the Eyrie. She was barely able to restrain Rickon. _I should send him to Winterfell_, she knew. _Out of harm’s way_. But if he was unwilling, even considering such a thing was pointless. _The stubbornness of Starks is always their undoing_, Littlefinger would say, and smirk at some joke only he understood. And so Sansa had to acquiesce to Rickon’s violent opinions and try not to feel worried when he told her, “I will protect...
you.” He was practising in the yard almost every morning and afternoon now, with sword and shield and axe and longbow; Ser Harrold Hardyng had japed that his ferocity knew no bounds. “Wolf blood,” fat Ser Wylis Manderly said, more worriedly. “Your uncle Brandon had it, too.”

Rickon said, “I saw Nymeria last night.”

“You dreamed of her, you mean.”

“No. I saw her. Shaggy went outside the castle and saw her.”

“Shaggy is in the godswood.” He had been banished there after he’d run amok in the sellsword camp and had bitten a squire’s arm.

“Yes, during the day,” Rickon said. “At night we go and search for the others on the lakeshore. Sometimes you can hear singing out there. You should come, Sansa.”

“...outside the walls?” She frowned. “I think not.”

“There’s nothing out there.”

“There is everything out there. We’re only safe... we’re safer in here.” Little bird in her gilded cage. Suddenly she was not hungry anymore. Sansa left Rickon to his supper and rejoined Brienne in the stairwell; together they followed the winding passages back to Sansa’s chambers. Podrick Payne joined her on the way up. “You should go and get something to eat, Brienne,” said Sansa. “Pod will serve for now.”

“Podrick is not—”

“—not a knight, no. But you look half-asleep. When was the last time you slept?”

“My lady, that is not relevant.”

“It is. I would sooner you fell asleep on watch than gave up all your days and nights for my sake. But your pride will not allow that, nor your sense of duty. So I command you to go and sleep, Brienne.”

“My lady, I—”

“Go.” The command was unkind, but necessary. Acts of necessary unkindness were getting more and more frequent nowadays.

Sansa went to her desk and opened Bran’s letter. The seal had been broken long ago, and she had read it so many times the paper was curling, and yet she had been unable to reply. I must, she felt, reading it through another time. I must reply, else Bran will think that I have abandoned him.

But how can I tell him that I mean to do just that? How can I say that my wars are more important than his?

As much as it hurt her, Bran would have to wait.

“My lady.” Podrick Payne appeared in the doorway. “Ser Brynden is here to see you.”

The Blackfish looked even more tired than usual. There were snowflakes in his hair and beard. “I have been to see Robert,” he said, warming his hands over the hearth. “He looks to be getting better. So they say.”
Sansa heard the skepticism in his voice. “Don’t you believe them?”

“I’m wary of believing anyone nowadays. And you should stay on your guard too, Sansa.”

Suddenly she realised. *He is talking about Littlefinger, but he is trying to be covert about it.* “I understand,” she said. “I know that Lord Baelish is up to something.”

He watched her steadily. “Then you know something must be done about it.”

“Yes, I am trying.” She did not want to say too much.

“They have already moved against Robert,” said the Blackfish. “They may come for you too, Sansa. You and Rickon.”

“I will not let them hurt Rickon,” Sansa said.

The Blackfish sighed. “And in that you are your mother’s daughter,” he said. Outside, it was starting to rain. “Fierce in your protection of those you love. But there is only so much you can do, Sansa, and I would sooner you did not risk yourself unnecessarily here. Your uncle Edmure and I... we think you and Rickon should go back north.”

She should have seen this coming. Ser Brynden was certainly not doing this out of malice – if anything, his actions were the opposite – but it was a complication Sansa could not deal with. “I can’t,” she said firmly. “Not yet. Not while things are still like this in the Riverlands. I’m not abandoning Robert while we wait for justice to be done. And I know Rickon would agree with me.”

“Edmure is your uncle, Sansa. We only want to keep you safe.”

“Edmure is the Lord of Riverrun. But I am a Stark as much as I am a Tully, and like Robb before me, I am under no oath to bow before his wishes.” She let out her breath. “Nonetheless, I agree that I will have to go north soon out of duty as much as out of a longing to go home. When all of this is done... but only then.”

“You are as stubborn as your mother.” The Blackfish smiled resignedly. “I told Edmure as much, but he believed that I could convince you. Evidently he was wrong.”

“He just wants to go back to Riverrun, that’s all. He has a responsibility to his people.”

“He does. But he knows the Tully words. *Family, duty, honour.* And that means you, Sansa.”

“But he has Aunt Roslin and cousin Hoster waiting for him back at Riverrun,” she said. “If he goes back to them, he is fulfilling his vow to family.”

The Blackfish thought about it. “The idea of sending him back has crossed my mind. But someone must protect you, Rickon and Robert.”

“I have Brienne.”

“Brienne is only one woman. You need someone powerful, someone—”

“Someone respected,” said Sansa. “Who better than you, ser?”

“Me?” Ser Brynden feigned distaste at that, but Sansa could see that he had been considering the prospect. “I am old, Sansa, and besides, my place is at Edmure’s side. At Riverrun.”

“You were Knight of the Gate for Aunt Lysa for ten years. This is hardly different.”
“It is hardly an easy decision, either. I have lost people in the past, Sansa. Your mother and your brother. Lysa. Hoster. And further back than that... It is not something I want to go through again,” he admitted.

Sansa sat alone for the longest time after he was gone. It was starting to rain. The drops burst like paint against the glass of her window, and they made a song; it was slow at first, but it grew louder and louder with every passing second.

*It is time.*

She placed Bran’s letter down gently on the table, and went out. Brienne was waiting outside. “I told you to go to bed,” Sansa said wearily.

“And I told you that I could not abandon my duty,” Brienne replied, wearier still.

*Family, duty, honour.*

“As you wish. But I have duties to attend to.” She pulled up the hood of her cloak to hide her face. “And you may not like them.” She wanted Brienne to let her do this alone, but the big lady knight refused. Sansa loved her for that.

They went down the stairs past the Small Hall where Littlefinger’s men lounged about playing dice, down past the kitchens where cooks and page-boys scurried like mace, down past the stables on the lowest floor, with its smells of unwashed straw and manure and horse feed. Down and down and down. “My lady,” Brienne said as they went down. “This is not so different to when your mother went to visit Ser Jaime... I... you cannot do as she did, you know.”

“I know.” They emerged into the grey room at the foot of the stairs. The sole gaoler on duty was a dirty-looking man who sat there with his mouth agape and gave Sansa a stupid look when she asked him to open the door.

“Now, m’lady?”

“Open the door,” Sansa repeated slowly.

He spent what seemed like an age searching through his keys. “Leave us,” Sansa commanded, once the way down was open. “Brienne, stand guard here, if you please.” Alone she descended, with only the feeble torchlight to show her the way.

The cellar was wet and dim, and smelled overpoweringly sour, like vinegar. *Does Lord Petyr keep his wines stored somewhere down here?* Sansa wondered. But presently she was not interested in Littlefinger, or anything he might have to say. Instead, when she raised the torch it cast a glare across the person she had been hoping to see: Princess Myrcella. Looking into the scruffy darkness of the cell, Sansa realised then that whatever she was smelling might not be vinegar.

“Sansa.” The voice was barely recognisable as Myrcella’s; it echoed hoarsely around the cavernous vault. “Robert. I swear I didn’t... I swear I never hurt him...”

“Why should I believe you?” Sansa asked.

There was a low, shuffling movement, and the figure uncurled itself from the darkness. Myrcella’s hair was matted with much, as brown as it was golden, and her shift was torn and filthy. *A princess reduced to rags.* “Please, believe me. Please.” Her eyes were bright and fearful. She swallowed. “Will they execute me?”
“Only if you are guilty,” Sansa lied. Even if the Vale lords judged that Aegon had manipulated Myrcella into poisoning Robert, they would still find her guilty of conspiracy. All the roads out of this dungeon led to Myrcella Lannister’s head being spiked and mounted on the castle walls. *You are a dead woman walking, princess.* But even then, Sansa found it difficult to muster any real pity.

“I’m not guilty,” Myrcella said flatly. “I’m not. There wasn’t even a conspiracy. Not really. It was all...” She looked around, searching for listeners in the dark. “Are we alone?”

“Yes.”

“It was Littlefinger. He told me that if I said... if I said Aegon had conspired with me... he wants to have you go to war against the Targaryens, that’s what he wants. And if he executes me... then Mother will declare war on him, or on you. I don’t know why, but... do you believe me, Sansa? *Sansa?”* Her voice was unnaturally high. “You *do* believe me, don’t you?”

“I... I don’t know. I don’t know what to believe.”

“I am innocent, I swear it. I never wanted to hurt—”

Sansa held up a hand and Myrcella fell obediently silent. “Do not lie to me,” she said to the cowering Lannister girl. “You may be entirely innocent in all of this, Myrcella. But do not pretend that you never *wanted* to hurt Robert. Because you did. I know what you wanted. You wanted the Vale, and you wanted power, only you did not want him. You would have brought an end to that marriage as soon as you could, through whatever means you thought necessary. I am certain that if you *had* been involved, then Robert would be dead and not just ill.”

“You don’t believe me,” Myrcella said hollowly. “You think I did it. You think I set out to kill him. How could I? How could I ever do that when I was so often reminded of my *brother* when I looked into his eyes? Could you kill your own brother, Sansa?”

“Robert is not your brother. He might have reminded you of Tommen, for whatever reason, but—”

Suddenly Myrcella broke out into choked laughter. Her giggles were those of a mad woman. “Oh,” she said. “Oh, there is an irony here. As I recall, Sansa, you were accused of murdering my other brother.” Her eyes went wide as eggs. “Did... did you do it? Did you kill Joffrey?”

Sansa felt curiously cold. “Would you be angry if I had?”

There was a long moment of consideration. “You know the answer,” Myrcella said at last.

*What made her like this?* Sansa could not help but wonder. *Was it the nature of Cersei and Jaime’s union that made her and Joffrey so warped, or... something else? Was it growing up in King’s Landing, around such liars as Littlefinger and Lord Varys, or has there always been something deficient in her, something that only poor Tommen was spared?* Sansa could not help but feel for the youngest of the Lannister children. *Growing up with Joffrey and Myrcella as siblings cannot have been easy. One a raging, angry monster, the other fickle and unloving, with no heart at all.*

“Myrcella,” she said softly. “Would you be angry if I had killed Tommen?”

That necessitated an even longer pause. “If you had killed Tommen,” said Myrcella slowly, “I would hunt you to the ends of the earth, and no matter how far you ran, you would never be safe from me. I would rip you to shreds with my bare hands and watch as the crows feasted on your corpse.” She said all this with a perfect, crazed calmness.

Sansa felt a chill go through her. “Myrcella,” she said. “Did you intend to kill Robert? Before?”
Myrcella did not answer.

“Then you should be aware,” said Sansa, “that lions are not the only ones with claws.” And mine are long and sharp, my lady, as long and sharp as yours. “But...” She swallowed. “But we both have a greater enemy, one we must work together to bring down, for the safety of our families and for the good of the realm.”

“Littlefinger.”

“Yes. But after that... your fate is your own. I will help you no further. And if we cross paths again...”

“I understand.” The green eyes met hers, and softened, just a little. “What do you want from me?”


Chapter End Notes

This is one of those chapters which you will probably look on very differently when you know where everything is going.

The final scene of this chapter, with Sansa and Myrcella, is deliberately written as a callback to Catelyn VII from *A Clash of Kings*, where she goes down to Jaime's cell. Yet the dynamic here, and Sansa's intentions, which are admittedly unclear, are different to Cat's.

Actually, now that I think about it, Sansa does channel Catelyn quite a lot in this chapter.

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Some questions for reviewers - things that I found interesting:

Acts of necessary unkindness were getting more and more frequent nowadays.

Does Sansa's newfound bleak outlook on the world - and her loss of innocence - demonstrate a personal tragedy?

There was a low, shuffling movement, and the figure uncurled itself from the darkness. Myrcella’s hair was matted with much, as brown as it was golden, and her shift was torn and filthy. A princess reduced to rags.

“Please, believe me. Please.” Her eyes were bright and fearful. She swallowed. “Will they execute me?”

How has imprisonment affected Myrcella's state of mind?

***
NEXT TIME:

What is your allegiance?

#QueenDaenerysTargaryenTheFirstofHerNameQueenoftheAndalsandtheRhoynarandtheFirstMenLadyoftheSevenKingdomsandProtectoroftheRealmQueenofMeereenBreakerofChainsKhaleesioftheGreatGrassSeamotherofDragons

or

#KingAegonTargaryenTheSixthofHisNameKingoftheAndalsandtheRhoynarandtheFirstMenLordofthe

***
Once again, thanks very much to everyone who has read, commented and left kudos.
The Dance of Dragons

Chapter Summary

And everywhere the dragons danced, people died.

Chapter Notes

This chapter utilises multiple POV characters; each new POV change is prefaced with a page break and headed with the chapter name and a number: eg. Barristan II.

In some places, the events of the storylines take place in chronological order; in other places, they occur simultaneously. However, it should be easy to tell which is which. For clarification, this chapter starts at Aegon's wedding feast.

To experience this chapter you will need:

30-40 minutes of time to waste
some sort of beverage to give you the necessary human nourishment (optional)
a relatively comfortable place to sit
the ability to suspend your disbelief
sufficient quantities of the essential resource: HYPE

Take a deep breath...
Good luck.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
There had never been so many Dornishmen in any one hall at any one time. Their raucous music played off the rafters of the throne room: the crazed wail of harpsichord and lute, the throb-throb of drums, the sweet, sing-song laughter, the fiery blast of an occassional trumpet. The men smelled of oranges and brimstone, the women of honey and aniseed and lemon; the sights were sun-bronzed skin and amethysts and gowns that pretended it was still high summer; the feast was all Dornish peppers and liberally spiced meat that made Strong Belwas look ready to vomit.

Daenerys Targaryen hated every minute of it, and sat wondering how long it would be before she could politely excuse herself. The king and queen had gone off to their bedding, far away across the city – Aegon had wanted to return to his camp with his new bride, and though that seemed an odd request, Dany had not refused it.

The hall was full of men she wished she had never laid eyes upon. While Oberyn Martell had followed his niece and nephew back to the camp outside the city, most of the Dornish lords remained here. Dany could see Brown Ben Plumm as well, who had been as insolent as Daario of late, and never seemed to be around when she needed him. Then there was Haldon Halfmaester and smug Aurane Waters, who had grown suddenly close to the king, and Lord Varys, who Dany was growing to dislike with every passing day in spite of his supposed loyalty.

But it was Daario who dominated her thoughts. Daario, and the lack of the moon blood, and the child that must be growing within her. It is his. It must be his. It cannot be anyone else’s. She already knew what she must do, for the queen could not afford to have a bastard child in a time like this... but even so, it pained her. After all this time, am I going to give up on my hopes of having another?

This was the culmination of her mistakes with Daario Naharis. She should never have thought anything of him. She should never have allowed herself to think that sellswords were anything other than the ficklest of men. I was a fool to trust him. Even more of a fool to love him. Was this one of Quaithe’s promised betrayals? Once for gold and once for blood and once for love.

I would sooner flay half these men than sup with them, she thought, glancing round the hall. “Excuse me,” she said to no-one in particular. “I need some air, I think.”

She took Ser Barristan’s arm and stepped neatly down from the dais, into the shadows of the hall where no one was looking. They were too enthralled by meat and mead and merrymaking to spare a thought for their queen.

“Your Grace,” Ser Barristan said as they left the hall. “Your guests will be wondering—”

“Tell them that I am indisposed and will be delayed in returning,” Dany replied acidly. “They should be no strangers to such a thing. Now, leave me, ser.” Perhaps that was a little harsh, but Selmy’s attempt to lighten her mood had been a foolish notion.

It had been snowing over King’s Landing for most of the day, and the night brought no respite. As Dany stepped out onto the stone balcony she felt flakes upon her brow, and some scattered in her hair. More snow had settled on the crenel in front of her. Dany brushed it off with an idle hand, and leaned out over the rampart. There. Everything was as it should be. The city was dim and foggy and quiet, and the faint pealing of bells and the yellowish glow of lights from brothels and winesinks was exactly as she expected. The moon was full tonight, and its light glinted off the steel caps and tall spears of her Unsullied soldiers.
The last time Daenerys Targaryen had felt this strange calm was out on the Dothraki Sea, beneath the
gaze of her sun-and-stars. To the Dothraki, the moon was either an egg from which dragons hatched,
or the wife of the sun, or both, or neither, depending on what you chose to believe. Either way, it
was a far more beautiful vision than that of the gnarled old men on Visenya’s Hill. Dany no longer
cared what treasons the sparrows spoke of her. All beasts tremble before the dragon.

Even the Dothraki. They had feared the black salt sea, once, but now they had conquered that too,
and they were only afraid of dragons now. Do they think of them as monsters or as marvels? Dany
wondered. She had never asked.

Thoughts of the Dothraki and their eastern homelands made her do a strange thing. She took off her
sandals and laid them down a few yards away. The terrace was cold under her bare feet. The
sensation was soothing, as she needed it to be. A queen does not scream her grievances, she thought,
a queen does not cry and wail and tear her hair out. She was not sure what a queen should do, but it
was not that.

When she turned round, Ser Barristan was still behind her. “I told you to leave me,” Dany said.

“Your Grace... if I may...” Selmy shifted awkwardly. “If you do not need me, I have... duties to
attend to in the city... but if you need me...”

It sounded like he wanted Dany to refuse him. But she said, “Go, as you will. I have enough knights
here to protect me.” Then she turned back to look over the city and listened as Selmy’s footsteps
became distant. It was only when he was long gone that she started to wonder what his duties might
be. Ser Barristan’s only duty is his duty to me. What could make him turn away from that?

She ought to return to the great hall, but she did not think she could face the prospect without
screaming. Instead she went into the courtyard. Ser Jorah Mormont was waiting for her. Of course.
Selmy would never leave me entirely without protection. But this showed that Selmy trusted
Mormont, at least somewhat, and that was a good thing.

“Your Grace,” said Ser Jorah. “Where are you headed?”

“Away. Somewhere that isn’t the Great Hall. To my chambers.” Perhaps she would invite Jorah in to
talk with her. Or perhaps not.

“I mistrust this wedding,” Jorah said as they climbed the stairs.

“You are suspicious of everything, ser.”

“I am when everything is worthy of suspicion, Your Grace. The Dornish have been perfectly fine in
the Maidenvault and the Tower of the Hand for the past few days. Why suddenly return to the
encampment?”

“Be quiet,” Dany snapped at Jorah. “I have enough to worry about without you bothering me all the
while.”

They walked in silence up to her solar, where she found Marwyn the Mage and Benerro waiting.
“What do you want?” Dany demanded of them. She wanted to be left alone.

“Benerro and I were doing some light reading the other day,” Marwyn said. “We have a mutual
interest in dragons, you see.” He grinned. “And another interest in prophecy.”

“Will you get to the point, or will it be riddles for the rest of the night?”
“No more riddles, Your Grace,” Marwyn acquiesced. “As you command. The book we found related to the tragedy at Summerhall, on the night of your brother Rhaegar’s birth. Specifically, to an old dwarf woman who was brought to court by Prince Daeron’s wife, Jenny of Oldstones. She was rumoured to be some sort of woods witch. It seems she was where this prophecy originated.”

“And?” Dany asked.

“Ah, here is the interesting thing. I was searching through a chronicle of Maegor the Cruel’s reign when I came upon mention of a dwarf sorceress in a list of grievances submitted by a landed knight near Sallydance, in the Riverlands. So it seems that this dwarf woman has lived for over two hundred years... and then I thought, why not three hundred? She may yet live, Your Grace. And if she knows the prophecy...”

“We may be able to understand it,” finished Benerro. “The dragon has three heads. She may know what that means.”

“And I suppose you seek my permission to go looking for this woods witch?”

“I do, Your Grace,” said Marwyn. “Benerro would stay and counsel you. He is not as learned as I, but he knows more of mystical matters.”

Dany shook her head. “You cannot. Not now. I need you more than ever, Marwyn. There is... something coming. I can feel it.” She took a deep breath. “I need to be alone. Please.” Without another word she strode through the solar and up the last flight of stairs to her bedchamber.

The air was cool and still. After the day’s trials, the complete calm was nearly enough to make Dany cry out in sheer relief. She went to the balcony and stared out into the misty night. Rain was starting to fall, very slowly. On Blackwater Bay to the east, a storm was gathering. Dany looked to the south. She could see the lights of Visenya’s Hill, and more up on Rhaenys’s. And Aegon’s camp beyond that. Would that I had the power to sweep it all away, Dany thought. To take everything except me in my tower and my dragons in the sky. Let the waves have it all. Or bathe it all in fire. Burn them all...

“No,” Dany said to herself. Those were Viserys’s words in her head. “You are not a butcher.”

“You are a queen.” A hand closed over her mouth, cutting off her gasp. When she pushed away, Daario Naharis was standing behind her. “How did you get in here?” she hissed at him.

“I have my ways.”

“You should not be here.”

“Then send me away.” He swaggered towards her, in that way he had. “Send me away, my queen.”

“I will,” Dany warned.

“Then do it.”

“I will,” she said, feeling a little foolish now.

“Then why haven’t you?” He stepped closer to her. “Your words are gentle caresses, Daenerys.”

“I am your queen. Not Daenerys.”

“It makes little matter. You cannot bring yourself to send me away.”
I can and I will, she thought. “You betrayed me,” she said. “You said you would return to me as fast as you could, but you lied. You supped with Aegon, you stayed in his camp, and you left me. Why did you do it?”

“I left you because you forced me away. I advised you to rid yourself of Jorah Mormont. I will warn you again—”

“Jorah has proved his loyalty.”

“Has he? How?”

*My feelings for Jorah are as inexplicable as the ones I have for you... and vastly different. My bear so fair. My captain, my fickle, lying, loving captain.* “Do not question your queen.”

“Then I will question Daenerys.”

“Daenerys is your queen.” She had not really been Daenerys for quite some time. “You are sworn to obey her.”

“I swore you my sword. I swore you my heart too, but you cast it away.”

*I had no choice. I cannot love Daario and love my kingdom at the same time.* Doubtless he knew that, but was waiting for her to say it aloud. “Your heart is not of interest to me,” she said coldly, though it pained her. “Only your loyalty.”

“My heart is my loyalty, Daenerys. Without it, I am but a sword in an empty hand. I beg you, do not do this—”

“I am a queen. I must—”

“Yes, you are a queen. No one can tell you how to feel.” Dany could not tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

She turned away. “You are doing exactly that. Leave me, Daario.”

There was a long moment of silence. Dany half-expected him to advance on her, to throw her down and force her to love him again. And honestly, she did not know if she would be able to resist. But instead Daario retreated towards the door. And stopped. She turned and met his eyes.

“When did you become so cold?” he asked. “What happened to the love we had in Slaver’s Bay?”

“I grew up,” Dany said. “I am a dragon, not some lovesick girl.”

“Will you take counsel from me one last time?”

“One last time? Why, are you going somewhere?”

He smiled sadly. “Exile. That is where you are banishing me, is it not?”

“You cannot go. I... I...”

“You need me?”

“No.” Dany refused to say that. “I need your loyalty. I need your men.” That was the truth, at least.

“But not my heart.” Daario laughed bitterly. “Take them both, or leave them both. You cannot have
one without the other.” He took half a step closer. “Do you want both?”

“No.”

“Did you ever want both?”

He had her there. If she said that she did, then Daario would go on forever seeking her attention, like a lovesick dog... and she could not have that. Not here. Not now. “No.”

An hour later, Dany lay in bed wondering if she had said the wrong thing. “I do not love Daario,” she said aloud, feeling both melancholic and free. “But I do need him.”

I should have left him in Slaver’s Bay. We had something there. And the memory of that thing could never be besmirched. Things in Slaver’s Bay had been... easier... better. I might have been Aegon the Conqueror come again. I could have gone east instead of west, to conquer Qarth and Asshai and everything beneath the Shadow.

To go west, you must go east, Quaithe had said. She thought she had accomplished that when she returned to Vaes Dothrak, but... could Quaithe have meant something else?

There was a queasy feeling in her stomach. The baby. I never told Daario about it. It was not noticeable yet, so he would not have seen it tonight, but it was almost inevitable if he found out, even if she chose to take a cup of moon tea and pretend it had never happened. And any prospect of keeping the child had disappeared too. After what I have just said to Daario, how could I raise his child?

Those thoughts haunted her to sleep. But when she dreamed, it was Viserys she dreamed of, pulling her up from her bed, seizing her by the shoulders. His nails were long and crooked, and they dug deep into her skin, leaving marks. “Wake the dragon!” he hissed at her, and when he spoke his voice was serpentine, and his tongue was forked like that of a snake. “You mussssst wake the dragon!”

Dany woke alone, and in darkness. Rain was pounding off the windows, and there was a definite tension in the air, one that would surely be disturbed at any moment—

“Your Grace.” Ser Jorah appeared at her side, a looming shadow in the coat of a bear. “Your Grace, we must talk.”

“What is it?” Dany called. Strangely, she did not feel lethargic in the slightest. It was as though she had never slept. She scrambled up to her feet, kicking on sandals, pulling on her bedrobe.

“A fleet, Your Grace... a Braavosi fleet on Blackwater Bay, sailing towards our walls.”

SER BARRISTAN I
King Aegon’s camp sprawled from Blackwater Bay in the east and north to the fringes of the kingswood in the south. King’s Landing reigned on its seven hills above them; the Sept of Baelor, the Dragonpit and the Red Keep were floating islands of light in the sky.

Ser Barristan Selmy felt uneasy. He had left the queen at her own urging, but Jorah Mormont and Daario Naharis were not protectors he was willing to rely upon. Yet by now it was too late to turn back, and the presence of Ashara’s letter in his pocket was a persistent reminder of why he must stay. *Meet me tonight,* she had written, *when the wedding is done and the king and queen have gone to bed. Meet me around the firepit outside the king’s tent. I will be waiting for you.*

Ser Barristan had come incognito, foregoing the enamelled armour of the Lord Commander of the Queensguard in favour of a sober woollen doublet and a dark brown mantle that left him looking entirely unremarkable. *Dressed like this, I might not even recognise myself.* That was a good thing, though. Not even the queen knew about his excursion. *If I had mentioned it, would she have let me go? And since I did not, am I betraying her?*

Edric Storm had accompanied him to the camp, but Barristan had sent his squire off to amuse himself while he waited for Ashara. He stood just outside the cluster of tents occupied by King Aegon and his closest councillors. The camp was in the throes of a merry feast; after the wedding, the king’s men had returned here to celebrate the union of Aegon and his Dornish bride.

All around him were the feast tents, with their banners of Targaryen black-and-red and Martell orange and Tyrell green, and others with dozens of southron devices in blue and silver and chequy green-and-white, and everything in between. There were barrels and casks and great tuns of ale and honeyed mead, and whole roasted hogs turned over spits. There were sundry platters of hot pies and pastries. The smells made Selmy’s mouth water. *I should have eaten more at the feast,* he thought. He was getting old, to the point that he had convinced himself that he could live on bread and water only, but that was not true. Or maybe the sensation in his belly was one of nervous anticipation, not hunger.

There was something in the air tonight. A certain stillness, a sense of the calm before the storm, that Selmy had felt before the Battle on the Stepstones, before the Trident, before the sieges of Astapor and Yunkai and Meereen. *Something is coming.* If only he knew what it was.

Then something moved in the corner of his eye and his old worries were forgotten. He swallowed. *She came. She did not lie. She is here, and it is really her.* “Ashara...” She was too far away to hear him, but Selmy breathed her name like an incantation. All at once he was back at the tourney of Harrenhal, and there she was in the stands, with violet stars in her eyes. *If I had couched my lance a little better and unhorsed Rhaegar... if she had been crowned the tourney’s queen of love and beauty instead of Lyanna Stark... if I had been a younger man, and not fettered by the vows I swore...*

It would not matter. Ser Barristan was twenty-five years older than Ashara Dayne, and whatever small grace and handsomeness he’d had in his younger days had faded as his hair turned white and crow’s feet appeared under his eyes. Ashara had aged too, he saw, but her eyes, which had haunted him most of all, were unchanged by the years.

Even as she reached him Selmy wondered if he should believe his eyes, but when the mirage turned to him and said, “Barristan. You came,” in the voice only she had, he knew she had to be real.

Selmy swallowed. “Lady Ashara. I... forgive my caution. I had heard stories... can it really be you?”
“It is. And I am sorry to have kept you in suspense for so long. You must have thought I was dead all this time.”

“When they first told me that you had thrown yourself from the Palestone Sword, I did not believe it,” Selmy said. “But... I lost faith, I will admit. I am sorry.”

“In that you are blameless. It is I who ought to apologise, not you. But you understand that I had to allow everyone to think that I was dead, for the good of the realm. I suppose you will be wanting answers?”

The words floated above Selmy’s head, barely heard. He gave a small, vacant nod.

“It was my duty,” she said. “I did it for Elia. As Robert marched on the city, she called me to her chambers one last time. ‘You must go,’ she told me, ‘for it will not be long before Aerys starts gathering his allies to use as human shields’. And so I abandoned her, and Aegon and Rhaenys, and went back to Starfall. It was not long after the rebellion that I heard from Varys, that Aegon had survived the Sack and needed friends to watch over him. I had thought to refuse him and stay where I was, but then I had news of Arthur’s death, and—”

“I’m sorry. About Arthur. He was a good knight, and a better man.” The words sounded so hollow.

“—there was nothing you could have done, Barristan. They say I threw myself from the Palestone Sword after that in my grief, when Eddard Stark brought me Dawn and told me what had happened. But in the end, I chose to live for the future rather than die for the past. I went to Essos and found Lord Connington, and Aegon in his custody. Then it was years of waiting...”

“I should have gone with you. I made a mistake in staying in King’s Landing with Robert.”

“It was your duty as a Kingsguard.”

*If I had known that you were alive, I would have abandoned it in a heartbeat.* “The Kingsguard died with the men who served in it. Jaime Lannister and I were always the least of the seven.”

“None of you were less than any of the others,” replied Ashara. “Even Ser Jaime... if you had heard what Aerys was saying towards the end, you might have been compelled to do the same.”

“He killed his king,” said Barristan, frowning, “and I abandoned mine. As I abandoned Aegon and Daenerys.”

“But you returned. Aegon does not judge you for the years you spent at Robert’s side, I promise you that.”

*Perhaps not. But I will always judge myself.* “Sometimes,” he said, “I wonder how it would have been if Rhaegar had slain Robert instead.”

“We all do.”

“If I had been with my prince in his time of need – my king, rather, for Rhaegar was what Aerys was not – or if your brother and Ser Oswell and Ser Gerold had been there with us...”

“Don’t you ever wonder why?”

“Why?”

“Why they were not at the Trident? Why they were not there to fight with you?”
Of course he had. In the early days, he’d spent hours sitting in the White Sword Tower thinking back on the Rebellion, thinking, *if only we had done this small thing differently, we might have won and Rhaegar might sit the Iron Throne.* But as the years passed him by and the wrinkles grew more and more numerous, the memories faded.

“It is a story I will have to tell you someday,” Ashara said, “but even then I know only the barest bones of it. Nearly everyone who knows the tale is dead.” She was shrouding herself once again in the cloak of mystery that had made Ser Barristan and so many others pine after her in the first place. What secrets did those dark purple eyes hide? What wonders? What answers?

He found his lips moving of their own accord, “Ashara,” Selmy said, he who had hidden his true feelings for so long. “I have to tell you the truth. I came here tonight against my better judgement to meet you. I had a reason, though.” Standing in front of her made him feel like a boy all over again. Distantly he recalled a ball at Harvest Hall, shortly after he had been made a knight, and dancing with Lord Swann’s daughter, the girl he might have married, and kissing her. How many years had it been since a woman’s lips had touched against his own? Was this what longing was? “Ashara, I—”

And suddenly they were no longer alone. It was Ashara’s nephew who had interrupted them, the boy Edric Dayne. Barristan felt that tense chill in the air again, like the shadow of some great beast in its approach. The men were moving away from the feast tents, looking up from their ale and glancing concernedly towards the east. Thunder boomed distantly. The stars in Ashara’s eyes turned dark.

“What is it, Ned?” she asked.

Ned, Ser Barristan thought. *The boy is named for Ned Stark.* Did that mean anything? They said it was Stark who had killed Ser Arthur Dayne. *So why is the boy named for him?* What had happened on those nights in Dorne, to bring about Arthur’s death and Ashara’s supposed suicide, and Ned Stark’s return to King’s Landing with only his sister’s bones?

Edric Dayne raised his head. “Our scouts have reported enemy ships on Blackwater Bay, waving the sails of Braavos and the Free Cities. Thousands of men, tens of thousands, maybe even a hundred thousand. A war council has been convened in His Grace’s tent—”

*Daenerys,* thought Selmy. “Forgive me, my lord, my lady,” he said. “I must return to the queen at once, and rally her sellswords and the Unsullied.”

Edric shook his head. “It is too late, ser,” he said, “by now their ships are coming up the Blackwater Rush. You will not make it back to the queen in time.”

“He is right,” said Ashara, heading towards the king’s tent. Barristan had no choice but to follow her inside.

King Aegon was not yet present, but two dozen of the Dornish and Reach lords were. Prince Oberyn and Lord Connington were at the head of the table. “Ser Barristan,” the Dornish prince said, “an unexpected pleasure. I would have thought to find you with the queen.”

“I had duties here,” Selmy said curtly.

“Well, we are thankful for your presence nonetheless. I trust you have been told what is happening.”

“Lord Dayne says there are ships coming up the Blackwater.”

Oberyn laughed. “More than just ships. Ships in their hundreds, and thousands of men aboard them. This is not just any battle. This is an *invasion,* Ser Barristan. I hope you do not underestimate it.”

That was a rather ironic statement from a man still dressed in his wedding silks, Selmy thought. “I
have no pretensions about this. A lifetime of war has taught me the importance of even the smallest battles. But as you say, this is not small.”

“I know you might harbour some mistrust for us, but we all have the same goal, Ser Barristan.” That was Jon Connington. “We all serve the same king... and queen.”

Aegon arrived then, almost on cue. He was not dressed for fighting either, and looked as though he had hastily redressed after his wedding night. “What has the world come to when a man cannot even get one good night of sleep?” he asked theatrically. “Especially tonight.”

“That is the way of things,” said Prince Oberyn. “While it is true that you only get only one wedding night, you can have lots of other nights to pursue love... but tonight we are blessed with a war as well.”

“I would not call it a blessing,” Garlan Tyrell said. “Truly, they picked the right night for it. Our guard is down.”

The very fact of that made Selmy quite suspicious. “Perhaps they knew that the wedding would be tonight,” he said. “Perhaps we have spies within our own ranks.”

“It seems likely,” Ser Garlan replied. “Alas, dealing with them will have to wait till afterwards. For now, we have a battle to plan.”

“Do we have their numbers yet?” asked Aegon.

“I sent Lord Wylde to make a field report,” said Connington. “But he has not yet returned. For now, we must estimate four hundred ships, or more, and a hundred thousand men, at the very least.”

Seven hells. Barristan could not understand how they were being so bloody calm about it. “Forgive me, my lords, but this all seems rather leisurely,” he said, “we are on the brink of possibly the biggest battle the Seven Kingdoms has ever seen, and yet we all sit round unarmoured and unready. There are preparations to make. Things to be done—”

“Yes, and we must remain calm about it,” Prince Oberyn said. “We still have the city walls. If we send our cavalry to attack the south bank while the queen’s Unsullied hold the Mud Gate, we will pin them between the walls and the river.”

“As we did with Stannis at the First Battle of the Blackwater,” added Ser Garlan.

“And where are these cavalry?” Selmy asked.

There was a moment’s pause. “Forming up,” said Oberyn. “I have sent my daughter Nym with the message, and Lord Yronwood with her. And then there are the Dothraki. Truth be told, I had rather hoped you might help us with that, Ser Barristan. They are the queen’s men. You are the Queen’s Hand.”

Somewhere in the distance, the sound of a catapult could be heard, and then the impact of a great flaming rock against stone. The ground shook a little. “They are already at the city gates,” King Aegon said, “we must hurry. Ser Barristan, can you bring the Dothraki to our side?”

“I do not speak a word of Dothraki.”

“I speak Dothraki,” said a voice from the back of the tent. Its owner pushed a way through: Brown Ben Plumm, captain of the Second Sons. “When you have brothers from all over Essos, it helps to know a few different tongues.”
The sellsword. The one who turned his cloak, not once but twice. Selmy did not approve, but it was all they had. “Will you help me, then?” he grudgingly asked.

“Not you. I will help the queen. And the king, of course.” He smiled.

“Not a problem. But you and Brown Ben had best get going, Ser Barristan. As you say, we only have so long.” And that was that.

Edric Storm reappeared as Barristan was mounting his horse. “See if you can find me some armour,” Selmy said, shifting in his saddle. “When we get back, it will not be long before we have to join the battle. And find some armour for yourself while you’re at it.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Edric, stepping back.

Brown Ben Plumm was waiting for him down by the river. A light fog was settling over the Blackwater and the camp, hiding half the world in its shroud of mist. The enemy ships were not close enough for Barristan to see them.

“You realise,” said Brown Ben, “that some of the queen’s bloodriders speak the Common Tongue, don’t you?”

“I imagine you know that as well,” Selmy answered. “Which begs the question: if we do not need a translator, why are you here with me?”

Brown Ben grimaced through black teeth. “Because I am an old suspicious man, and so are you. And like all old, suspicious men, I need someone to share my suspicions with.”

“And what suspicions are those?”

Plumm took a hasty look back over his shoulder at the fading encampment. “I have to question whether our queen and our king are on the same side at all. They do not seem too troubled by all this news of foes on the river. Which makes me wonder how much they already know...”

“Why are you bothering me with this?”

“Because if Aegon and his men are planning something against our queen, when better to discuss that plan than at a time when they have sent her most loyal supporter away? And if Aegon and his men are planning something, that would certainly explain why Nymeria Sand has been making covert visits to my captains, perhaps offering an incentive for them to turn their cloaks...”

“So you suspect some sort of... conspiracy?”

“Don’t you?”

Selmy did not answer. “Even if this is true... what are we supposed to do with this knowledge?”

“Oh, bide our time. Sit back on our laurels and be old, not bold – though might be somewhat more difficult for you, given your reputation. We should probably go and seek these Dothraki, too; doubtless they will have their uses. But we would do well to be watchful, Ser Barristan. I think this night may hold a few more surprises than either of us are expecting.”
Through the porthole window he could see the battle on the riverbank, as soldiers spilled from the Braavosi ships in their hundreds to splash their way through the shallows leading up to the Mud Gate. Somewhere above him men were screaming orders at each other in unfamiliar tongues, while below decks Numbers lay moaning in the language that all men knew.

Penny huddled in the corner beside the squire’s makeshift bed, wiping his sweaty forehead with a cloth and whispering nonsense rhymes in a scared, sing-song voice. Every now and then she would glance nervously towards Tyrion and his furrowed brow. “What is it?” she would hiss, quietly so Numbers would not hear. “What do you see?”

“Death,” Tyrion answered. The Swordfish had been spared the worst of the battle, here in the deepest part of the Blackwater river, but through the climbing plumes of smoke, the screams of burning men were unmistakable. “The war,” he said. He was now convinced that such things were inevitable. He watched as a nearby hulk was consumed entirely by flames, exploding all along its length before sinking slowly and gracelessly into the dark water. Another hundred ghosts have floated to the bottom of Blackwater Bay.

“FIRE!” he heard someone shout in Valyrian, and there was a great whumping noise, and one of the Swordfish’s fiery missiles sailed across the water and disappeared into the fog. Then there was a bright flash, somewhere in the Dothraki encampment on the south bank of the river. Men were screaming in the shallows. Arrows flew from the deck of the Swordfish onto one of the ships of Queen Daenerys’s fleet, sending it pirouetting back into the fog.

Death. The war. Fire and blood. And soon they may swarm onto our own deck, and then I will know them more dearly than I had ever intended to. Not to mention that the queen had dragons, and would surely be unafraid to use them...

He turned back to Penny. “How is he doing?”

Her lip quivered as she wiped Numbers’s brow again. “H-he... he’s fine. For now.”

“Keep him cool.” It might have been better to keep him warm, but Tyrion could not remember how to deal with fever. Isn’t that why we have servants and maesters? All his knowledge of dragons and history was doing them a fat lot of good down here. He paced across the cabin, paced back, gazed out of the porthole. Still fire. Still blood. The smoke was mingling with the foggy night, making it harder to see with every passing moment. Very soon they would be entirely blind, and they would be entirely alone. If we sink to the bottom of the Blackwater, will they come for our bodies years in the future, and find me at the window and Penny crouched over Numbers, with tangleweed growing through our skulls and tendrils of moss creeping over our bones?

That would have been an ironically fitting end to his journey. His mission to Braavos had been a dismal failure, after all. Daenerys sent me to speak with the Iron Bank. And after everything, I did not manage that. Still, Tyrion doubted that it would matter now, since the Bank had come in force to kill the queen’s dragons and take the Iron Throne for themselves. The Iron Bank and the Iron Throne. They were almost made for one another.
But perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps Illyrio Mopatis meant to plant his own fat arse on the throne. The cheesemonger certainly did not think that Daenerys Targaryen should sit there. “It was never meant to happen this way,” he had confided in Tyrion. “I had expected Daenerys to wither and die in Vaes Dothrak, or to burn in the Red Waste; alas, she has grown, like a weed. And now that weed must be pruned, before the garden grows out of control.”

*Only this weed has three dragons.* Illyrio and Tormo Fregar had put up huge scorpions and catapults on their biggest ships – the *Swordfish* among them – which could supposedly slay the dragons. And nearly every man carried a crossbow with which he could bring them down. *They will have little luck there, though,* Tyrion knew. A dragon could be killed with one well-placed quarrel through the eye and into its brain, yes, but such a shot would be nearly impossible on a fully armoured, moving target.

*Then again, I did not think they would beat us in Braavos, either.* It had not taken Tyrion long to find out what had happened. Salladhor Saan, it seemed, had not been trustworthy at all. While Saan had been generous in his provision of thirty-seven ships, he’d been equally treacherous in telling Illyrio Mopatis the entirety of their plans. When their ships had gone out to meet the enemy fleet, packed with nitre and powder full to bursting, they’d sailed straight into a dummy fleet of unmanned cargo ships which had driven them back – like rams – into the fleet of the defenders. In an evenly matched battle, such a tactic would have been suicidal, but with the defenders placing all their hopes on Tyrion’s plan, they had quickly been torn to pieces in a pitched naval battle where they were outnumbered two-to-one. “And we knew you were going to do something like that, anyway,” Bronn told him. “You weren’t the only one who was there at the Blackwater.” The only silver lining in the whole thing was that Tormo Fregar had clapped Saan in irons as a pirate and had him thrown into the lagoon.

Fregar was that sort of man, possessed with a strange sort of justice. It was Illyrio’s intervention alone that stopped him from throwing Tyrion overboard. Even now, he was not sure why Illyrio was so keen on keeping him alive. “Why *do* you need me?” Tyrion had asked two days ago, at their last meeting as they sailed past Dragonstone. “If I were you, I would have thrown me overboard long ago.”

Illyrio’s smile had a hint of Tywin Lannister in it. “The idea grows more and more attractive with every passing moment.”

“Well, I hope you can resist the temptation,” Tyrion had said. “Nevertheless... if you were going to have me thrown overboard, my lord, I think you would have done so a long time ago. Thus I gratefully conclude that you are keeping me alive for a reason.”

“I am starting to forget what it is,” muttered Illyrio. “Nonetheless, the fact of your usefulness remains, Lord Tyrion.”

“I am useful in many ways. To which are you referring?”

“You are a Lannister. The last of the Lannisters to wield any respect, as far as we can tell. Our friends at the Iron Bank of Braavos are owed a debt. We are told that you know how to pay debts.”

“When you take King’s Landing, you may pillage and plunder to your heart’s content. Surely the city must have something of worth to satisfy the Iron Bank.”

“We do not intend to sack the city,” said Illyrio. “Not when our men are already inside its gates. When we go marching up the shores of the Blackwater, they will open the city to us.”

“Even if that is true, you cannot have more than a few hundred men inside the city walls. A few
“thousand, if we assume that you have paid off a few sellswords. Daenerys and Aegon have a hundred thousand men to that. And they are defending. One man on a wall can be worth ten men beneath it.”

“Not if the man on the wall has a knife to his throat, wielded by the man beside him.”

“You cannot have enough men—” That was when it dawned on Tyrion. “You aren’t doing it for just the Iron Bank.”

Illyrio grinned. “And the penny drops. I am a little disappointed, my lord. It took you a long time to realise that I do not have any interest in taking the Iron Throne for myself. I only seek to see it returned to its rightful heir. An interest I share with my friends of Braavos and Volantis and the Disputed Lands... it is not the dragons alone I am opposing. It is the Targaryens.”

He was mulling those words over in his head when another exploding hulk further down the river startled him out of his recollections. Numbers gave a long, shuddering moan. The healers aboard the Swordfish had taken the splinters out of him, and leeched away the infection, and for a day or two he had been fine, but somewhere out in the Narrow Sea he had worsened, and right now the physicians were being about as unhelpful as Tyrion. And besides, they had important people to tend to, those who were fighting and dying on the decks. So all they could do was listen to Numbers as he moaned.

It was around midnight by his reckoning when Bronn came to his door with half a dozen Braavosi soldiers behind him. “Illyrio wants to see you.” Tyrion had expected the cheesemonger to wait out the battle behind the lines, so he was moderately surprised when Illyrio announced his intentions to see the fighting through himself. He was even more surprised by the summons. “Why?” he asked Bronn.

“Don’t ask questions. Do as you’re told. It’ll go better for you.”

It was hard to fight off the impulse to spit on Bronn, although the last time he had done that, Bronn smacked him in the face. Tyrion swallowed. “Fine. But leave one of your men with Penny and Numbers. They are to do as exactly as she says, and if the boy dies, I’ll—”

“Oh, I’ll kill him myself. I like the lad.” Bronn shoved one of his men into the room and pulled Tyrion out into the corridor. Two men took his arms and frogmarched him through the underbelly of the ship. Normally they blindfolded him when they left his cabin, but this time it was dark, and there was nothing to hide. The screams upstairs grew louder, and the explosions louder still; red fire glinted through the windows, and the timbers of nearby ships groaned in pain.

Illyrio’s cabin was as gaudy and ostentatious as its owner, but its owner was not here. Instead a lone figure sat upon a chaise in the middle of the room. “I shouldn’t be surprised to see you,” Tyrion said to him. “Illyrio has mentioned you often, Lord Varys.”

The eunuch smiled. “Oh, I hope he has been complimentary.”

Tyrion curled his lip. “More so than I might have been.”

Varys was oddly garbed tonight. Instead of his normal lavender or lilac silk, he wore patterned black wool, mail and leather, and a studded black skullcap. “Have I seen this disguise before?” Tyrion asked.

“Perhaps,” said Varys coyly.

“It looks like the sort of thing you might choose to go sneaking around in. The sort of garb you
would use to sneak through dark places... passages in the Red Keep, or... tunnels? I suppose that visiting Illyrio was something you could not trust to your little birds.”

“Right as always, my lord Tyrion. It does so pain me when I cannot trust them to keep silent—”

“They have no tongues.”

“Indeed. But should they learn to read and write someday, I would not want men to trace my plots back to me.”

Tyrion frowned. “I’ll tell them, then.”

“I fear you may not survive this night, my lord. You may be consumed by the fires the mad queen Daenerys unleashes on the king’s camp. And I am afraid my little birds will not survive either. It does so pain me to end things like that, but it is all—”

“—all for the good of the realm.” Tyrion sighed. “I grew tired of your lies a long time ago, Lord Varys.”

Varys licked his lips. “I am sorry, then.”

“For what?” He snorted. “You will forgive my skepticism, but after so many years alongside you, I’m starting to think I should have trusted Littlefinger instead. You tell me all the time that you act for the good of the realm. I hope you will forgive me when I express my doubts in your goodwill.”

Varys smiled that smile of his. “And how can I convince you?”

“With the truth. If I am about to die, as you say, you have nothing to lose from me knowing your secrets.”

“The truth,” repeated Varys. “Hmm. And which truth would that be?”

“All of them, if you can. How long do we have?”

Varys walked to the porthole, and glanced out. Tyrion caught flashes of daisy-yellow light in the deep night. “Long enough,” the Spider said. “Where would you like me to begin?”

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**SER BARRISTAN II**

By the time Ser Barristan and Brown Ben Plumm returned to the encampment with Ko Rakharo, a dozen bloodriders and a hundred horsemen in tow, the battle on the river was well underway. From here they could see the flames burning among the enemy boats, and hear the sounds of swords and spears clashing. “Those are Unsullied up there, if my eyes do not lie,” said Brown Ben, pointing to the city walls, faintly visible across the river. “So, then: another battle.”
It did not feel very much like a battle, partly because the fog obscured half of it, and partly because there seemed to be a complete lack of urgency in the camp. The king and his lords had armoured themselves since he left, and someone had dutifully set out a battle map, but that seemed to be all they had done. Otherwise it seemed disconcertingly merry, as though the wedding had never really concluded. Yet whenever the mood seemed too stable, there would be the sudden whoosh of a catapult or the screech of arrows and the reminder of the battle would return.

“We have brought you the Dothraki,” Brown Ben said, rather pompously. “They are yours to command, Your Grace.”

“I doubt the Dothraki will take kindly to being commanded,” said Oberyn Martell. “I think we would be better served by letting them do as they please. It is how the horselords fight. If we can get them onto the bank, they can ride up and down in front of our lines...”

“There is the sheer momentum of the cavalry charge to be considered,” Ser Garlan Tyrell said.

Ko Aggo had entered the tent behind them. “Is not cavalry,” he said loudly. “Is Dothraki.”

Oberyn shrugged. “There you are. Let them do as they will. It is better for all of us that way.”

“Thank you, Ser Barristan,” the king said once Aggo was gone. “And you, Brown Ben. I suppose you will both be wanting to get ready for the fighting?”

“Fighting?” Selmy nodded. “An inevitability, I suppose. Might I know where in our lines you want me?”

“We had thought the vanguard would suit you best. We need someone who can inspire their men to action, and there is no one better suited than Barristan the Bold.”

And no one more likely to die, if you are putting me at the very front of this. “You do me a great honour,” Selmy said flatly.

“It is an honour well-deserved,” replied the king. “But since we are to be joining the lines soon, we cannot loiter here discussing it. You will need your armour.” He glanced about and found his squire. “Edric. Go with Ser Barristan. Find him what he needs.”

There was no way for Selmy to refuse, so he turned and followed the pale-haired Dayne boy out of the tent. And if Brown Ben is right with his talk of conspiracy, I am leaving them to discuss their plans some more.

Edric Storm joined them on the way, bringing Barristan’s armour. “It isn’t your Queensguard armour,” Selmy’s squire said, “but it was the best I could find, and it should fit you.”

“We have a few pieces back at my tent,” said Edric Dayne. “And King Aegon told me to find you a Kingsguard cloak. You should have one.” They headed back to the pavilion of the lord of Starfall, a tall plume of cream-coloured silk topped with purple flags and banners. Together the two squires dressed Barristan for battle, and Ned Dayne clasped the white cloak around his neck.

“I hope to serve in the Kingsguard someday,” said Ned to fill the awkward silence.

Selmy frowned. “But you are the lord of Starfall.”

“I know. But you were due to inherit Harvest Hall, weren’t you? And lords have given up their titles to serve in the Kingsguard before. Princes have served in the Kingsguard before.”
“Yes. And a great many of those men never quite managed to adapt to a life of pure chastity. That’s something they don’t tell you in the White Book.”

“There is honour in the Kingsguard.”

“There was,” Barristan muttered.

Edric nodded mournfully. “Ser Jaime said the same thing. He said the Kingsguard had been without honour for twenty years now.”

“Did he say that he was part of it?”

“He did. But he also said that it could be restored to honour, if... when... when the next lot of knights come in.”

“When I die, you mean.” Selmy shrugged. “I would advise you against taking lessons from the Kingslayer—”

“He’s a good man,” protested Edric. “He just lost his way, that’s all. And he only did what he had to, because King Aerys was going to burn down the city.”

*So that’s the tale he’s telling now.* Selmy nodded sagely. “Bring me my sword, please.” That was his own, at least, unlike this borrowed and mismatched armour and this white cloak that belonged to somebody else.

As he looked up, Ashara returned to the tent. “Ser Barristan,” she said, “I wonder if we might have a moment alone to talk—”

“My lady, the battle is like to start any minute.”

Sighing, Barristan waved the two boys from the tent. “What is it?” he asked Ashara.

She wavered, uncertain. “I wanted to talk to you,” she said. “I thought we would have more time, but with the battle... there are things you must know, Barristan. About Starfall and the Tower of Joy.”

“The Tower of Joy? Where is that?”

Ashara held up her hand. “I lied when I told you about returning to Aegon right away after faking my death. I trust you know the story of how House Dayne came to possess Dawn, ser?”

“I do. Arthur told me. A blade forged in the heart of a falling star.”

“A blade that made us the Swords of the Morning, and the foremost champions of light. And... a blade that will be needed in the wars to come.” So saying, she crossed the tent, knelt down beside a heavy iron chest, and unhooked a series of clasps and locks. When she opened the chest, Barristan did not even have to look to know what was inside.

“It is supposed to remain at Starfall,” Ashara said, “until the time comes for the Sword of the Morning to claim it. But these are not ordinary times. The day is coming, Barristan. I have been to Volantis and Tyrosh and Lys and Oldtown, and I have spoken to scholars from Qarth and Asshai and Yi Ti beyond that. Priests of every faith, and they all agree that the day is coming. And when it does... I fear that my nephew will have a part to play in all this. He will need to be trained.”
She was not making much sense, but Barristan went along with it. “I... I am the Lord Commander of the Queensguard. I cannot—”

“I know you value your duty,” said Ashara. “But this duty is greater, and you know it.” She leant across, and kissed him on the cheek, so fast that Barristan did not really know what had just happened. “This duty is for me.”

Down by the river, a warhorn was blowing. “I-I must go,” Selmy said. “I have to fight.”

“I know,” she said, “but you’ll come back, won’t you?” And we can be together, in a way, her eyes added. “Go now, then, my knight. Do what you do best. Be Barristan the True. Barristan the Brave. Barristan the Bold.”

DAENERYS II

Ser Jorah had wanted her to return to Maegor’s Holdfast to wait out the battle with the frightened women and children, but Dany was having none of it. “If we are to be attacked, let me look into the face of my attacker,” she said, when reports that the enemy ships had started sailing up the Blackwater came trickling in.

And so there she stood on the top of a bastion of the Red Keep, gazing down over the black river and the blacker bay. “Your Grace should be wary,” said Ser Jorah for the tenth time. “It will not be long before they start firing on your walls.”

“Let them. We will not break so easily.” She had to show strength.

“Yes. But you might.”

“Not if Drogon is on his way.” She could sense the wings of her black dragon beating through the night sky, somewhere far across the Blackwater river, near Dragonstone. When he comes, they will stand no chance at all.

Marwyn the Mage had his far-eye and was peering down over the merlon. “Ser Jorah may have the right of it, Your Grace,” the maester said. “I can see a few scorpions down there and a goodly number of catapults.”

“They intend to fight our ships,” said Dany. “Not the men on our walls. See, they are drifting up the river.” The royal fleet was moored down by the Mud Gate. Dany had no pretensions that her ships would survive the assault of their enemy, who outnumbered them nearly five times over. She had no news from the fleet on Dragonstone. If they had any sense, they would have stayed hidden in the caves and the harbor rather than fight a fleet that hugely outnumbered them.
“Can we hit them from here?” asked Dany.

Ser Jorah looked over the rampart to judge the distance. “Perhaps. Though they do seem to be skirting out of our range somewhat, down onto the southern side of the river.”

“It is worth an attempt,” Dany said.

“It is worth more than that,” replied Daario Naharis, coming up the stairs behind her. “What have we got to lose?”

Why is he here? “Where are the Stormcrows?”

“I have sent half of them down to fight by the Mud Gate. The rest are with me.”

“And why are you not at the Mud Gate?”

“I thought my sweet queen could do with a helping hand up here.”

“Your queen could do with a helping hand down there.” Dany pointed. “Tell the men that I want all the catapults firing. And you can help them out, if you like.”

Daario stepped neatly backwards. “As my queen commands.”

She watched him go. Why did it have to be tonight? Why could it not have been tomorrow, or in the past, or some other time when I did not need the loyalty of Daario Naharis? Or any sellswords, for that matter.

A boy came up to the rampart, panting after having run a long way, coughing smoke. “Message... for Your Grace... from King Aegon and Ser Barristan.”

“Spit it out,” Jorah said.

“They are attacking, trying to pin the foe between the river and your Unsullied at the Mud Gate, Your Grace. They are trying to swarm their way across onto the north bank. But the ships... there are so many of them. He has sent Brown Ben of the Second Sons and Ser Barristan to rally the Dothraki horsemen.”

That was some good news, at least. Brown Ben spoke Dothraki, and even if they did not listen to him, her bloodriders knew that Ser Barristan spoke with the queen’s voice. “Does Aegon think we will make it through?” Dany asked.

“I do not know, Your Grace,” said the boy. “But he asked... it might have been in jest... if you had any dragons. He said that they would light the whole river aflame, and they would be good for our morale, he said.”

Dany agreed. “Run back to Aegon. Tell him I intend to go to the Dragonpit and coax out Viserion and Rhaegal.” Truth be told, she was surprised they had not yet joined the battle. “And tell him that Drogon is on his way!” she called after the retreating boy. She could feel it.

“Your Grace,” said Ser Jorah when he was gone. “The city may not be safe. There will be rioting, and looting, and the sparrows are up on Rhaenys’s as well as Visenya’s—”

“If the sparrows are against us, then kill them.” It could not be more simple than that.

“Your Grace,” Jorah said again. “It is not safe for you.”
“And how else do you propose that we get the dragons, Mormont?” Daario had returned. “They only listen to the queen.”

And even then, they are stubborn. Dany remembered the last time she had visited them in the pit, and how they had snarled at her. And I cannot fly either of them. The dragon has three heads, but I can only fly one. How could she control Viserion and Rhaegal even if she managed to get them into the air?

We will cross that bridge later. Dany frowned at Daario. “I told you to stay with the catapults—”

“And they are firing. Look.” Daario pointed, and on his cue, a sergeant shouted a command and great flaming barrels of pitch were flung into the air, soaring over the wide expanse of the river and then plummeting out of sight below the walls. “Your Grace, this is no fit task for your captain. Let the Stormcrows escort you to the Dragonpit. We have had reports that the enemy is out in force there tonight.”

“Your Grace,” Jorah began. “We—”

“As you will,” Dany said. “Better than than leave the Stormcrows loitering uselessly on the walls.” And if she needed Daario later, it was better that he was not harbouring a grudge against her.

She turned to Marwyn the Mage. “Marwyn, you have a command here. Jorah, Captain Naharis and I are going to the Dragonpit.”

“Me, Your Grace?” The archmaester looked stunned.

“Yes. Is that not an iron link on the chain around your neck? Meaning you have studied warcraft.”

“A theoretical knowledge only, Your Grace. Far from experience of the few thing.”

“Marwyn, I refuse to believe that in all your years of travelling, you have not seen your fair share of wars.” By then Dany was already leaving. They went down to the armory, where she donned black ringmail and scaled plates over her shoulders and breasts, and a narrow, round-domed helmet. Then she saddled and mounted her silver, the horse that had been Drogo’s gift from so long ago. It made her feel brave, as though her sun-and-stars were still riding alongside her. With Jorah at her right and Daario on her left, the Stormcrows and her guards following behind, they set out down Aegon’s High Hill. Behind her, the ground was thundering and crashing with the sounds of great stones being hurled at the Red Keep and over the city walls. Unsullied battalions marched in double-time down the streets. And Jorah had not been wrong about the rioting; Dany saw smashed windows and burning structures, and freedmen and sellswords throwing punches at each other. A heavy fog had settled; through it she could see something burning.

“Flea Bottom,” Ser Jorah intoned heavily. Indeed, the slum that clung to the slopes of Rhaenys’s Hill appeared to have been consumed by the conflagration.

In the square outside the Guildhall of the Alchemists, they found a large battalion of Unsullied blocking all of the roadways. When Dany rode up, she was surprised to see that it was Grey Worm who led them. She said, “I thought you were out by the Mud Gate.”

“These ones were,” said Grey Worm. “But then this one heard that there were attackers inside the city. This one has left his brother Solemn Sword to lead the Unsullied outside the city walls to come and investigate. We are winning the battle outside the walls, Your Grace, but inside the city it is different. This one thought it was a matter of urgent importance that the dragons are not threatened.”

“Threatened?” Dany asked, frowning.
“You have not heard? The sparrows are swarming up the street to the Dragonpit. These ones have barricaded Visenya’s Hill and the Great Sept, but in the slums and alleys of the city there are still fires and riots, and some of the sparrows have made it up into Rhaenys’s District...”

Like the ones we saw in Flea Bottom. “We must see to this,” Dany said. “Though at the same time, I cannot help but think you would serve us better back at the Mud Gate.”

“Then who will lead the defense of Rhaenys’s Hill?” asked Ser Jorah.

Daario smiled, his gold tooth flashing. “Who do you think?”

It was another moment before Jorah understood. “Cannot? Oh, I certainly can, and I will. This is no different to the battles we fought in Slaver’s Bay. And the blood of the dragon does not fear the pecking of sparrows.”

“Your Grace, it could be—”

“Don’t lecture me on how war is dangerous.” She turned the silver away from him. “Grey Worm, send your men back to the Mud Gate, they need you to command there. Ser Jorah, Daario, with me.”

TYRION II

The truth. That was all Tyrion Lannister had ever wanted from Varys. Where do you want me to begin?

He had a long think about it. Tysha. It was always Tysha, and it always would be. Where do whores go? Tyrion took a breath. “When the queen sent me to Braavos, you said—”

“It was the queen who sent you to Braavos, but it was me who suggested it. Do you think it was merely pure chance that you met Illyrio there? Merely pure chance that you uncovered such a vast and expansive conspiracy against our noble sovereign?”

“No. You wanted me to find it.”

“I wanted you to join it, truth be told. Give a man a sheep and he becomes a shepherd. Give a dwarf a bag of gold and... well, he has the chance to be loved, to be what he has always wanted to be.”

“You don’t know what I want.”

“Oh, I do. You are a simple man, Lord Tyrion, try as you might to and delude yourself otherwise. Wine, wealth, women. Simple pleasures for simple men. If I were feeling charitable, I might throw a few books in there too, but I wager your appetite for literature pales in the face of your other appetites.”
Tyrion swallowed and said nothing. *Let him continue with his smug revelations*, he decided. *He may yet make a mistake.*

“I thought you would take the gold and join Illyrio’s side. Unfortunately, Ferrego Antaryon rather overcomplicated things, and then you pulled your trick from the Blackwater. Not that it mattered. If anything, removing a few grasping hands from the table – a third of the Braavosi fleet, for example – benefitted our cause quite nicely. But nevermind that. Here we are.” Varys flashed a sickly grin.

“All very good,” said Tyrion, “but you never answered my question. You said that in Braavos, I would find out where whores go. What did you mean?”

“Whore,” said Varys.

“What?”

“You were not looking for whores. You were looking for one in particular. A whore whom you suspect might not be a whore at all. The tale is more widely known than you might realise. The Imp married a whore to spite his lord father, and after, Lord Tywin made him watch while an entire guard barracks took their turns raping her. And the Imp went last, and paid her with a golden coin instead of silver when he raped her, because he was a Lannister, and Lannisters were worth more.” When Varys looked up, his eyes were damp with false tears. “It is a sad story, but, alas, one that is not quite as unique as you might think. Unless your theory turns out to be true, and she never was a whore at all. Unless she was just a poor crofter’s daughter who climbed into bed with the wrong man. Unless she fled to King’s Landing with the intent of getting onto the first ship she could find and sailing away to live a life of luxury with the golden coins she had earned. But alas, someone stole most of her money in the night, and the next morning’s ship to Braavos was the only one she could afford after that.”

Varys raised an eyebrow. “Let’s have a deal, my lord,” he said quietly. “A truth for a truth, that’s fair, isn’t it? So tell me about this whore of yours. Tell me why you thought she wasn’t a whore.” He walked to the porthole again. Tyrion glanced round, wondering if there was a knife somewhere he could use to stab the eunuch in the back.

But of course there wasn’t. Tyrion sighed resignedly. “My story is shorter than yours, Varys,” he said. “And more bitter.” And it was. “I thought she loved me.”

Varys came and sat back down, now carrying a ewer of water in his hands. Tyrion did not know where he had found it, and did not ask. Varys filled both cups. They both drank. They both sat in silence.

“Tysha.”

Varys glanced up.

“Her name was Tysha. Did you know that?”

Varys nodded.

A pause.

“Was that your question?” asked Varys.

“No.” Tyrion sipped his water. “My question is why?”

“Why what?”
“Why did you go to all this trouble? Because I think you’ve had this all planned for a very long time. Aegon and Daenerys, the return of the Targaryens, right down to the very tiniest detail. Me. Why bother? If you were truly working for the realm, why would you throw it into such turmoil? What is your goal?”

Varys smiled, tightlipped. “Which question are you asking?”

“I am asking why.”

The eunuch smiled. “Then I will tell you. And perhaps you will understand. You do not know it, Lord Tyrion, but I have familial loyalties, just like you.”

“I have no family to be loyal to. They are all fled, or dead.” He thought of Jaime, far away beneath distant stars. *He lied to me about Tysha.* He forced himself to swallow the bile rising in his throat, swallowed it down with a sip of bitter water. *I thought Father might have lied, but never Jaime.*

“I never planned for you to be released from your cell in King’s Landing when Joffrey was murdered, you know. But neither did I plan to let you die in darkness. In hindsight, that might have been a wise move. The Red Viper would have fought for you in your inevitable trial by combat, and that would overcomplicate things between Dorne and the Iron Throne more quickly than I could deal with.”

“The past is the past,” Tyrion said acidly. “You mentioned family loyalties. To which family? The Targaryens? Forgive me if I do not believe you. My brother always said that you played a part in sending Aerys spiralling further and further into his madness.”

Varys smiled. “Yes. And now that same madness has manifested itself in our sweet Queen Daenerys, who will soon perish in fire and blood, along with thousands of her people. But what is the cost of thousands of people against a kingdom?” He caught Tyrion’s look. “Oh, look upon me with horror if you must, but don’t forget your hypocrisy. You did the same at the Blackwater. You lost your nose for it, but if the gods truly judged our sins justly, you would have lost your life.”

Tyrion thought of the long days after the battle he had spent feverishly dreaming of Tysha, barely clinging to reality. *I was closer to death than you might think, Varys. But I could not have been further from justice.*

Instead he said, “If you don’t serve the Targaryens, then who?” He stopped himself.

Varys turned away from the porthole and smiled. “In a coat of gold, in a coat of red, a lion still has claws. Your father dispensed with the Reynes in an act of merciless injustice, but there are more accusations to see Lord Tywin safely through to hell. Some might call him a kinslayer, for example.”

“The Reynes might have been descended from the bastard sons of the Kings of the West,” said Tyrion, who had heard that story. And where the Lannisters had the Reynes, the Targaryens had the Blackfyres.”

“*Have,* my lord. They *have* the Blackfyres. In a coat of red, in a coat of black, a dragon still has claws.”

*And mine are long and sharp, my lord, as long and sharp as yours.*

“But none of that matters here,” Varys stated. “Since Daenerys was born of Aerys and Rhaella, and Aegon is the son of Elia Martell and our beloved Prince Rhaegar Targaryen.”

“Oh, is he?” His suspicions were rising.
“A question for a question, my lord. Now it is my turn.”

Tyrion grudgingly acquiesced to that. “Ask.”

“Did you find out about the boy?”

“What?”

That smile of Varys’s was more smug than ever. “Your little squire.”

“Numbers. My uncle Gerion’s son. But you knew that all along, didn’t you?”

“Is that your question?” Varys asked.

Tyrion cast his mind back. “He said there was a man who took him. A man whose face he never saw... and if your links with the Golden Company go back as far as I think they do, then... how much of this did you plan, Varys? And why? What does the boy mean to you?”

“There may come a time when King Aegon needs a loyal lord to serve him in Casterly Rock. And since it cannot be you, why not him?”

“The boy is baseborn, Varys, and unacknowledged. He comes behind me and my siblings, behind Uncle Kevan and his sons, behind even his half-sister Joy, behind everyone. He has no claim on the Rock that the Westerlords will accept. And besides, how do you intend to get my sister to leave the safety of Casterly Rock? I told your king that it can withstand a siege for years.”

“I am not relying on your sister, my lord. Cersei is more predictable than she thinks, but not predictable enough for me to rely on her. No, I am relying on sweet Tommen’s naivety to prevail, as it did when he released you from prison. But you are asking far too many questions. Allow me to reply with one of my own. Do you perchance recall the riddle I gave you when you became Hand of the King?”

“A king, a septon and a rich man walk into a room,” Tyrion recited boredly. “Between them lies a common sellsword. Each of the great men bids the sellsword kill the other two. Who lives, who dies?”

“And I said ‘power resides where men believes it resides.’ So tell me this, Lord Tyrion, where does power reside now?”

“I am tired of riddles.”

“Power does not lie with any of them. It lies with the man who stands behind the sellsword, whispering the answer in his ear and insisting that it is true.”

He was telling Tyrion something there, but he did not know what. Outside, another bright burst of fire filled the sky. “It is time now, I think,” Varys said. “Time for us to leave. Go and fetch your little friends from their cabin, Lord Tyrion. Because very soon, it will begin. And we will take back our heart’s desire.”

He had to ask. “And what is your heart’s desire?”

Magister Illyrio appeared behind him in the doorway. “Vengeance,” he said. “Justice. Blood and fire.” He curled his lips. “Come now, Lord Tyrion. A horn is about to blow, the battle is about to change, and there is something I need you to see.”
SER BARRISTAN III

All he could hear was the sound of drums. Whatever little order the battle once had was now reduced to a confusion of fire and blood. Ser Barristan Selmy stumbled forwards, leaning awkwardly on the pommel of his sword, each step twinged with pain. Clouds of smoke and fire drifted down over the battlefield, seemingly without end.

The Dothraki were thundering past on his left, still ahorse; Edric Storm, dismounted, was closer by his side. Somewhere over to the right was the other Edric, Ashara’s nephew, and King Aegon on his courser, banners of red silk or maybe fire streaming behind him and his men.

Selmy brought his sword up to block an axe swinging through the smoke, forced the weapon off and brought his blade back through his foe’s throat, all without stopping. “Forwards!” he shouted to the men around him, not knowing if any of them could hear him.

They were on their way down to the river now. The grass beneath his boots changed to wet river mud. The rain against his face tasted of salt and grit and blood. His horse had fallen on the ridge, breaking both its front legs; Selmy had been forced to put the poor animal out of its misery.

Out on the river, the ships of the Braavosi had turned towards the city walls, and their catapults and trebuchets were throwing great loads of red fire against the stones of King’s Landing. Barristan made his way to where Edric Storm and Edric Dayne stood watching agape at the top of the hill. “We need to get back into the walls!” he shouted. If they could get enough men onto the north bank with Grey Worm and the Unsullied while Aegon’s attack continued from the south, they could put trap the foe between them.

The Baratheon boy nodded first. “But how are we going to get through, ser?” Between here and there the battlefield was a desolation of blood and fire. Aegon’s banners bobbed as they descended into the valley. Hoofbeats thundered past, left and right. The ships on the river turned to face the new enemy, and men jumped from the rails and came leaking out of the hold, making a sodden march up onto the river. Ser Barristan turned round, again and again. A small band of men was forming up around him: Darkstar Dayne, Ser Reynard Morrigen, Lord Gargalen... and Ser Garlan Tyrell. Selmy was thankful for the presence of the last. A man I can talk with.

“Ser Garlan!” He had to shout over the raging noise of the flames below. “Do you think we can get our men round onto the riverfront? We can flank them up the left side! Use the trees as cover!”

Tyrell nodded. “As you say, ser.” He had a score of his brother’s men with him, knights and men-at-arms both. “Follow Ser Barristan!” he commanded. As one they set off down the steep hill into the wood, Selmy noticed something odd. During most of his battles, he had never felt so alive, with the blood rushing through his veins and his head pounding with the sound of drums... whereas here, he felt strangely cold inside. With each step through the woods he became more and more aware that he was the oldest man here. I have seen enough of this, he thought. By all rights, this should be my last battle. And perhaps it would be.
But he would not give up now, could not give up now. My queen needs me. The realm needs me. I have a duty. Same as anybody else. Selmy turned his sword over in his hand, fixed his helmet back onto his head. He turned to give Edric Storm a reassuring look; this was the lad’s first battle, and he was nervous despite the brave look he put on, sweating beneath his helm. Barristan tried to think back to his first battle, to the first time he had swung a sword in earnest, to the first man he had killed.

He did not remember it.

Selmy and Ser Garlan were not alone in leading their men through the trees. By the time they broke through and out onto the beachfront, there were a hundred men behind them, two hundred, and knights bearing down ahorse in the wings. The woods fell away behind them, the dark shadows of the trees replaced by the flaming lights from the river. The ships were launching flaming rocks and scorpion bolts across the water now; a nearby payload burst against the ground in front of him, sending a spray of blood and entrails into the air. Corpses, he thought, reeling away, they are flinging corpses too.

He did not have much time to think about it before he was among them. Selmy’s sword slashed left and right, whistling as it cut down one man and another. Edric Storm circled in front of him, swinging his sword two-handed as his father had once swung his warhammer. Edric Dayne was spry and quick, darting in and out. King Robert and Ser Arthur, Selmy thought, briefly pausing to watch them fight. I am among ghosts. He must have seemed a ghost himself, or would have done had he worn his white cloak.

The smoke was rising over the river. Some of their enemy’s ships were starting to burn, great purple banners coming down in tangled, smoking messes. It was beauty. It was ecstasy. It was horror. The corpses flying everywhere, the crows overhead in the mist and rain, and the knowing that he was just some tiny speck of dust in the midst of it all. “The other bank!” Selmy shouted. “We need to get across the river!”

Garlan Tyrell rallied to him. “We can use the ships as a bridge! Like we did when we fought Stannis!” He pointed Barristan onwards. “That way, ser!”

They moved through the foe’s lines like a knife through butter. The flanking attack took the enemy sellswords unaware, and they splintered, falling apart at the seams, fleeing back into the fight or away into the forest. There were horses gone mad, men gone madder; every scream was the song of war, the song Selmy hated. But all he could do was keep going. A spearmen nicked him in the leg, and Edric Storm stabbed him through the back; Selmy returned the favour by drawing his dirk and slamming it into the chest of Edric’s man as he climbed back to his feet. He lost Edric Dayne in the haze, and Ser Garlan, and found Ser Daemon Sand, and Prince Oberyn, and lost them all over again. The enemy had formed a shield wall, but Selmy and his men went at it again and again, and eventually one of their foe’s catapults misplaced a rock and the line went in two and they were through. An arrow caught Ser Jon Fossoway in the eye, he went down screaming; now they were climbing over bodies, more bodies, flaming bodies and smoking bodies. Barristan slew one of the enemy flagbearers; the man slipped down the pile of corpses and his flag burst into flames. What are we attacking now?

A horn blast blew, somewhere out over the river, cutting through the din of battle, so ludicrously, frighteningly loud. No doubt the enemy sounding out a signal. The river. Yes, the river. And the bridge of ships. Selmy thought he glimpsed Ser Garlan Tyrell there in the darkness, wandered towards him. And closer by, was that Lord Gargalen, standing up on that hill? Barristan coughed out smoke. “My lord! My lord!” He staggered up the hill. His head was throbbing.

Gargalen turned to him. His eyes brightened with recognition. “Lord Gargalen,” Selmy blurted out,
“we need to get to the shi—”

“My lord!” Edric Storm grabbed his shoulder and all but threw him backwards; Gargalen’s axe came down a moment later where Barristan’s head had been. What? When he struggled to his feet, Edric and the Dornishman were fighting atop the mound of bodies, Gargalen’s dirk heading down towards the squire’s throat. Not understanding, only acting, Selmy picked up his longsword and lunged, catching Lord Gargalen in the back, knocking him down from the pile.

Gargalen’s men turned to them, five of them; Selmy went left, brought his sword up in an arc that broke through his foe’s guard. He slammed the second man with his shoulder and knocked him down. A horse smashed into the man as he fell, breaking him into chunks of bloody pulp. Three men to go, two, then one. Edric Storm climbed up from the pile, breathing heavy, blood spatters on his face.

“Lord Gargalen’s men have turned,” said Selmy, “and some others, I do not doubt. We should tell King Aegon.”

“No, my lord.”

“What?”

“Look!” Edric pointed into the smoke. A Dothraki horseman came hurtling through... and heading for him, one of Aegon’s Kingsguard knights on his white horse. The two came together with sword and arakh... each of them going for the kill. “We’re betrayed.” The words came out of Selmy in a rasp. “The queen—”

“It’s the king you should be worried about,” said Edric. “We’re... the queen’s army are across the river, aren’t they?”

Selmy understood at once. “You think we can get through unnoticed?”

Edric picked up Lord Gargalen’s cloak. “It’s a good thing you aren’t wearing your Kingsguard armour, my lord.”

“So what do we do?”

“We try and get to King Aegon, my lord. And then... and then... well, if he has betrayed Daenerys, he wants the throne for himself... if you... if you...”

Edric was right. Selmy nodded. “This was inevitable, I suppose.” The Iron Throne is only meant to seat one. He fastened Lord Gargalen’s cloak around his shoulders, yellow with a red cockatrice on the back that almost looked like the Targaryen dragon. So I must seek Aegon. And then... I must kill Rhaegar’s son.

He turned to Edric, who had also donned one of the yellow cloaks. “We will never make it back to Grey Worm,” he said, looking across the burning river. “So, then. There is only one thing for it.”

“Find Aegon.” Edric nodded. “And then...”

Barristan would not say the words. Perhaps that would make it easier when the time came.
As they got closer to the Dragonpit, Dany could smell the smoke from Flea Bottom burning down below. Shortly after that, the sparrows began to make themselves known; the biggest crowd had gathered in a plaza outside the Dragonpit. The drums which marked the steady, united march of the Unsullied began to dwindle beneath the shouts and rumbling chatter of the gathered sparrows.

“They are clamouring around the entrance,” Daario observed. “If you want, we can clear them out of the way and occupy them while you get inside.” He said this an oddly reserved fashion, lacking his usual heroic flamboyancy.

But Dany was not complaining. Perhaps I have succeeded in beating Daario down, for now. “As you will,” she said, reining up on the other side of the square. Ser Jorah and two score Unsullied fell into formation around her. Dany watched from a safe distance as Daario’s Stormcrows smashed into the ranks of sparrows, beating them back across the square, forcing them away from the entrance to the Dragonpit and into the fight. When the way was clear of sparrows, Ser Jorah said “Now!”, and the Unsullied hurried forward, shielding Dany from rocks and arrows through the drifting smoke. In the vast mouth of the entrance she jumped down from her silver and they proceeded into the pit on foot, with Ser Jorah leading the way. A few sparrows tried to stop them, but then they were through the heavy iron doors of the pit and among the Unsullied defenders.

The captain of the Unsullied here was called Askah, and he commanded around a hundred Unsullied whose duty it was to defend the dragons. Right now the better part of his force were outside the gates helping Daario and the Stormcrows, but he gave Dany an escort of ten to take her down to the Dragonpit proper.

It was dark down here at night, and the shadows cast by their torches only emphasized how small and insignificant they were with the weight of so many years of Targaryen history above their heads. There were huge stone statues in the atrium, worn away by years of snow and rain, but there they stood, even now. This place was filled with ghosts. In places, Dany could have sworn she heard the pitter-patter of children’s feet against the rough stone. And once, she glimpsed saw a shadow running through the darkness. It is nothing, she told herself, it is no surprise that there are beggar children living down here.

Then all at once the darkness was behind them, and the dusky bowl of the pit floor was before her, supported on all sides by tall and crumbling pillars. The ceiling had been ornately carved once, but in times gone by it had collapsed, and now the rain and fog was leaking in. Dany could see the smoke from the battle outside rising through the holes in the roof, blocking out the starry night.

The Dragonpit was huge, big enough for twenty dragons or more. It was a while before she saw Rhaegal and Viserion at all, curled up in a shadowy part of the pit. “There,” Dany said, pointing. She reached down and pulled off her sandals, tossed them into a heap. The sand and dirt was hot beneath her bare feet. “Let me go alone,” she said, warding her protectors back.

“Khaleesi—,” Ser Jorah started, reaching for her arm.

“Let me go alone.”
Ser Jorah backed away from her, staying with the Unsullied. Dany went away from him and Moqorro and the others. From the edge, the floor of the pit curved downwards like a bowl, into deepening darkness. She could hear scales dragging over the sand, and caught the glare of a bright golden eye. Her breath rasped in her throat. “Viserion...” and then, seeing the glitter of emerald scales, “…Rhaegal.”

The two dragons turned their heads slowly towards her. Their coils entwined in and out of each other in magnificent spirals. Dany took another step closer; those eyes blinked brightly. “Viserion, Rhaegal,” she said again, “we need to—”

A great burst of flames flew from Rhaegal’s maw, much closer to her face than Dany had been anticipating. Viserion stirred his huge wings; she felt the wind scratch her face. The queen took a step back. “You need to go,” she said. “We need—” She trailed off. Viserion and Rhaegal were no longer as biddable as they had once been. Their time in chains under the Great Pyramid of Meereen had given them an understandable suspicion of Dany. Yet... if they had despised their imprisonment, why had they been so keen to return to this lair in the dark?

Dany decided that she would try and flank them. That way, I might be able to get them moving. She had no plans after that, but there was no point in making them until she could get Viserion and Rhaegal to stand up. She walked round to Rhaegal’s left. “Come on,” she whispered, “come on, come on, follow my hand, into the middle, go on, go on...” He was rising on his haunches now, eyes following her hungrily.

Would that I had a piece of bait... other than myself.

She stepped towards Rhaegal... and something made her duck down inexplicably; flames burst above her head, scorching the back wall. Dany stumbled under it and rolled backwards. Rhaegal rose half a foot into the air, flapping his wings. Underneath him she saw a glimmer... and then she understood. Eggs. Marwyn mentioned breeding cycles. That’s why they haven’t left the Dragonpit. That’s why they made their lair here, in a place that is safe and warm and dark. They are protecting their eggs. There was a mad rumbling; the floor shook.

Ser Jorah had joined her on the pit floor, despite her protestations, his sword drawn to protect her. Viserion saw the glimmer of steel and advanced towards it. “Put your blade away, ser!” Dany screamed. Ser Jorah backed away... but then a silvery spear flew out from behind the Unsullied shields and bounced off the ground near Dany. Jorah pulled her aside. “Back!” he was shouting at her, “Your Grace, they’re attacking, we need...”

Viserion and Rhaegal advanced into the middle of the pit. Now the spears flew at them. Dany wanted to run to them, but Ser Jorah held her back. The dragons went forwards, the ranks of Unsullied parting as they approached. The sparrows and the enemy soldiers ducked under the burst of flames - were those Braavosi soldiers? Dany could not tell – and some burned and screamed and died.

The spears flew one way; the dragonfire the other, yellow and purple and veined with red sparks. Then Daario’s riders were coming through the tunnel, the banners of the Stormcrows dragging behind them, down on the enemy... and then riding past them. Dany could only watch in horror as they circled round her dragons, throwing spears, and went through her waves of Unsullied, knocking over their shields. She saw Daario at the last moment, bearing down on her; Ser Jorah knocked them both into the dust, and his arakh passed over her. When she made it to her feet again, she could feel blood trickling from a deep cut on her hand. That would have taken my head off, was her first thought. Then she realised that Daario had tried to kill her.

Three treasons you will know...

There was no time to think about it now, though. The Stormcrows were riding round the pit, darting
in to slash at her dragons, and Viserion and Rhaegal were under the onslaught of them, and the pillars of the pit were cracking and the ceiling was rumbling and the ground below them too, and Daario was coming round for a second pass—

*You don’t want to wake the dragon, do you?* The voice came from somehow deep inside Dany. It sounded like Viserys. A moment later, she knew. She broke from Ser Jorah’s grasp, dragging the knight with her, moving towards the centre of the pit. A bare instant later, Drogon crashed down through the roof above where she had been standing. Stone and moonlight spilled over her; Dany fell onto her back, bruised.

Above her, Drogon and Rhaegal and Viserion stood as one, blowing black and red and yellow fire into the night, ignoring the spears that pinned them. Viserion was flapping above the ground now, beating vast cream wings. *Leave this place,* the voice told Dany. *Leave them all behind.* She followed without question. Viserion rose, and Rhaegal made to follow, out of the gap in the pit. Dany clung to Drogon, grabbing hold of a scale. *Quickly, now!* She could not say why she was rushing, but she was. Her sweaty hands kept slipping off Drogon’s back, but with Ser Jorah’s help she made it up.

There came a vast rumbling boom from below them, and Dany knew that the Dragonpit was falling apart, that the floor was caving in, that the hell-pit beneath the earth was calling for her, and that she must leave now, or die. *Valahd,* she thought, and Drogon rose. Somehow she still had hold of Jorah’s hand, and the next thing she knew it was both of them on Drogon’s back and the Dragonpit was burning up beneath them, and then the city, all of it going up in bright emerald flames, Daario and Grey Worm and all her Unsullied, fire consuming the Dragonpit and three hundred years of Targaryen history and them flying up and up and away from it all. Clouds closed behind him, and King’s Landing was disappearing.

Ser Jorah was breathless. “*Khaleesi,*” he said, “Daenerys. That... that was wildfire, was it not?”

*Are you fazed by it? Thousands have burned already.* “It was,” she said, “though I do not understand how.” And then, just like that, she did. “Tunnels under the city,” Dany shouted over the wind. “And jars in the pit itself. They could not kill my dragons with fire, but... if they have burned all the city, they will have taken thousands of the Unsullied—”

“And they could have taken you,” said Ser Jorah.

Drogon let out a shrill wail. Dany turned to look back at his flank, feathered with spears. “He is hurt,” she said, “the spears...” There was one stuck just inside her reach. Dany grasped the haft with one hand, and gave it a sudden yank. Drogon wailed again, and began to descend, down towards the Blackwater river; for a brief time, he was out of her control, and all Dany could do was hold on tightly.

As she went lower, Rhaegal and Viserion came up behind her on the flanks, the green dragon on her left, the white dragon on her right. Both were wounded by the spears. Both had their wings outspread. And both were awaiting the commands of their mother.

The Blackwater Rush was spreading out in front of them, hundreds of grey ships like ghosts on the foggy water. *The ships of my enemy.* There was only one thing for it. Dany could see their iron-tipped ballistae, their catapults with their flaming rocks, firing on the city walls. She and Drogon plummeted lower and lower and lower. “*Khaleesi,*” said Ser Jorah. “*Khaleesi,* be careful.”

*I am the blood of the dragon,* Dany thought. *This is what I was born to do.* They got so low that Drogon’s feet skimmed the water before they pulled out of the dive, and then they were soaring through the ships, rolling left and right, and the ballistae were too late, the bolts were falling behind
They rose sharply again; behind them, the three dragons left a trail of blazing hulks and burning, screaming men. Dany steered Drogon to the right, back over the walls of King’s Landing. The Dragonpit on Rhaenys’s Hill was still belching out massive plumes of greenish-black smoke. But it was Visenya’s Hill she headed for, where the last of the sparrows stood gathered on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor, looking up into the night as death descended upon them.

Death opened its mouth and fire burst first. The marble statue of Baelor the Blessed became a messy blob of stone. In seconds all seven towers of the sept were afire, and then the great stone ceiling was caving inwards, coming down in a confusion of rubble, burying hundreds beneath it. Dany pulled up sharply again, the three dragons ascending in a line, up into the stars.

“Where now?” asked Ser Jorah, as Drogon’s wing inclined, turning them in a sharp bend to the left, back towards the battlefield.

“Aegon has betrayed me,” said Dany. “Not just Daario Naharis.”

“Your Grace, you cannot know that—”

“I can. See down there.” She pointed vaguely. “The Braavosi are fighting alongside his men.” She knew Ser Jorah could not see it, but who was he to argue?

Drogon folded his wings again, and went into a dive. “Slowly,” Dany said, “slowly.” She did not want to end up burning her own men.

“Wait,” said Ser Jorah, tapping her shoulder. “Down below, Your Grace. The Dothraki are charging. If we come down at the right time, we can hit them together.”

“You may have a point,” Dany admitted, slowing down. “If I land, we can see who is in charge—”

AAAAAARRRRREEEEEEEEEEsaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.

The sound was like the dying shriek of some long-tortured beast, so shrill it burned her ears. Drogon writhed in the air, and behind her she could see Viserion and Rhaegal doing the same, trying to resist that call and failing. They were losing altitude again, the city was appearing beneath them. Up, Dany willed Drogon, up and away. But whatever command she had over Drogon was fading away. Come, said a voice, come to me. Come to me, and be my dragon. And she knew that voice.

SER BARRISTAN IV

The piles of bodies had built up into a maze around them, a maze where Dothraki horsemen and armoured knights could thunder around the corner without a moment’s warning, where the Unsullied and the Windblown fought with King Aegon’s infantry in merciless battles of blood and fire. And
were those dragons overhead? Selmy could no longer make sense of anything.

A quarrel whistled past him into the chest of a man coming down the slope beside him. Barristan raised the Tyrell shield he had picked up, not wanting to be picked off either accidentally or on purpose. The smoke was hot and heavy around their heads; they had to keep low to get through. Rain was blowing into their eyes from the east. “This way, ser!” Edric yelled into his face, black hair flying wildly.

Selmy followed; he tasted the blood, the bodies, and now the battle fever, finally the battle fever. “There!” Edric pointed into the bloody darkness. Like some cruel twist of fate, the enamelled armour of the Kingsguard made the king’s presence obvious. Barristan curled his gauntlet into a fist. *I must do this,* he thought.

They plunged on, down towards the beach; all the grass was gone beneath them, leaving only wet mud threatened to make them stick. It was now impossible to tell who was on which side, so they fought everyone who sought to stop them, sellsword and man-at-arms and knight alike, Aegon’s man or Daenerys’s. The king could not be far now. All they had to do was follow the sound of the wailing horn.

As they headed out towards a piece of open ground, Edric shouted a warning. “Dragon, my lord!” They threw themselves flat on the ground; a moment later a black shadow swooped low across their vision, and the night turned angry and red with fire. When Barristan looked up again, grey ash was settling over the beach, and the blackened bones of dying men remained standing like statues, and then toppled into dust. The hills of corpses melted together in the fire. *It is like Aegon the Conqueror and the Field of Fire,* Barristan thought. He found his feet and dragged Edric up too. The horn was still wailing; one of the dragons was writhing in mid-air; he could not tell which one from here. Ser Barristan blinked soot from his eyes and brushed it from his armour. “Seven hells,” he said aloud. “Seven bloody hells.”

Edric stared out, aghast. “I know, my lord.”

“We need to end this,” Selmy said emptily, starting forwards again. They climbed over the top of one flaming wall. A burning man came running at them, wielding the burning Targaryen flag like a spear. Selmy parried his blow and kicked him down the hill, where he shrivelled up in a blazing heap. The air stank of burning flesh.

Selmy turned his back, to make it look like he was retreating into Aegon’s camp, and Edric did the same. By some mercy of the gods, the king’s men saw their cloaks and let them pass through. That was it; Edric was whooping in delight, though no one heard him.

“The king.” Selmy shook his shoulders. “He’ll be at the middle!” Together they went forwards, ducking down and away, retreating. Sergeants went forwards screaming orders, archers fired arrows high, scorpions and catapults through fiery loads into the night in doomed attempts to bring down the dragons. No one noticed Ser Barristan and his squire moving through.

Edric saw the king first, pointing with his sword. “There’s the Kingsguard, ser, and there...” Barristan squinted and made out the figure of the king, standing among his guards. He saw the banners of Targaryen, Martell, Dayne – how many hours had passed since he looked into Ashara’s eyes? Had that memory been real at all? – and Tyrell. They were hemmed in by the fire all around, and backing through the press meant he bumped into men with every step he took. None of them paid him any attention.

He could see King Aegon and Lord Connington clearly now. The king had a horn at his lips, runes glowing on the wood every time he sounded it. Beside him stood the squire Edric Dayne, Ser Garlan
Tyrell and Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell, with his spear. They were all looking up into the sky.

Ser Barristan followed their gaze, and saw, with mild shock, that the dragons overhead were writhing in mad pain at each horn blast, as though trying to rid themselves of flies. Fire burst from their jaws in intermittent, uncontrollable bursts, igniting the trees and the grasses and the men on the battlefield below. *Fire and blood.*

“How are we going to get to them?” Edric Storm whispered. “I could—”

*There is only one way,* Selmy knew. “Wait.” He laid a hand on Edric’s shoulder. His heart was beating ever faster. *I can get through them,* he thought. He would hate to force his way to the king through Edric Dayne, but he fancied his chances with the squire better than he did with any of the others. *And then...* He locked his fingers around the sword hilt, turned his head... and saw a ghost in the crowd.

“The dragon has three heads,” said Prince Rhaegar Targaryen, who had been his king. He wore the armour he had died in at the Trident. *The dragon must have three heads, Barristan.*

Selmy knew Rhaegar’s apparition was not real. But he looked real. “You would do the same, if I were here. You would do this to save the Seven Kingdoms.”

*The boy is my son, Barristan.* Behind him stood a shimmering faint figure that might have been Elia Martell.

“It is your sister who will accomplish the legacy of dragons,” he murmured back. “And she is my queen.”

*Would you give up this chance at your dreams?* That was Ser Arthur Dayne, the sword Dawn in his hands. *My sister expected differently of you, Barristan. As did I.*

Why was he the only one who had chosen Daenerys over Aegon? Lord Connington, Ashara Dayne, Ser Richard Lonmouth—all of them had chosen Aegon, leaving only him with his queen.

*I swore a vow. I will not break it.*

“Oh, you will.” The last face belonged to Ser Jaime Lannister, as young as he had been before the Tourney at Harrenhal. *You will become a Kingslayer, Selmy, same as I. I’ve longed for such esteemable company. Kingslayer and Kingslayer. I’ve longed to see you become a hypocrite, too.*

“This is different.” Selmy had never felt more weary. “I have to do this.”

“As did I.”

The ghosts faded away. “Ser,” said Edric, nudging him. “It’s time... the dragon’s coming.”

So it was. Drogon was coming down low, his jaws peeling back... for a brief moment as he entered the moonlight, Ser Barristan was certain he glimpsed a pale-haired girl clinging to his back. *Daenerys.* Then the moment was gone, and the black wings spread wide, and the fierce glare of fire went up, and Barristan Selmy and Edric Storm burst through the line, swords out, mud churning beneath their boots as they sprinted across the gap—

Suddenly the woods broke open with blaring horns and trumpets and two score horsemen crashed through the trees, spears and swords pointed out. Selmy would have fallen under their hooves had Edric Storm not dived aside and knocked him down. Even then, he felt the hoofbeats right by his head, crashing down, mud in his face. He blinked up blearily and saw the pennants of the Second
Sons, broken swords, dozens, hundreds, a thousand of them, crashing into the enemy lines. “Come on!” Edric was shouting, tugging on his arm. “Get up, get up!” Blearily, Barristan made it to one knee, then up to his feet. “They’re distracted!”

So they were. Both Aegon and his defenders had turned their backs to face the onslaught of the Dothraki. Barristan glimpsed Brown Ben Plumm climbing the hill, and Kasprio the Cunning, and — was that the dwarf, Tyrion Lannister? — as Edric manoeuvred him across the torn ground where the horses had stampeded, up towards the commanders on the hill. Another horn blasted through the night, and then there were more horses, Dothraki with their arakhs and the Windblown, with the Tattered Prince leading, his raggy coat streaming behind him.

Ser Barristan took up his sword. King Aegon had his back turned. Now, it must be now, you must, you must... He took one step, two steps, a third—

“Ser, look out!”

“Your Grace!”

Barristan caught Prince Oberyn’s downswing on his sword, forcing the spear away from his helmet, and advanced, one slash and another. Edric had turned to engage King Aegon in single combat, but Selmy was too preoccupied to look. Oberyn jabbed towards him; he had to throw himself almost off balance to get out of the way.

Selmy beat off the blows, trying to find his opponent’s weakness. Prince Oberyn was younger than him, quicker and more agile... but also prone to arrogance. As he danced back, Oberyn called out to him, “I have always wanted to spar with you, ser,” he said, “a shame it has to be like this.”

“Yes,” said Selmy. “A shame indeed.”

Oberyn feinted left; the spear went right. But Barristan had been expecting that, and caught the blade on his own, forced it off with an almighty effort. Oberyn stumbled a little, but leaned on his spear and leapt back up. Around them the battle was raging, horses, men, swords, arrows, screams. His spear is coated with poison, Selmy thought, as the Red Viper pressed another assault. One scratch from that, and I am dead...

It was time for him to change tack. This time Selmy attacked, his steel against Oberyn’s, blocking the return blows two-handed, turning them back towards their owner. He quickly learned that he had to be careful of both ends of the spear, as the Red Viper whacked the pole end into his shin and nearly forced him to his knees. The spear came down; Selmy caught in on his own, pushed it away, stood up, but he could not get a breath in before Oberyn attacked again. He parried a blow from the left, dodged right, barely found his breath before he had to step back and block again. He tried to press the attack two more times, and came close to cutting the Red Viper’s shoulder when he overbalanced, but Oberyn twisted wildly under the blade and cartwheeled backwards, somehow finding his feet and the spear. That gave Selmy a moment to breathe, but that was not enough. Oberyn was on him in an instant, spinning the spear, slashing, his blade a blur; it was a wonder that Ser Barristan managed to stay on his feet. He is younger than me, and quicker... but he is not cleverer.

One scratch from his spear, and I am dead... but I’m dead anyway, aren’t I? He could see Ashara standing behind Oberyn, nodding yes. If the poison was not already in him, it would be soon enough. That was inevitable. Oberyn is not cleverer than me, Selmy considered again. But there was something even more important than that. Unlike me, he has everything to lose if he dies.

Selmy stepped back, and glanced down into the battle below. The Second Sons were coming round
for another pass down below; he could hear their horses coming. _I must be quick._ He parried another
blow from the Red Viper, a second, then threw himself forward, closing the gap, feeling Oberyn’s
spear pierce his side, grabbing the prince by the hands that grasped the spear.

Prince Oberyn looked down, almost surprised. “I am sorry.”

“I know,” said Selmy. _Three, two, one._ He forced himself forwards with all his weight; the spear
shattered into a thousand fragments with a screaming _crack,_ and the Dornishman fell backwards,
down the hill, stumbling, falling, finding his feet — until a Second Son crashed into him so forcefully
that horse and rider and Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell ceased to be in an instant, and instead
became ragdolling pieces of flesh and blood and bone.

Ser Barristan Selmy staggered back to his feet and picked up his sword. The horses were running riot
all over the hill. _Where is Edric?_ He could not see the boy anywhere, and he had no time to look.
This was it. He picked up his sword one last time, spasming from Oberyn’s poison even as he did so.
_Here it comes._ For King Aegon, by some miracle, was coming towards him. Clearly there was no
recognition in his eyes. Ser Barristan brought his sword up.

But then, only metres away, he saw something else. The knight Darkstar, bearing down towards the
squire Edric Dayne, whose back was turned, his sword upraised.

_Do your duty._

_Barristan the True._

_Do it._

_Barristan the Brave._

_Do it._

_Barristan the Bold,_ said Ashara.

He charged, passing King Aegon by, running faster than he ever had in seventy years of life, and the
wind was behind him, and the wind was with him, and he was the wind, and all the years were
slipping away...

Ser Barristan Selmy brought the sword across one last time, and watched the head of Ser Gerold
Dayne as it flew away, watched as Edric Dayne went to his knees in the grass. Then it occurred to
him that he was lying down, staring up past the boy into the darkness. But it was not darkness, only
light, and the ghosts were singing. He looked up at the Dayne boy. “Ser?” the lad asked confusedly.
“I... you’re...”

“I’m dying.” It was strange to finally say those words and mean them truly. “So, then...”

There were tears on the boy’s face. _Why? He does not know me. But I know him. He looks like
Arthur, and Ashara... but he is Edric._ Selmy managed to laugh. “So many Edrics,” he muttered. “So
many... and now I see...” He pointed upwards.


“Like the sword.” It was only the first fresh fingers of pale purplish light through the darkness, like
the faint glow that had dressed Ser Arthur Dayne’s sword the first time they rode to battle together,
like the faint glow of Ashara’s eyes. “The sword...”
The woods burned above them. The dragons sang, and the ghosts sang with them.

TYRION III

The runes on the dragonhorn glowed the colour of fire-branded flesh as King Aegon lowered it from his lips. The sound of his exhaled breath echoed until it seemed it could echo no more, and then beyond that, as sweet and subtle as the screaming of swords.

Penny turned to look at Tyrion. “Does that mean we’ve won?” she whispered.

“No,” he replied. “It means something, but it does not mean that.”

The battle was dying around them. Aegon’s men had finished with most of the Dothraki, the Unsullied lines were breaking, and the captains of the Second Sons and the Windblown had been captured. Somewhere further down the ridge, they had found the corpses of Ser Barristan Selmy and Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell. The snake is dead, Tyrion thought when he heard that, breathing a brief sigh of relief. It wasn’t justice, but with Oberyn dead he thought things would be much easier, somehow.

Varys and Illyrio had led the procession down from the Swordfish through the corpse-strewn battlefield. Numbers was barely strong enough to stand, so Bronn had helped the boy on the long walk up the hill through the fog and smoke. Penny threw up twice before they reached the top. Even now, her eyes were red-rimmed and her shoulders were shaking with fear. Tyrion had no idea how he was supposed to reassure her. He could not even reassure himself.

The screams of dying men could still be heard below the hill. The crows would feast on the morrow, Tyrion thought. They would feast for many days and many nights. The corpses of the slain were piled up like a fresh layer of soil, and the piles were getting higher as the last arrows rained down and dying men fell down with their entrails sticking out. In the darkness no one knew whose side they had fought on, and no one cared.

But King Aegon had triumphed. Triumphed by foul trickery alone, and now he stood, unscathed in his ruby-studded silver armour, with his Valyrian sword clutched in one gauntleted fist, and his accursed horn in the other, staring expectantly up at the night. Tyrion, Penny and Numbers were about fifty feet away from him on the hilltop, oddities to be seen and mocked more than anything else, their faces and hair dark with smoke and sweat. Penny was red from the chill of the wind, while Numbers was pale with sickness and worry, and Tyrion somewhere in between. He shivered as a bead of sweat trickled down his back, slowly, menacingly.

“Look,” said Penny quietly. She raised a hand into the night, matching the gestures of several others. Tyrion tipped back his helm and squinted. “I can only see specks.”

“Not specks,” she replied. “Dragons. One of them is green. The other’s white.”
“But the one that Daenerys rides is black. And not here.”

“She’s dead,” Tyrion said listlessly. “It’s over. The dragons danced, and people died. As we all knew they would.” Part of him felt like crying.

“He’s going to blow the horn again,” Penny said.

And he did. He had heard it whispered that such accursed horns could kill their owners outright, leaving their lungs charred, but Aegon had the blood of the dragon, whether he was a Targaryen or a Blackfyre, and so went unharmed. AAAAAARRRRRREEEEEEeeeewwwwiee, the horn screamed, burning in Tyrion’s ears. AAAAAARRRRRRREEEEEEeeeewwwwiee. As the dragons came closer, he could see them writhing, in fury, in pain, dragged down as though yanked out of the sky by an invisible rope. The white dragon was blowing fire in a halo around his head, the green snapping and snarling at the air, beating away invisible wasps. It hurt Tyrion to see such noble creatures reduced to this, playthings for the amusement of a king who now seemed near as mad as his ancestors.

“They won’t like that,” said Brown Ben Plumm, who had come to stand beside Tyrion.

“Dragons do not do well in captivity.”

“And how do you know that?”

Tyrion smiled ruefully. Once, he might have had a droll reply to that question, but now he could only watch as the majestic creatures were dragged unceremoniously towards the ground, one reluctant wingbeat after another.

The circle surrounding Aegon bristled with spearpoints and crossbow quarrels. Four huge scorpions waited with their heavy iron bolts pointed to the sky, towards the descending dragons. When they came down at last, Tyrion caught the glare of the white dragon’s eye, and saw something there he had never been expecting to see. *Fear. They must think Aegon has brought them to their death.*

Aegon stepped back from them, the dragonhorn clutched in one hand. “Rhaegal!” he shouted, taking a leather whip from Jon Connington. “Viserion!”

“He is mad,” said Brown Ben, and Tyrion had to agree.

“You will obey me!” Aegon shouted, sounding somewhat like a petulant child. Tyrion was instantly reminded of Joffrey. *I am the king.* “You will!” the king called again.

Rhaegal hissed at him, lowering his neck a little. Viserion thrashed instead, back and forth, his eyes moving through the crowd around him, as though searching for a saviour. His mouth opened wide, but there was no fire in it.

At Lord Connington’s urging, Aegon decided to focus his attention solely on Rhaegal, who seemed the more biddable of the two. “Rhaegal!” he yelled, cracking the whip. “Down!”

The green dragon gave a keening wail, thrashing its head left and right. Aegon brought the horn back to his lips and gave a short, sharp blast. Rhaegal screamed, and Viserion turned in a wide arc, his tail scything through the air. *It burns them,* Tyrion realised, feeling sick. *The horn burns them. He is torturing them into obeying him.* His sickness was starting to turn to anger. *How dare he?*

If he were a bigger man... if he were Jaime, he would have gone and challenged the boy right then and there. *Who are you to hurt dragons?* But as it was, all he could do was stand and watch. Numbers gave a tiny whimper of pain, cut off beneath Viserion’s roar and the ensuing blast of fire he released into the air.
“No!” Aegon shouted, a moment too late. But one of the scorpions had already unleashed its quarrel; the bolt struck Viserion hard under one wing, making him scream and stagger. Tyrion covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut, wishing the dragon would stop with its terrible screaming. When he looked up, Viserion was cowering back across the circle like a drunk, his golden eyes wide and afraid.

Aegon was swinging the whip madly; now Rhaegal was joining his brother in the mad thrashing, wailing and hissing in pain. Tyrion could not understand the language of dragons, but he knew what they were crying: *Mother, Mother, Mother.* The horn wailed again, and the dragons shrank back into themselves. Tyrion almost felt their burning pain.

*They are children,* he thought. *What sort of monster would torture a child?* If they had given him a sword... now he was looking round at the belts of the men standing around him. *I could throw it at Aegon. If the gods gave me some luck for once, maybe it would kill him, and then the dragons would burn everyone around them.* He had never felt such pure hatred, for Aegon, for everything. Smoke was everywhere, rising over the Blackwater and over King’s Landing behind it. Dead bodies haunted the ground, and crows haunted the sky. *All this, for a crown?*

The king was moving towards Rhaegal now, still cracking the whip, threatening with the dragonhorn. Tyrion watched as he approached the dragon, reaching out to his snout, never looking away. “Rhaegal,” he called, “Rhaegal, I am your master.” Then he moved round to the wing joint, still holding the horn, ready to torture. At one moment Rhaegal cringed away, and Aegon blew one short blast, binding the dragon back to his will.

*I will not watch this,* Tyrion thought. He turned to look at Viserion instead... and found the dragon staring back in his direction. Not quite looking at him, but somewhere near him, close. And strangely... he could almost feel the dragon reaching out, caressing him as Shae once had, almost knowing him, but never quite getting that far. The ground was starting to rumble, ever so gently, beneath his feet.

“How do you feel that?” he asked Penny.

She frowned at him. “What?”

He must be imagining things. For now he could feel an intensity in the air too, something impossible, a premonition of things to come. And if he just said the word—

“Now,” Tyrion whispered, scarcely believing.

And impossibly, the sun burst through the mist.

Viserion let out a sudden screech; he turned in a wide circle, forcing Aegon to take two steps backwards into Jon Connington. When Tyrion looked up to see what the commotion was, he found the dragon’s golden eyes looking directly into his mismatched ones. *He sees me.* There was no doubt about it.

Then another impossible thing happened. Viserion’s screech met its reply. But not in Rhaegal. Instead the scream came from somewhere far off, but it was still unmistakeably a dragon’s cry. That meant only one thing. “The queen...” Penny whispered.

“The queen,” said Brown Ben Plumm. And his eyes met Tyrion’s too. Then, more loudly, “THE QUEEN!”

And Drogon came plummeting from the clouds, shadowed against the red sunrise, with sunbeams
streaming red and gold from his midnight wings. And on his back—

“THE QUEEN! THE QUEEN!”

The Second Sons turned, somehow armed again. Aegon’s men turned to look too. Tyrion took one step forward, barely catching a glance of Daenerys Targaryen on the dragon’s back, very much alive – the queen – then he threw himself at Penny as hard as he could, knocking them both down into the wet mud.

The sky exploded above their heads. Tyrion went deaf. Bits of trees rained down, ash and bark and dust. A huge ugly tree cracked open and fell down, down, down, and broke into a million pieces in the midst of the crowd opposite, leaving behind grotesque smears of blood and bone.

Viserion was screaming too. Tyrion could hear it, could feel it in his bones. It drove him to his feet, and he began to stumble through the enemy lines, Penny calling after him, “Tyrion, my lord Tyrion, there’s a fire, we have to go, we have to go – back!”

Instead he crawled towards it, scraping his hands and knees against the mud, blood on his face – he didn’t know how it had gotten there, but it was there – and his breath hoarse in his throat. The very air seemed to be burning, but he kept low to avoid the worst of it. Why? He could hear King Aegon shouting at him now, shouting for them to man the catapults and the ballistae, and behind him the great wooden engines were turning to look skyward. Drogon was circling, coming in for a second pass. Tyrion had to reach the cover of the next tree before he came back.

He made it with barely a second to spare, ducked down behind the sturdy oaken wall. A great black shadow darkened his world, then passed on. When he looked back, the wall had collapsed behind him, almost taking him and Penny with it.

Tyrion could hear King Aegon shouting something at Rhaegal, one hand with Blackfyre at his belt, the other on the hot whip. Viserion was snorting small gouts of flame from his nose. His eyes met Tyrion’s as the dwarf approached. He needs me. But why? Before he could answer Viserion’s wings flapped, and now he was facing King Aegon on the left, with Rhaegal on the right. His tail thrashed left and right, smashing men away, as though he were in pain, as though he were bound by some invisible—

The horn. Tyrion scanned the ground. There it was, forgotten amid the madness of the situation, curled up on the ground like a fetus, smoke rising from its mouthpiece. They are still bound by the horn. He pointed to Penny, coughing. “We need to get that!”

Why, you fool? asked a little voice in his head. Why do you need to risk yourself for this? Didn’t you learn anything when Ser Mandon cut off your nose?

Ser Mandon is dead, he replied to it. And I am not. Granted, that was due to Pod, but—

“Look out!” yelled Penny.

Tyrion threw himself flat. Viserion’s tail would have missed him anyway, but only due to his dwarfish height. It smashed two men and knocked them clear of the hill, screaming. “Kill it!” someone was shouting. “Kill it, it’s gone mad, kill the beast!” Spears and swords were drawn. Viserion screamed, lashing against the invisible bonds. Penny helped Tyrion to stand, dragged him back behind the tree – little cover, but better than nothing.

“Where’s Numbers?” he asked her.

She pointed back towards the circle with a worried shrug. It does not matter, Tyrion thought. We
cannot go back for him. Not now. He hoped Bronn or someone at least vaguely trustworthy got hold of the boy, and not Varys.

Rhaegal was in the air now, rising higher and higher with Aegon on his back. Then he was up and away, soaring into the air to meet Drogon. Tyrion hoped that Aegon would fall and break his back, but he had no time to consider it, for now shouts of “KILL IT!” were coming from the men on the ground.

They meant Viserion for certain. Flames burst from his yellow maw, engulfing three of the men closest to Aegon. All the while his eyes never left Tyrion’s. “KILL IT, KILL THE BEAST!”

And Tyrion could only stand and watch in horror as one of the Dornishmen charged forward with spear out and drove the point deep into the dragon’s neck.

Tyrion and Viserion screamed as one. And Penny too, and Tyrion stumbled forwards, his axe drawn now, running towards the dragon, his dragon, as fast as his legs would take him, and the golden eyes kept staring at him, full of sorrow and wretched pain and a lifetime of misery and all the things they’d done for love and where did whores go and who was Numbers and what was the point of living and had his father loved him and had he killed his mother and why had Jaime lied and Tysha, Tysha, always Tysha—

They did not see him running. Or if they did, they paid him no heed. That was their mistake, and it always would be. It was Jon Connington who realised what he was doing, but too late.

Tyrion Lannister sprinted the last few paces through the grass, and brought his foot down on the dragonhorn as hard as he could. The splintered wood burst through his boot and up through his flesh, but he no longer felt it, no longer felt anything but impossible euphoria, as Viserion screamed out.

He staggered back through the grass, ignored by all of them, and then he was somehow scrambling onto Viserion’s wing. Penny following him up the craggy face of white scales veined with gold.

Why not? Tyrion thought absurdly. There is only one mountain left to conquer. If Daenerys Targaryen can do it, so can I.

Mercifully, Viserion had not been hurt as badly as he first thought. The great white wings stirred to either side, and Tyrion clung to the scaled neck just as tightly as Penny clung to his side, as the dragon left the smoking clearing and the ruins of Aegon’s camp beneath them and climbed, up and up, into the dawn sky.

DAENERYS IV

Drogon was circling back over the Blackwater Rush when Ser Jorah Mormont noticed Viserion and Rhaegal rising from the forest again. Dany felt a rush of relief at first... and then she heard Drogon hiss and when she looked more closely, she could see riders on their backs. That gave her a queer
giddy feeling. She had never presumed to ride either of the other dragons, but she had never thought that anyone else would ride them either. “Who are they?” she asked.

“It is too far to see,” said Jorah.

“I have a sneaking suspicion that one of them is Aegon.” Dany’s lip curled as she spat out that last word. She noticed that the horrendous call that had driven the dragons to earth had faded. He has what he needs. She urged Drogon towards them. As she did so, Viserion soared off, his golden wings glittering, vanishing into the distant clouds. Maybe she had been imagining his rider. But by then there were other problems. Rhaegal, with Aegon on his back, was flying up to meet her. Down, she willed Drogon, and the dragon went low, and the green flew above her.

She thought Aegon might not know how to rein Rhaegal in, but the dragon turned smoothly in mid-air and circled back towards them. “The horn may yet have some power,” she said out loud.

“What will you do, Khaleesi?” said Jorah.

Dany had her answer at once. “In war, you kill your enemies, Jorah.”

“He is your nephew.”

“He was. Now he is a betrayer, and a pretender.”

A pause. If Jorah had any objections to that, he kept them silent. Dany sensed that he was dissatisfied with some of that, but what else could she do? “I will not hurt Viserion,” she said, more to herself than to the knight. “I will not.”

Then how are you going to kill Aegon? Viserys’s voice in her head again.

“I... I suppose I’ll have to knock him off.” That was how they had done it during the Dance of the Dragons. Viserys had told her a story of the Dance over Harrenhal, when Prince Daemon Targaryen had leapt from his dragon Caraxes onto Vhagar to put out Aemond One-Eye’s remaining eye with his sword Dark Sister. Dany did not have a sword, so she would have to make do.

She turned Drogon about so she was facing her nephew again, hovering in place a moment. Rhaegal faced her, with Aegon a speck on his back in silver-and-black armour. The two of them lined up like knights before a joust. Dany sighed. It was always going to end like this, she thought heavily. It was only ever going to end like this. She tickled Drogon’s scales and said, “Naejot”. Forward. The dragon’s movement was not lumbering, but swift and straight as an arrow, and even in the midst of battle there was the brief moment when she realised the ecstasy of her flight.

Rhaegal was coming towards her, closer and closer, faster and faster. Aegon had Blackfyre drawn, though Dany could not say what she meant to do with it. At the last moment, when she could see the strange yellow of Rhaegal’s eyes, she urged Drogon upwards.

The wingtip just barely passed over Aegon’s head; the two dragons collided and Dany was nearly torn from her perch. Drogon screamed out in pain and began to plummet, Rhaegal’s jaws scrabbling in his belly. Wrestling, the pair hurtled down towards Blackwater Bay, claws tearing, jaws snapping. Dany had barely any control at all, but she managed to somehow turn Drogon out of his dive before they hit the trees. Screaming, the dragon turned a wide and low pass over Blackwater Bay again, swerving this way and that as scorpions and catapults fired their bolts into the sky.

Only once they were well out of the way did Dany turn to look at the damage. Drogon had been wounded in the Dragonpit by countless spears, some of which were still sticking out of his side, and the tussle with Rhaegal had left him even more scarred. Fortunately, though, he was still flying, even
if his wingtips sagged a little. And from what she could see, Rhaegal did not look much better.

She steered Drogon round, back to face his foe, who was cutting wide over Blackwater Bay. They were very high up here; the ships were lost beneath them, and dawn had disappeared into the clouds. Dany urged Drogon to rear up, flapping his wings back, she clinging to his neck for all it was worth. The scales felt greasy beneath her fingers. Blood? She could not tell.

“Your Grace,” warned Ser Jorah. Dany looked around Drogon’s neck, and she could see what he saw, feel what he felt... Rhaegal flapping towards him. The green dragon was coming from up high, faster and faster with every second he dove. Dany jerked aside, but too light. Drogon’s sudden jolt almost threw her off, and Ser Jorah had to grab hold of her armoured pauldron to stay on. The new pain in Dany’s shoulder echoed the pain in Drogon’s neck. She screamed out. “Down, Khaleesi!” Jorah shouted, pushing her into the dragon’s scales as a halo of fire burst above their heads, brighter than the sun. Dany tried to make Drogon descend, but he would not, he could not, and Rhaegal was flying around him and all the dragon could do was turn to shield his passengers from the dragonfire, his wings withering, falling—

Then there was a massive crash and Rhaegal was spiralling away, and Dany heard a third set of flapping wings and Viserion rose above their heads, pursuing his green-and-bronze brother down towards the trees. Drogon, bleeding from every wound now, descended to follow.

They were low over the river when Dany came upon them again, as she and Drogon made their awkward descent. Viserion and Rhaegal were locked together above the ships, claws scrabbling, belching flames at each other. Viserion, less wounded than his brother, was on top, and on his back —

“Is that the Imp?” Ser Jorah asked, disbelieving.

Dany was never quite certain. For then Viserion drew back suddenly and Drogon, descending, hit Rhaegal with all the force he could, sending the dragon spiralling away, down into the river below.

When he hit the ground, Daenerys Targaryen knew that her child was dead. She could not say how, but it was so. Aegon and Rhaegal rested in a mangled heap above the Blackwater. And now Viserion was gone in the clouds above, and suddenly it was only her, and she could not hear what Ser Jorah was shouting in her ear. This battle has cost me so much, she thought, turning Drogon’s head back towards Aegon’s camp. She did not care who was winning the battle on the ground, or know if they had already won. Her mind was empty save for three words. Burn them all. Burn them all. “Burn them all,” she whispered under her breath.

Drogon’s jaws opened as they flew low... and Dany felt the twinge of pain in his side, and knew that he could not, that they had no time for this. Drogon needs to rest. If I subject him to this, he may die.

The mouth closed. Dany drew her dragon up from the dive, and only just in time, for Drogon was sluggish to pull up and they nearly went smashing through the trees. Up, she willed, up, away from this. Away from all of this. We do not have time for this today. Go and rest.

But in her heart, as they headed back out over Blackwater Bay, away from armies and navies and brave dying men, towards Dragonstone, she was thinking darker thoughts. Let them burn.
First of all: a shameless appeal for comments.

This chapter took WEEKS to write. It has been a nightmare that has constantly plagued me, and an utter pain in the arse... but in the end I loved it, and I hope you did too. So today my appeal goes out not only to all my regular reviewers, but to the lurkers like myself who review only infrequently. If you're going to review one chapter in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, make it this one. Tell me what you think, in as many or as few words as you like. And let's see if we can make this the most-commented on chapter in the story.

If we reach 10 comment threads, I will post a preview of an upcoming chapter in the comments.
If we reach 20 comment threads, you get a second preview of another chapter.
If we reach 30 comment threads, you get Previewo Numero Tres.
If we reach 1000 comment threads, EVERYBODY IN THIS STORY LIVES.
(Yes, I now offer bribes.)

That being said, there should be plenty to talk about with this one. My favourite moment in this chapter was the duel between Barristan and Oberyn, pitting two of the Seven Kingdoms's finest fighters against each other, in a battle that definitely sends Barristan out in the most heroic fashion possible. It resolves the mystery of Ashara Dayne, opens the Blackfyre question, and leaves even more loose ends than it ties up. But I'm going to leave the discussion of that open to you.

So, then: thank you all so very much for reading, commenting, subscribing and leaving kudos. We're on the home stretch now. Let's get this done.
Night Gathers

Chapter Summary

“There’s a blizzard coming.”

Chapter Notes

First of all, thank you all for the fantastic response to Chapter 97. We reached the rare and fabled land that is page 2 of the comments section. So without, further ado, huge thanks to everyone who read, left kudos, subscribed, and particularly to all the commenters on recent chapters: Lannister4Life, S058, mr. perry, Vandal, One Thrilled Reader, Lindsiria, yyzEthan, Metsamies, iliaccrestv, Juvenal, Guest, LordVelaryon, aeb, DanyelN, Lypten, VVSIGNOFTHECROSS, R D, ShotgunInfinity, JustBNMe, TheMostGinger, Slicer37, and everyone else who has commented in the past.

Thank you all so very much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JON

Mole’s Town itself was mostly underground, but the wildlings had raised their tents on the surface, sprawling out from the kingsroad where it wound its way through the settlement. A few of the free folk crowded out onto the road, dark-eyed and wary as they watched the approaching horses and the men riding them. “They do not love you, Lord Snow,” said Tormund Giantsbane, as a mother rushed out of her hut to pull her daughters back inside. All the while she watched Jon with suspicion in her eyes. Or is that worry?… or even fear? He had never meant for the wildlings to be afraid of him.

West of Castle Black, a fog was settling; the signal fires between here and Queensgate burned palely through the gloom, barely visible now. Two days before there had been a line of beacons, one every league, and from the top of the King’s Tower Jon could see as far west as The Nightfort. Now, only the faint glimmer of orange light could be seen through the mist. The Others could have taken every other castle and we would not know.

There was a signal beacon here in Mole’s Town too, a stout wooden tower a hundred feet tall, with a base fifteen feet square. Wet hides coated the walls and roof to stop the tower catching fire. Wildling
children fed long branches of green wood to the flames. While Jon had sent full-grown warriors and spearwives to castles all along the Wall’s length, he’d kept boys and girls under sixteen at Castle Black, at Queensgate five leagues to the west, and at Oakenhield and Woodswatch to the east.

Jon had been equal parts pleasantly surprised and concerned when he found out how many of them were willing to help in Castle Black’s defense. He’d said only boys and girls over twelve would be permitted to fight, but those as young as seven were aiding the Watch in a number of tasks: maintaining the signal beacons, fetching and carrying supplies for the stewards, picking berries and hunting game in the woods, helping to man the Wall during the day. In return the Watch gave them a set of woollen blacks, a hot meal each day, and taught them to fight with sword and bow in the fashion of the Seven Kingdoms.

Tormund reined his horse up suddenly and jumped down from the saddle. “Hark, crow!” he called to Jon, “come and see!”

Jon expected something at least slightly interesting as he pushed through the press, but it was just a Northman in Flint colours brawling a burly wildling before a crowd. With a bellow, the wildling called for his axe, while the Northman took up a greatsword. This again. Jon signalled for Kedge Whiteye to intervene before they killed each other, but Tormund caught his arm. “They’re fighting friendly, Lord Snow.”

After a moment, Jon noticed that the crowd were chanting encouragement, not for the fighters to kill each other. Reluctantly, he nodded and went away. “That wasn’t worth getting off my horse for,” Dolorous Edd grumbled as they mounted up again.

“Thought it might do you some good to stretch those weedy crow legs of yours,” said Tormund, “and now you have.” He smiled through yellow teeth.

Jon smiled tiredly at the jape, but there was more truth in Tormund’s words than he knew. Amid all his duties as lord commander, there was less time than he would have liked for sword practise. That would be his first priority when he got back to the Wall, he vowed. Unless something else comes up. And it almost certainly would.

“Sixty thousand,” Jon murmured under his breath. That was how many wildlings were encamped on the Gift around Mole’s Town. “I am thankful for their help, Tormund, but... complications arise...”

“Say what you’re meaning to say, Lord Snow. I haven’t got all day.”

“The free folk need a leader. Mance is gone. Without him, there’s nothing to keep the ice river clans and the Hornfoots from killing the Hornfoots, nothing to separate the Thenns from the Frostfang tribes...”

“We have the Others to keep us together.”

“When men and women and children are dying in their thousands, that won’t be enough. We’ll start turning on each other, even if it makes no sense at all. Think about it: when my brother Robb rode south, he had Roose Bolton and Walder Frey at his side, united in the cause of rescuing my father. But when Robb was weakest, they turned on him and murdered him. No, we need someone like Mance... we need... we need...”

“Har!” Tormund gave a throaty laugh. “You want me to lead the free folk? Oh, aye, me member’s bigger than any of theirs, and I’ll match them blow for blow in a fight, but I’m not like Mance. He was clever, and cunning; he tricked us into joining him. I’ve got about as much subtlety as Wun Wun. Har!”
Jon tried a different tack. “My brothers didn’t choose me because I was the strongest among them, or the smartest, or the most experienced. I don’t know why they chose me, but—”

“We chose you because everyone else was worse,” Dolorous Edd supplied. “And because we’re terrible people, and we wanted to do a terrible thing to our friend.”

“And now Lord Snow wants to do a terrible thing to me, is that it?” Tormund laughed again.

Jon failed to see the funny side in any of this. “They respect you, Tormund.”

“Oh the field, aye. But in their cups, they call me somebody’s drunken old grandfather, Mance’s pet, the man-whore of Ruddy Hall. I’m not the man you’re looking for, Lord Snow?”

“And who is? Who led the free folk up to Hardhome and back? Who was the first to try and make an alliance between the wildlings and the Night’s Watch? Oh, there might be people better than you, Tormund, but I don’t know where to find them.”

Tormund thought about that. “And how do you expect me to become leader of the free folk? What am I s’posed to say? I am your king now, listen to me. They’ll drag me down off my high horse and tear me to pieces.”

“We’ll hold a council,” Jon said. “A week from now, in the Shieldhall. Tell your people we’re looking for someone to lead the free folk. There’ll be arguing, and shouting, but at the end of the night we’ll have some sort of vote. And even if they don’t name you, at least you’ll have a leader.”

They were outside the gates of Castle Black now. Tormund halted his horse and gave Jon a stormy look. “I make no promises,” he said, “but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Don’t mention me, though,” said Jon. “They’ll never listen if they think we’re trying to interfere in it.”

Tormund snorted. “They’ll know anyway. What, you think they’ll believe I came up with the idea for a vote?” He rode away laughing.

Jon and Edd rode through the gates of Castle Black. Iron Emmett, the new First Ranger, was training recruits in the yard. There were more recruits here now than Jon had ever seen; most were the wildling boys and men come up from the Gift. At Emmett’s command, fifty bowstrings thrummed and arrows thudded solidly into a dozen straw dummies. Emmett walked across the yard shouting encouragement.

“He’s nicer than Thorne ever was,” said Edd.

“Yes,” said Jon, “but I think Ser Alliser might have helped us in a time like this.” Sometimes you had to be cruel to be kind.

They walked across the courtyard. When they’d arrived at Castle Black, the snow had been several feet deep in places, but Jon had ordered it all cleared, as they would need the space for their drill. Now wildling boys went out with snow shovels at dawn every morning to clear it out. Up above them, the winch lift up and down the Wall was running smoothly again, and a team of builders were working on the ice. Jon had asked the builders to construct another lift, as they would need to get supplies and men up and down the Wall more quickly in the foreseeable future. “It will take the better part of a year, my lord,” said Othell Yarwyck. “By that time, it will be too late.”

“Better to start than to do nothing,” Jon had said. He set Alf, Kegs, Spare Boot and the others to repairing the cranes and catapults and scorpions that lined Castle Black’s fortifications, and to putting
up new hoardings and ringforts. Now there were builders atop the Wall day and night, Sworn
Brothers and free folk both. Times were changing. Bowen Marsh had been sent to Woodswatch-by-
the-Pool, far enough away that he could not do any harm, but close enough that Jon could quickly
recall him if necessary. Othell Yarwyck was less replacable, though, Clydas told him, since none of
the other builders had Yarwyck’s experience. “And it was Marsh who did the treason, my lord.
Yarwyck was only guilty of not stopping him.” So Jon reluctantly restored the First Builder to his
duties. “But if you betray me again,” he warned, “I will have your head.”

Outside Jon’s door, his squire Dryn, Tormund’s youngest son, waited, clad in a motley of wildling
greys and Night’s Watch blacks. “My lord,” the boy said, “they’re waiting for you.”

“Who?”

“The loud lord and the bear lady.”

*The Greatjon and Maegi Mormont.* They had been asking for a private audience for days. Jon
sighed. “Edd, I fear I need to speak to them alone.”

“No matter, my lord. I’ve got an inventory to finish. Someone has to check the rats haven’t eaten
everything.” He walked off muttering under his breath.

Jon opened the door to his solar. Almost immediately the Greatjon and Lady Mormont rose to their
feet, intent on getting the first word in. “Lord Snow—,” the Greatjon began.

“I hope you have not brought me more news of Robb’s will,” said Jon tiredly. “If you have, you
already know what I will say, so why are you here?”

“To ask you to reconsider,” Lady Mormont said. “Oh, I have my doubts that we will get anywhere.
You are as stubborn as only a Stark can be. But you loved your brother, did you not?”

“Aye. I loved Robb, as my brother and my best friend. I will tell you that now, so you do not ask me
again. But he was a Stark, and I am a Snow. We both knew that. I remember... there was a day when
we were practising in the yard. He would pretend to be Cregan Stark and I would be Prince Aemon
the Dragonknight, or something like that. One day I shouted that I was Lord Stark of Winterfell.
Robb said, “my lady mother says you can’t ever be the Lord of Winterfell, you’re just a bastard.” It
was true, and it still is true. Now, maybe my brother wrote those words in good faith, but he believed
that Bran and Rickon were dead, and that I was his only hope. And now that is *not* true, as you both
well know. I cannot, and I will not, abuse his memory – and Lady Catelyn’s – by usurping the
Kingdom of the North from his trueborn brothers. And even if I were not bastard-born, I would
refuse you. My place is here on the Wall.”

“Your place is here at the *fight* on the Wall, Lord Snow. If you were the King in the North, you
would be able to command the Northern lords to give you men, supplies, whatever you need, and
they would be honour-bound to obey, from Barrowton to Widow’s Watch, from the Last Hearth to
White Harbor, and even further south. The Tullys would join you—”

“*Would they?* Would Edmure Tully join a man who usurped his nephews? Tell me, my lord, my
lady, *how* do you propose I go about declaring myself King in the North? Do I force my own brother
out of Winterfell? Do I give up my vows and set a precedent for my Sworn Brothers to do the same?
Do I make myself an object of the fury of the southern kings when I may soon need their friendship?
Stannis Baratheon offered to make me Warden of the North. You are offering to make me king. I
refused him then. I will refuse you now.”

“Hmm,” said Lady Mormont. “Well, I cannot say I am surprised.” She rose from her seat.
“Thank you for your time, Lord Snow,” said the Greatjon, tight-lipped. They went without another word, and left him to his doubts. *I could be king.* Jon knew. Was being Lord Commander really so different to being king? He shook his head to clear it of the thoughts. *No.* He resolved to distract himself with other matters. Writs, promises, meetings. The hours disappeared away behind him. Suddenly it was sunset and Dryn was coming up the stairs with his food. “Is there anything else you need, my lord?” the boy asked as he set the platter down.

*Clarity, for a start.* “Edd will be back soon,” Jon told Dryn. “I want Emmett up here as well, and Othell Yarwyck. And Clydas. I’ll see them together.” His councils were often more work than they were worth, but at least they were easier than the ones he had shared with Marsh and Septon Cellador in days gone by.

Dryn had barely left the room when there was a screeching from outside the window and the Old Bear’s raven burst in through the window and swooped down onto Jon’s plate, stealing a whole chicken leg. Jon swatted at it but it flew up on the lintel and hopped from one foot to the other, taunting him: *“Corn, corn, corn.”*

“Be quiet about your bloody corn.”

*“Blood, blood, blood.”*

That was odd. “Has someone been teaching you new words?”

The bird stared at him. *“Raven,”* it screeched, *“raven, raven.”*

“Yes. You are, more’s the pity. I swear, when you die, I’m not getting another one. I’ll never understand why the Old Bear kept you. I hope you weren’t like this to Bran when he was here.”

*“Bran, bran, bran,”* the bird mimicked. Then it took off from the mantelpiece, the chicken leg still in its beak, and flew back out the window. The snow was starting to come down in skittish, frantic flurries.

By moonrise the walls had turned white again, and the yard was deserted. Dryn led Iron Emmett, Dolorous Edd and Othell Yarwyck into his solar. Clydas brought up the rear.

“Can I offer you any refreshments, my lords?” Jon asked.

Iron Emmett stamped snow from his boots. *“Some mulled wine would not go amiss.”* Yarwyck and Edd nodded their agreement. Clydas’s hands trembled.

“I will start by telling you the plans I already have,” Jon said, as Dryn brought the kettle over from the fire. “I have convinced Tormund Giantsbane to call the free folk together to choose their new leader, to serve as Mance did.”

*“King-beyond-the-Wall?”* Yarwyck furrowed his eyebrows. “Lord Snow, perhaps it is better to let the wildlings be. There are brothers who still do not like what you have done.”

“Are you one of them?” Jon pressed on before Yarwyck could answer. “They will have to live with things as they are. The free folk are south of the Wall. They will not be going north of it again. I am sure you would all rather have them in some sort of order than as a leaderless rabble. Either way, the new leader of the free folk will play an important part in our securing of the Wall’s defenses. And speaking of the Wall’s defenses, how is our lift going, Othell?”

“Slowly but surely. I cannot say when it will be done, though. There will almost certainly be unforeseen difficulties along the way.”
“Keep at it. The lift may not matter, anyhow. It is what we do along the top of the Wall that is important.”

“The scythe is affixed and ready again, my lord,” said Iron Emmett. “But we still need more men to work with metal and wood to make swords and arrows. You’d have thought that the free folk would have a few more good smiths among them. Most of their steel is poor.”

“Then teach them to make better steel. Aye, we’ve no longer got Donal Noye, but there are good men in our smithies, and if they can make swords, they can teach others to make them. In the meantime, I want daily swordwork and archery practise to continue for as long as we can.”

“There’s a blizzard coming,” Edd said darkly.

Jon looked to Clydas. “When will it hit?”

“Hard to say, my lord. But if I had to guess...” Clydas took a swallow of wine; his leathery throat bobbed. “…a moon’s turn. Maybe less.”

If the Others come, they will come then, when we are at our blindest. “We must be ready, then.”

“What about the trees, my lord?” asked Iron Emmett.

“The trees?”

“Beyond the Wall. I mean... if the wights are hiding anywhere... Leathers and I were talking the other day. We thought that if we wait for them to get into the trees, and then set it all on fire, we’d be able to get hundreds of them.”

Clydas shook his head. “The wood does not burn well. We could try, but we would have to send our men down to get the trees on fire...”

“Our catapults would reach that far, at a stretch,” said Yarwyck. “It is a good plan. And if we burned the trees, we would be able to see them coming from further off. Every second counts when our enemies are marching on the Wall.”

Not if their army is many thousands of times bigger than ours, Jon thought. How many have died out there over the years, over the centuries? How old are the oldest corpses that walk in the white walkers’ army? “See if you can come up with a plan,” he said to Emmett and Othell Yarwyck. “Though it may not matter, if we run out of food before then. Did you finish your inventory, Edd?”

“I did, unfortunately” said Edd. “The garrison has nearly two thousand mouths to feed, and that’s just the black brothers and the Mole’s Town folk we’re feeding. Which might be a good thing when it comes to fighting, but five years ago we had barely three hundred brothers. And back then we had more food.”

“How long can we last?” Jon asked, dreading the answer.

Edd shrugged. “At the rate we’re going through our supplies, three moons. And that’s with half rations for everyone including the officers, and by the third moon we’ll be down to sawdust bread and Hobb’s special stews. And turnips. We have a lot of turnips. But other than that, it’s not looking good.”

“Cut the rations down to a quarter,” suggested Othell Yarwyck.

Clydas shook his head. “Malnourished soldiers will be worse than useless. Our men need vegetables
and red meat to get through the winter, especially with all the fighting we need to be doing.”

Jon had an idea, albeit a far-fetched one. “There are glass gardens at Winterfell where food grows even in the depths of winter. We might do well to look at building some of those, perhaps down in the ice caverns. It’ll be a tricky task, aye, but I have faith in the builders and the stewards to work it out.”

“Irrigation systems... heated houses... Lord Snow, what you’re asking is impossible. If we still had Maester Aemon, he might have been able to find a way through this, but... and even if by some miracle it worked, we’d need the better part of the year to get the first seeds to grow.”

“All the same,” said Jon, “I think a lot of our preparations nowadays will be for the long term.” And I doubt we will all be alive to see them completed, he thought, but he did not say that. “See what you can do, First Builder. But in the meantime, we need a different idea.”

Iron Emmett shifted uneasily. “I know we’re all about... working with the free folk and all, my lord, but I know some of them have been... well, the kitchens aren’t always as full as they should be, Hobb says. We need stricter penalties for thieves.”

“Take their hands,” suggested Edd.

“Take their heads, not their hands,” said Othell Yarwyck.

Jon gave him a disapproving look. “Many of these thieves are starving children, First Builder. If I execute a child in the castle yard, the free folk will murder me. If I take a child’s hand, even...” He shook his head, willing the problem to go away.

“Perhaps,” said Clydas, “it would be possible for you to levy some sort of provisions tax from the Northern lords who are hiding behind the Wall. And surely your brother Lord Brandon would be kind enough to lend you some of his provisions in our time of need. And if we are especially lucky, the letters he sent south may yet bear fruit.”

“I am not willing to wager our future on optimism,” said Jon, “nonetheless, I like your idea of the provisions tax... though the Northern lords will not.”

“Let them be angry,” said Emmett. “They’re hiding behind our Wall.”

Jon sighed. “Yes, but we cannot stop them from hiding behind it.” He did not think they were going to get anywhere today. “Let us leave it for now, my lords,” he said. “We will talk again in the morning.”

Clydas lingered when the others had gone. “My lord,” he said querilously. “There may yet be some benefit in making another appeal. Particularly one to the Iron Throne. The word from the south is that the Seven Kingdoms are nearly reunited. The Targaryens were friends to the Night’s Watch in King Jaehaerys’s day.”

“That was two hundred and fifty years ago,” said Jon. “But what harm can it do? I am trying everything nowadays, it would seem.” He laid down a sheet of paper. “Thank you for your counsel, Clydas,” he said quietly. “It cannot have been easy to perform all of Maester Aemon’s duties, but you have performed them admirably.”

“They have taken a toll on me, I fear. There was a time when I enjoyed them, but now I only pray that Maester Samwell is quick in returning.”

“From Asshai? It seems unlikely.” Seven hells, Sam, what possessed you to such stupidity? Jon had
nearly had an apoplexy when he heard where his friend was headed. “Sometimes,” he said, “I wonder what happened to all of the level-headed people. Now all we seem to have is madness.” And me the maddest fool of the lot, trying to find a path through it all.

Chapter End Notes

Things to bear in mind with this chapter: people don't know about the Battle of King’s Landing yet - something we'll see not just in chapter 98, but in pretty much every chapter up to about 108. A lot of the upcoming events take place in a very small timeframe.

This chapter is a bit shorter than I'd been expecting, mostly because I had to cut a conversation scene as it didn't fit properly into Jon's character arc, and we lost about 500 words on that. Obviously, this one doesn't really live up to the high bar set by the last one, as a pure setup chapter, but it was necessary to establish the setting and conflict of Jon's story in the third arc. Incidentally, Jon has the most chapters remaining in his story (he's got 4 more to go after this one).

I'm finally at the point where I've planned every single chapter out, which means all I have to do is write them. Hopefully I'll be finished by the end of June, and my target is to upload the final chapter of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS by July 15th, a day before the new season of GOT starts.

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Once again, I welcome any and all comments, long and short alike. And I will upload another chapter preview if 10 comment threads are created. I've changed the chapter order a bit, so we've got Bran after this one, and then two Casterly Rock chapters after that.

Thanks for reading.
Bran woke with a start, shivering in his nightclothes. Birds were twittering outside his window; dawn was not far off. Eyes closed, he pressed his hand to the chamber wall and listened to the steady heartbeat of Winterfell: its familiar creaks and whines, the hot water pulsing through the walls as steady and sure as the blood through his veins. His breathing calmed.

He had dreamed of Summer, though he had not been in Summer, but instead an eye in the night watching over the wolf. Did he know I was there? Bran did not dare intrude into Summer’s mind to find out. Angry as the wolf was, it was hard enough to find him at night, never mind consider joining with him. Summer would return one day, he was certain of it. But not yet.

Bran sat up and looked around the bedchamber. It was almost pitch-black, but he could see quite well in the dark. Maester Luwin had told him once that blind or deaf men sometimes had their other senses heightened as a result. Perhaps it was the same with cripples.

They had given him his lord father’s bedchamber, the biggest one in the castle. It was sparsely furnished and lonely, and Bran felt very small in Lord Eddard’s massive bed, which was big enough for six, or maybe more. When he had been very small, and scared of monsters in the dark, his mother had brought him into their bed, and Bran had gone to sleep with his head against her shoulders, while she murmured lullabies and mussed his hair…

They are dead now. It does not do to dwell on the past. His lord father’s bones were down in the castle crypts, and they had said prayers for Robb and his lady mother, though their graves were empty. I am the only Stark in Winterfell now. He had never been alone like this before. Even when Mother had gone south, Rickon had stayed behind with him. You will see them soon, Bran told himself, they will get here soon. Sansa promised in her letter.

It was not only the Starks who were missing from Winterfell. Most of the servants and castlefolk had died in the war too: Vayon Poole, Jory Cassel, Fat Tom, Hullen, Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik and Alebelly and Mikken who worked in the forge… only a few remained. Hal Mollen and Beth Cassel were two, and then there was Old Nan, who had miraculously survived her ordeal in the Dreadfort despite her age and frailty. In a few days, she would likely be gone too.

The bed seemed to be getting bigger and bigger. Bran buried his head in the pillows, wishing Summer was there to snuggle beside him. And before he knew it, morning light was coming in through the shutters, and Hodor was shouting outside his door: “Hodor, Hodor, Hodor.”

“Come in,” Bran called.

Hodor helped him dress in the garb of Lord Stark of Winterfell: blue doublet with padded sleeves, a leather jerkin with the Stark direwolf on the cross-straps, a heavy fur-lined cloak. Then it was time
for breakfast. Downstairs, Bran sat in his great-grandfather’s chair in his grandfather’s hall with his father’s bannermen gathered around him. Someone set a bowl of porridge before him, with honey and berries from the glass gardens. He wondered where Meera was. In the library, most like. She seemed to think Winterfell’s library might hold secrets not found at Castle Black. Bran did not blame her. She was growing restive, and had been ever since they arrived in Winterfell. He wished Larence Hornwood and Talia were still here, but they had stayed behind at Ironrath, preparing for their wedding. “If the Others are going to kill us all,” Larence said, “we might as well.”

Bran should have told Talia that her brother Asher was dead. When she finds out, she will know that I knew and did not tell her. She will hate me for it. He was wallowing in his pity when Hal Mollen entered the hall and knelt to whisper in his ear. “My lord, you have a visitor. She says it’s most urgent. She says she’s on her way to visit your brother.”

“Which brother?”

“Oh… should I ask, my lord?”

“I’ll ask her myself.” Bran pushed his bowl away. “Hodor, help me out of my chair. Hal, send a man to escort this lady to my solar.” My solar. It felt strange to say that.

On the way, they came across Meera and Maester Wolkan headed in the opposite direction. Meera was carrying a stack of books. “My lord,” she said, very stiff and formal.

“Have you found anything interesting?” Bran asked.

“More than we did at Castle Black. You should come and have a look, sometime.” He sensed something bitter in her voice. “Are you busy?”

“I’ve got a visitor,” he explained. “But you can come, if you like.”

She glanced between Bran and Maester Wolkan. “Fine,” she said eventually, passing her books to the maester. “I need something to amuse me.”

Together they entered Bran’s solar. The woman sitting by the fire was dressed head-to-toe in scarlet silk which did not look anywhere near warm enough for venturing so far north. Her lips were red, her cheeks were red, and even her eyes were red. “You are Brandon Stark?” she asked. Her voice was very rich.

“I am,” he said. “And this is my friend and counselor, Meera, of House Reed. How may we help you, lady…”

“My name is Melisandre of Asshai,” the woman said, “you may have heard of me.”

“Melisandre? My brother mentioned you.”

“I trust Lord Snow had only good things to say?” She smiled. “A jest. I suspect his impression of me was of overwhelming distrust.”

“Then why should we trust you?” asked Meera.

“Because you will be interested in what I have to say.”

Bran pondered a moment. “The hospitality of Winterfell—”

“—is not something I need. I will be gone by nightfall, Lord Stark, on my way to the Wall. But
Winterfell is a curious place, and I sense there are secrets to be discovered here. Would you mind if I had a look at your crypts? My visions have shown me—"

“Visions?” Bran asked.

“I am a red priestess of R’hhlor, Lord Stark.”


“The Lord of Light,” said Lady Melisandre. “Sometimes He deems it necessary to show me certain things. And one of these visions has led me to your castle, and to your crypts. And to you, Brandon Stark.”

“You should call him Lord Stark,” said Meera.

“You can call me Bran,” said Bran. He quite liked Lady Melisandre. Maybe it was her voice, or her eyes, or just the way she carried herself.

“Your name was well chosen,” she said. “You were named for Brandon the Builder, I presume?”

Bran shrugged. “There are a lot of Brandon Starks.”

“And I think you are more important than any of them,” said Melisandre. “Especially now, with the Long Night on its way.”

“What do you think is in the crypts?”

“The dead… and the living.”

“Everyone in the crypts is dead,” said Bran. Didn’t she know that?

Melisandre nodded. “For now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You have seen it. The dead walk, Lord Brandon. And when the Long Night arrives, the crypts will not contain them.”

Bran imagined dead Starks climbing from their tombs: his father, and his brother, his grandfather and his uncle Brandon, wandering through the halls of Winterfell, freezing the warm springs and hot pools which fed the castle, ice in their stone bones and in their stone eyes. “That won’t happen,” he said. “The dead can’t get inside Winterfell. Brandon the Builder built the castle with the same spells he used to build the Wall.”

“The dead are already inside Winterfell,” said Melisandre. Her breath was warm, and it made Bran shiver. “I have seen them in the great hall, in the cloisters, in the lord’s bedchamber and down in the godswood. What will stop them from getting out?”

Bran sucked in a breath. “What do you need to see?”

Melisandre rose. “I will meet you at the crypt entrance,” she said. When she walked from the room, the fire died down in the grate. Bran shivered, suddenly cold.

“Bran,” Meera said. “I don’t think you should trust her.”

“Why not? I don’t see why I shouldn’t. Father always warned me about judging people on
“It’s not that,” she said, “but… Bran…” She was spluttering over her words. “Bran, you’re a man grown now, and surely you’ve heard about priestesses from the east who can… make a man believe certain things.”

“No,” His face turned red and hot. “No, you’re wrong, you’re worried, that’s all. But I’m a man grown, you said it, I can look after myself.” He turned away to watch the snowflakes falling over the yard. Why is she so concerned?

“That’s what I mean, Bran,” pleaded Meera. “You… you wouldn’t just take anyone down to the crypts, would you? You told me once they were a Stark place, your place. I bear Lady Melisandre no ill will, but she has just arrived. We do not know her.”

Why won’t she be quiet? “I am the lord of Winterfell, not you,” he told her sternly. “I’m sorry, Meera, but I said I’d take her down to the crypts, so I will. You can come if you want, or you can stay.”

Meera’s voice turned icy. “Fine. I’ll stay. You and your lady can venture down into the crypts together. And alone. I’ll be in the library, searching for your scrolls. Again.” Her chair scraped back and she was gone before Bran could reply. Not that it mattered. Meera was just being stupid.

Bran sent Hodor to fetch Hal Mollen. “I’m going down into the crypts,” he told the captain of guards. “With Lady Melisandre.”

“The red woman?”

“Yes. I need some guards. And Hodor.”

“I’ll come myself,” said Hal. “Will half a dozen men be enough?”

“Maybe more.”

Hal smiled. “It’s only dead men down there, my lord, begging your pardons. Nothing that can hurt us. As you command, though.”

Ten minutes later, Bran, Hodor, Hal Mollen, and ten of Hal’s best men were at the top of the stone steps which led down into the Winterfell crypts. They had to scrape away the crust of snow blocking the way down, which took another five minutes. Lady Melisandre conveniently timed her arrival when the last of the scraping was done. She brought a squire with her, weighed down with scrolls and heavy tomes.

“Lord Stark,” said Melisandre, taking a torch from Hal. “Once again, thank you for your good faith in me. May I?”

“Of course,” said Bran, indicating the way forward.

“Hodor,” said Hodor.

Melisandre stopped abruptly, as though every bone in her body had frozen. For a long time she was still. Then her head turned, very slowly, and Bran thought he glimpsed fear in her eyes. Why would she be scared of Hodor? He’s harmless. “Don’t worry about Hodor,” he told her, “he won’t hurt you. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“No,” said Melisandre, “I doubt he will.” She walked past them to the crypt entrance and stood for a
while staring down into the dark. Then, waving the torch ahead of her, she set off undeterred into the
darkness. Bran gave her a few seconds, then signalled Hodor to follow. Lady Melisandre’s squire
went third, and the soldiers after him.

Bran sought out the squire as they descended. The boy was struggling under the weight of the books,
so Bran asked Korwin to help him carry them. “My thanks,” he puffed.

The boy had a certain accent. “Are you from the North?” Bran asked him.

“Aye, my lord. I went down with Lord Glover. But I help Lady Melisandre now.”

“What’s your name?”

“Beren, my lord.”

“There was a Beren Stark once. No, wait. He was a Beron. He died fighting the ironborn. There
might have been a Beren as well. We’ve got loads of Brandons, either way.”

Beren’s eyes widened. “All down here in the crypts?”

“Aye. There were nine King Brandons. And I’m the second Lord Brandon. That should have been
my uncle, but he died. And I should never have been lord, but Robb died.”

“I… I heard a story that your brother could turn into a wolf. That’s why the called him the Young
Wolf.”

Bran laughed. “We have wolves, yes, but we don’t become wolves.” He thought it best if people did
not know about his warging.

“Hodor,” said Hodor, his voice echoing.

Melisandre picked up her pace a little. Bran turned to Beren again. “Why does your lady not like
Hodor?” he asked.

“I don’t know, my lord,” the boy replied, shrugging. “Probably something she saw in the flames. She
says I might understand them one day, but to me they look like normal flames.”

They had reached the first level of the crypts. “Cold,” he heard Melisandre say. “Colder than it
should be. Lord Stark, there are hot springs under Winterfell, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then why can we not feel them here?”

“We are… deep under the castle,” Bran said. Something about that did not quite make sense to him.
The crypts are too cold. His breath misted in the air. Has it always been like this, or only recently?
He looked at Melisandre. “Are you looking for something in particular, or—”

“I am looking for something,” the red woman said, “but I won’t know what it is until I see it.”

“Well, that’s helpful,” muttered Hal Mollen.

“The crypts go on for ages,” said Bran. “If you don’t know what you’re looking for, it might take
you days to find it.”

“Hmm.” Melisandre waved her torch about, spreading light through the long rows of columns. “The
“All of the statues have swords,” he said. “They’re all Kings in the North and lords of Winterfell. Except those ones over there.” He pointed. “That’s my uncle Brandon, and that’s my aunt Lyanna. My father had their statues built. Before them it was only the lords who got statues. Oh, and there are some empty tombs down there.” He pointed. “For when…” He cleared his throat. “For when I die.”

“Let us hope that is not for a very long time,” said Melisandre. She turned away from the newer tombs, and set off abruptly in the opposite direction.

“Shall we follow them, my lord?” asked Hal Mollen.

Bran considered it. “No,” he said. “You go after her. I want to stay awhile. I…”

“I understand, my lord. Do you want to be alone?”

He nodded. There was the sound of receding footsteps, and then it was only him and Hodor. “Put me down, please,” said Bran. He wanted to look upon them as he was.

He had been down here a few days ago, to see them for the first time, but half of Winterfell had insisted on coming with him, and Bran had felt intimidated by it all. Now he sat alone in front of Lord Eddard’s statue. Father standing with Ice – not the real Ice, for the Valyrian greatsword was lost in the south – with a look that someone else might have called grave and foreboding. But Bran knew it was only the expression Father used when he was playing the part of Lord Stark. Other times he was smiling, or even laughing. But that is not how they will remember him. Is this how he would want men to remember him?

He turned his gaze to Robb. His brother wore the crown of the Kings of Winter, wrought in stone. The other lords had wolves curled up at their feet, but Robb’s was bigger than any of theirs. And it was not just any wolf: this was a direwolf, this was Grey Wind. Bran wondered how they would carve him when he was dead. Wise, with a sword in his hand and a direwolf curled up by his feet, or as a frightened boy, hiding away? It will not matter if the Others kill us all first, he thought.

The crypt had suddenly gotten chillier. Bran looked over to his right. His grandfather Lord Rickard’s sword was gone. Meera had taken it from his tomb, back when they’d been hiding in the crypts, so Bran was not questioning where it was, but why it had been there in the first place.

They’re only statues, he thought. Statues of lords and kings who are dead and buried. Iron swords guard against the Others... but there are no Others here. Back in Bloodraven’s cave, Jon had told him a story about how the castle was said to be a prison for the Night’s Queen, and there had to be a Stark in Winterfell to keep her from getting out. Blood sacrifice, iron and fire and weirwood. Almost as though they were trying to guard the crypts. Why would they—?

“HODOR.”

Bran nearly screamed. Hodor had crept up behind him, and stood there grinning like an idiot.

“You shouldn’t do that.” But really he was sighing with relief. “It’s nothing. They’re just statues. And Jon’s story was just a story.” But even so, he did not really want to be down here anymore. He had paid his respects to Father and Robb. There was no reason to linger among the dead. “Take me back to the stairs, Hodor,” he said.

“Hodor,” said Hodor, picking him up. “I’m going back up,” he told Hal Mollen, who was waiting by the steps. “But I want you to follow Melisandre. I shouldn’t let her be down here on her own. I want
to know where she goes and what she does.”

“As you command, my lord.” Hal called for one of his other men to escort Bran and Hodor back to the castle.

It was a relief when the darkness was replaced by blinding winter sunlight. “Where would you like to go, my lord?” the guard, Gared, asked.

*It is not so much a matter of where I want to go as where I have to.* A lord could not choose his duties. “My chambers,” Bran said. “Robett Glover will be back from his hunt soon.” The younger of the Glover brothers was his main advisor at Winterfell, other than Hal Mollen. If there were things to be done, Robett would know.

To get back to his chambers they had to pass through the godswood. Sometimes, on nights when there was no wind, the old gods would reach out to him. But not today; today, the godswood rang to the splashing of children playing in the hot springs and the unfamiliar laughter of people who were not his siblings or Jojen or Meera or Osha or Maester Luwin. “Hodor,” said Hodor mournfully, no doubt thinking the same thing.

When he got up to his chambers, Maester Wolkan was waiting for him with a letter. “From Casterly Rock,” he explained as Bran squinted at the lion on the wax seal.

“From Tommen. King Tommen.” It felt strange to say that too. *The war made everyone into kings.* Bran waited for Maester Wolkan to leave, then cracked the seal to read:

*Bran,*

*I wrote you seven pages, but I’d sooner send a messenger, or say it all in person. So I’ve just sent this for now.*

*Right now I’ve got my own problems to worry about, so I can’t help you with your war in the North yet. But hopefully I’ll be able to do that soon. You could come to the Rock and see me, or I could visit you in Winterfell, if that’s easier.*

*There’s a lot for me to say, and with everything that’s happened, it would be impossible for me to describe it all. I’ve seen battles and weddings, I’ve seen Riverrun and Casterly Rock, I’ve met people from Dorne and the Reach and all over. I’ve made new friends and some enemies. I’ve seen a lot of bad things. But I’ve seen some good things as well. I’m glad we had our adventures.*

*I don’t know anything about three-eyed crows or dead men walking, but I know you wouldn’t lie about them. So I can’t send you help yet, but if I can send you food or gold or something to make the winter easier, then just ask.*

*Your friend,*

*Tommen*

Bran glanced out of the window. The past was a thousand miles away. *You should make friends with King Robert’s children,* he recalled his mother telling him, long ago. *One day you may be grateful to*
have friends in King’s Landing.

Instead we had Robb and Joffrey, and they had a war. And Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella were never the king’s children to begin with. He felt a shadow looming above him. “The things we do for love,” a man’s voice said, and then he was falling backwards, out into the empty air… slamming his back into the hard wood of the chair.

The door of his solar opened and Robett Glover entered with two companions: Ser Donnor Locke, old Lord Locke’s son and heir, and Lady Jonelle Cerwyn, a homely woman of around thirty years who was the lady of Castle Cerwyn. “My lord,” said Glover. “We heard you went into the crypts with a red priestess.”

“Yes,” said Bran. “The Lady Melisandre of Asshai. She is still down there now.” He stopped; Glover was frowning at him. “You don’t approve.”

“My lord,” said Ser Donnor. “There was a time… well, the crypts are sacred to the Starks of Winterfell – and if not to them, then to the old gods. Forgive me, but it will doubtless aggravate some of your bannermen if you are known to be bringing new gods into a place so significant to the old faith.”

“The Starks of Winterfell are guardians of the old faith,” he replied, quoting something in a book he had read. “In the old days, they were not only Kings of Winter, but the foremost champions of the old gods. And besides, we will need every man possible if we are to defend against the Others. Red priestesses, and Lannisters too.” He held up Tommen’s letter. “King Tommen has agreed to help us with supplies and coin—”

“Lannister gold is false gold,” said Ser Donnor.

Lady Cerwyn nodded. “The Lannisters always pays their debts, true… but they will be counting this as a debt, no doubt, and they will be expecting some sort of due from you.”

“I will not refuse his help,” Bran said.

“We did not ask you to. But before you accept it, my lord, you should be aware of the risks involved.”

“I am aware. Tommen is my friend—”

“He might have been five years ago, but a lot has changed since then and now,” said Robett Glover. “Those who lost sons and brothers at the Red Wedding and during Stannis’s campaign will be none too happy to see Lannister banners riding through the Neck.”

“They will be none too happy to die against the Others,” Bran said.

Glover changed the conversation. “Regardless, my lord, there are other matters which demand your attention. The first concerns the Bolton inheritance. With the death of the wildling Mance Rayder, rights to the Dreadfort have reverted to the Warden of the North. Evidently, we cannot give the castle back to Ramsay Bolton—”

“Ramsay has a child by Jeyne Poole,” said Donnor Locke. “The child is young and uncorrupted at this time—”

“A child in the custody of an unstable mother and Barbrey Dustin,” said Lady Cerwyn. “The Poole girl is insensible, as you all saw when she was in Winterfell. No, if we give this child the birthright of the Boltons, we are giving Lady Dustin control over half of the North. And if this child turns out like
Ramsay… the risk is too great.”

“But if we hold onto the Dreadfort, Lady Dustin will not be happy,” said Bran.

“Lady Dustin is one woman. She cannot threaten your hold over the North. But if we grant her control over the Dreadfort, she can.”

“You might take a middle course, my lord,” said Robett Glover. “We could give the Dreadfort to one of your other lords. Someone who proves their loyalty in the war ahead. And that way, your lords would have a reason to fight harder.”

“And what if we judge Lord Manderly to be most willing, say?” said Donnor Locke. “White Harbor would extend its influence even further.”

“Better Manderly than Dustin.”

“Aye, for now. But times change. Nonetheless, certain alliances can be ensured…” He looked at Bran. “Ensured through the bonds of marriage.”

He did not understand. “Who’s getting married? Do you need me to give permission.”

“Aye, we do,” said Glover. “But you’ll choose the bride, my lord.”

“Me?” spluttered Bran. “I… who would want to marry me?”

Who would to marry a sad crippled boy?

“Someone who wants to be lady of Winterfell,” answered Lady Cerwyn. “And there are no lack of prospective brides for you, my lord. We have looked at the highborn girls of around your age. Lord Manderly’s granddaughters have only a few years on you, and they are said to be very fair to look upon. Wynafryd may inherit White Harbor someday, but Wylla is closer to your age and said to be of a fierce and loyal disposition. She spoke out against the Freys of the Crossing before the whole of her grandfather’s court.”

This was not where Bran had been expecting the conversation to go at all. “We might look further north,” Glover said. “The Umbers—”

“I fear you might have a hard time with an Umber girl,” said Lady Cerwyn. “Most of them are as big as the men. There are the Mormonts of Bear Island, I suppose. Lady Maege’s youngest daughter, Lyanna—”

“I’ve met Lyanna,” Bran said, “and somehow I doubt she’ll marry me. Or anyone.”

“Lord Ryswell has a cousin, Myranda,” said Lady Cerwyn. “She would give you a good alliance. Eddara Tallhart is the Lady of Torrhen’s Square, a maid of fifteen years. And there are girls of your age from Houses Glenmore, Whitehill, Overton, the Flints of Widow’s Watch, Reed—”

“Reed?”

“Yes. Lady Meera is unmarried. And heir to Greywater Watch with her brother’s death.”

It was strange to think of Meera as a marriage prospect, as a name to be tossed aside as someone Lord Stark might want to marry, if he cared to. Somehow Bran thought he’d rather have her as a friend. “Nevermind,” he said. “It doesn’t matter. But… you know… this isn’t an easy decision. I’ll think about it.”
“Of course, my lord,” said Glover, stepping back. “Should I leave you with a list of names?”

“If you want.” Was this how Father would have picked someone for me to marry? Would he just bring me up to his chamber and say, Bran, you can marry one of these girls, if you like. And if you don’t, then you can marry one of them anyway. He liked to think Lord Eddard would be kinder than that, but given the sacrifices a lord had to make, he wouldn’t have been surprised.

He read the names Robett Glover had put down. Words, just words, and words are wind. Yet behind each of those names lay an entirely different future. A wife, children, my happiness at stake on a blind decision. Was this what being a lord was like? Bran tried to push it to the back of his mind.

He unrolled Tommen’s letter again. “You’re a lord too,” he said out loud. “A king, in fact. Perhaps you’ll know what to do.” He started to write. By the time he finished, Lord Glover brought him some more duties, to do with last year’s import revenues and harvest tithes and so forth, and then it was midday. After that, the hours fell away quicker still, afternoon and sunset and moonrise. Bran watched the yard from his window, looking down over the boys at their sword practise, wishing he could join them. Ser Kyle Condon, who served Lady Cerwyn, was teaching the boys now, his voice replacing Ser Rodrik Cassel’s in the yard.

He had supper with Beth Cassel, Ser Rodrik’s daughter. She was a curly-haired girl about a year older than Bran who spent her days nursing the castle’s infirm and wounded, Old Nan among them. “She is not long for this world,” admitted Beth. “It’s almost as if she clung to life only until Hodor got back.” Old Nan was ninety-eight years old. “She will be gone soon.”

“I should see her,” Bran said.

Beth shrugged. “Maybe. But it’s not my place to say, my lord.”

Back in the old days, Bran had dismissed Beth Cassel as another of Sansa’s insipid friends who liked to do nothing other than sew and eat lemoncakes. But now she was one of his only links to the past. “Robett Glover says I need to marry someone,” he said.

“Oh. Are you asking me?” She gave him a teasing smile. “Even if you were, I’d have to refuse you.”

“Why?”

She blushed. “You’ve got a guardsman called Duncan… actually, nevermind, my lord. Anyway. I’m sure Meera will be lucky to have you.”

“Meera?”

“Well, how many other Northern ladies do you know?”

“Meera and I aren’t… we aren’t…” Bran shook his head. “Everyone gets the wrong idea.”

“Oh, no, Bran. I think you have the wrong idea. It’s obvious—”

“Even if it was true – and it isn’t – I wouldn’t be able to tell her today. We had an argument. About… about something stupid.” Was Melisandre more important to him than Meera? And speaking of Melisandre, where was she?

His steward Wallace poked his head around the door. “Lord Stark,” he said. “The Lady Melissandre has returned.”

Beth stood. “I’ll leave you to it.” Melisandre came in as she left. Bran felt a curious tickling sensation
when she approached; the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. The room felt a lot warmer, too.
“Did you do that?” he asked.

“Did I do what?”

“The fire… it seems…”

“Warmer. Yes, it would.”

“Can you… can you use fire like that?” It would be useful to have someone who could manipulate
fire in the war against the Others.

“Sometimes. But much of what men call magic is illusion. As I’m sure you know.”

Bran waited for her to explain.

“I have seen you in my dreams, Brandon Stark,” she said. “And not always on the side of light. I see
you with three eyes, all in different colours. Blue eyes. Red eyes. Green eyes. Dark eyes and bright
eyes.”

“My eyes are blue,” said Bran.

Melisandre looked at him as though she were trying to stare into a very deep well. “They are for
now,” she said. “The future is less certain… there is a connection between you and Them, Brandon.
I fear the day will come when you will stand with our greatest enemy… yet I also see a day when
you will be our greatest ally in the wars ahead. A time will come when you must make a choice. It
may be the Great Choice that decides the fates of men. I thought it was so with Stannis, but…”

“You thought Stannis was the Prince that Was Promised.”

“I was wrong. The Prince that Was Promised will come to me in the north, in the midst of this war.”

Bran frowned. He could not think of any princes in the north. Did Mance Rayder have a son? But
the promised prince has royal blood, and Mance has none. He only had one theory, and he was
wary about telling Melisandre, but he did so nonetheless. “I… I met a man who thought Rhaegar
Targaryen might have been the promised prince. Or maybe his son, Aegon. There was something
about the dragon having three heads.”

know what it means. Benerro thought it might refer to Daenerys Targaryen, and her three dragons,
but…” She did not finish her thought.

“Did you find what you were looking for in the crypts?” Bran asked.

“I found many things. Few of them were encouraging. The lower levels of your crypts are collapsed,
I saw.”

“It’s always been like that. All my life.”

“And with good reason, I think. There is an old evil down there, something so ancient, and yet so
recent.” Her eyes flashed. “The day may come when you have to open those crypts, Lord Stark. And
that is a choice only you can make. This castle is held together by old blood magic. The very
foundation stones and the roots of the oldest trees are steeped in sorcery such as I have not seen since
I left Asshai. Old magic. Dark magic.”
Melisandre put her hands on his. “When that day comes, the darkness will call to you. It will attempt to ensnare you, to entice you. You must resist it.” When she put her hands on his knees, Bran felt a shudder of warmth in the limbs that had been dead and cold for so long, fire creeping through his veins. He could feel his toes twitching, his knees bending, his muscles contracting and relaxing. Just a little more… a little more and he would leap out of his chair, running and jumping and climbing and—

Melisandre moved her warm hand to his cheek, then to his neck, down to his heart. I will fly, Bran thought, drunkenly. I can fly. He was starting to breathe heavily, inhaling the sweet and smoky smell of the red woman’s hair. She was more beautiful than anyone he had set eyes upon, and her eyes glittered a thousand colours, a thousand reds, a thousand eyes and one, like Bloodrav—

Wake up. The voice pierced through him, sharp as a needle. “Summer,” Bran said, startling upright. That had been Summer’s voice. He glanced round the room frantically, half-expecting the wolf to be there in the doorway. But they were alone. He looked back at Melisandre. The ruby at her throat was shimmering, glowing bright as blood. She used something on me, Bran realised, and were it not for Summer, I would have succumbed. He leaned back in his chair, away from her. “I hope you find what you are looking for at the Wall,” he said coolly.

Melisandre had gone paler than snow. “Y-yes,” she said, swallowing, fearful. “Yes, I hope so. For the sake of us all.” She stood and backed towards the door. “Good night, Lord Stark.” And she was gone.

After, Bran sent for Hal Mollen. “When Lady Melisandre was in the crypts, where exactly did she go?” he asked.

“She wanted to go down deep, m’lord. As deep as deep goes. We could barely see two feet ahead of us, even with the torches. There’s a place down there… where a man starts to forget there’s a world above. And then there’s the whispering. Always whispering.”

And the day may come when I have to venture down there, thought Bran. “Thank you, Hal,” he said. “Can you send Hodor in, please?”

“Hodor?” Hal’s fingers trembled as she spoke. “Yes, my lord.”

Bran frowned. “Is something wrong, Hal?”

“I… no, my lord. It’s just…” The guard captain swallowed. Bran had never seen him looking so afraid. “Hodor, my lord. When you’re down there, that’s what they whisper.”

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes I get to a point where I’m about halfway through the chapter and I look at the wordcount and see I’m at 5000 words already. There’s a lot of story that I wanted to tell - Old Nan, Bran's interaction with the old gods, and some wolf dreams - but didn't get to.

That being said, a lot of this stuff is incidental to the main plotline of this chapter, which is the interactions between Bran and Melisandre, and the mysteries of the Winterfell crypts - I promise we will return to this, in time, because there's a lot down there which deserves to be explored.
Next: I moved a few chapters round, so we've got a Casterly Rock double next.
The Lannisters are strangers to winter.

In the yard below, blunted tourney steels smashed against one another and against padded leather, arrows thudded into straw dummies, while men called “Halt!” and “Again!” and “Now!” as they sparred and drilled. Jaime watched from the balcony, resting one hand on the rail.

“That one has a good stance,” said Ser Jasper Peckledon, pointing to a young man with a peacock on his shield, who was busy beating his bigger opponent into the dust.

Jaime watched as the bout restarted. He shook his head. “The boy is fast, but he waits till the last second before moving out of the way. He tries too hard to outsmart his foe. In the Kingsguard, he would face men bigger and faster and smarter. I cannot afford to have the king protected by a man who fights so dangerously.” He was close to hypocrisy, but Jaime stuck to his judgement. “And the Serretts are too bloody proud for my liking.”

“As you say, Lord Commander.”

Ser Loras pointed. “What about him?” Though he was not of the Kingsguard, there was no one else in Casterly Rock with a thimbleful of the right sensibilities to carry out this task. Jaime had come to appreciate Ser Loras in recent days. He looked where Loras was pointing. “That one? With the jester on his shield?”


“Worthy?” Jaime snorted. “Oh, none of them are worthy. Not even you, Ser Jasper. The best I can say is they are… not unworthy.” He doubted there were seven knights in Westeros who were worthy of the Kingsguard. Barristan Selmy, if he is still alive… Brynden Tully, at a stretch… Brienne of Tarth… “They don’t deserve the honour of a white cloak,” Jaime said, “but when does any man ever deserve his fate?”
Footsteps on the terrace alerted him to the approach of Garrett Paege. The boy came up the stairs breathing heavy. He brushed down his snow-dusty tunic. “Ser, I’ve word from the queen. Her Grace would like to see you.”

Jaime sighed. “I serve at Her Grace’s pleasure.” To Ser Loras he said, “meet me in the great hall when you can and tell me if you see anything more promising.” Then back to the boy: “Lead the way.”

The snow had not ceased over Casterly Rock. In the Stone Gardens dozens upon dozens of snowcastles had risen. Jaime had been one of these children, once; page boys wrapped up in woollen mittens with scarves around their windburned faces, squires and young knights pelting each other with snowballs as they defended the garden’s covered bridges. One of the snowballs hit the back of his cloak, white against white; a hoot of laughter went up.

He took his hood down as he went inside. The upper levels of the Rock were chilly, but Cersei refused to move, so every day servants brought up rugs and tapestries and warm firewood to the upper levels to accommodate the queen and her courtiers. On the stairs he passed two boys carrying a massive tub of hot bathwater, and a serving maid struggling with the weight of a huge tapestry. Lannister guardsmen in red wool cloaks marched down the hall. Of all the Great Houses, only the Lannisters had enough money to put all their guardsmen in wool and fur come winter. As Jaime understood from their council meetings, they were importing a healthy amount of sugar, spices, grain and fruit from the Summer Isles and the Free Cities and other places that did not feel the winter as keenly.

He found Cersei with Randyll Tarly, Qyburn and Harys Swyft. The queen’s cups and candlesticks had been cleared to one side to make way for a large map and a host of markers. “What’s this?” Jaime asked.

“The red are ours,” said Lord Tarly. “The black are Stannis’s.”

“Stannis is dead.” A pause. “Or not. I suppose one tarred head looks quite like another.”

“We never said it was not Stannis’s,” Cersei snapped.

“But you have your doubts.” He glanced back at the map. “I did not know Stannis had so many men…” The red still outnumbered the black, but not by as many as he’d thought. “No matter. It is only a map. Is that why you brought me here, because I have seen maps before—”

“If I wanted a fool, I’d send for uncle Kevan,” said Cersei. “No. This is something else. We have received a letter from our beloved uncle, warning of raids on our coasts.” She scowled. “Qyburn.”

The maester took over. “There have been incursions all the way from Kayce to the Crag. They came in under the cover of last night’s snow. The town of Humphall on Fair Isle was burned, and they attacked at Feastfires too.”

*Oh, this is interesting.* “Was it Stannis?” Jaime asked.

“It may have been. Ser Kevan describes the attackers as having the Greyjoy kraken on their shields. And the sigils of several other Houses from the Iron Islands.”

“Robert should never have granted Balon Greyjoy mercy,” Cersei said. “It was one of the few military mistakes he did make.”

Lord Tarly cut in. “With all due respect, Your Grace, King Robert’s greatest weakness as a leader was his failure to properly enforce discipline. It cost him at Ashford, and it cost him on the Iron Isles.
Indeed, he should have taken Balon’s head, not just his hostage.”

“It is little use to speak of things that might have been,” Jaime said. “It does not bring us any closer to a solution.”

“Oh, it does,” said Tarly. “We must wipe them out. The Iron Fleet broke upon the Honeywine; I saw it with my own two eyes. These are but the remnants of Euron Greyjoy’s fleet, broken men attempting a raid when they think we are weak. Drive them back entirely, I say. Leave no man, woman or child to tell the tale of their failed advance. We can raise a force within a week.”

“And who will command?” asked Jaime.

Cersei’s smile had all the sweetness of sour milk. “I thought you might command them yourself, dear brother. Your men need to see you out in the field again.”

“Winning pathetic victories against reavers armed with sticks and stones? Oh, indeed, we will all benefit from such small victories.”

“Daeron the Young Dragon won much of his reputation by overplaying his small victories.”

“I am not Daeron the Young Dragon.” Jaime shook his head. “Send somebody else. What about you, Lord Tarly?”

“I am occupied with greater preparations,” said Tarly, not explaining what that meant. “The queen is right. And if you win a victory here, it will stand you in good stead to win another on the road to King’s Landing.”

“Daenerys Targaryen has dragons,” said Jaime. “These ironmen do not. This will not be the same sort of battle.”

Cersei picked up one of Stannis’s pieces. “Let us put the reavings aside for a moment, and consider something else. It is possible that Stannis – dead or alive – has formed an alliance with the ironborn.”

Jaime frowned. “What?”

“He could have promised them that malformed thing he calls his daughter,” said Cersei. “The girl is barely fifteen, but the savages will have no qualms about that. She—”

“You’re not making any sense. This is Stannis Baratheon. A man as stubborn as iron. Do you honestly think he’d let the ironborn have any stake in his kingdom? And don’t you remember the Battle of Fair Isle, Cersei? Don’t you remember who destroyed the Iron Fleet?”

“You may be right.” Plainly she could not have cared less. “Either way, it would be irresponsible to leave such a thing unattended. We—”

“If you are asking me—”

“The king is asking,” said Tarly. “Not us.”

“And have you asked the king? I can’t see him, unless he is hiding under a table somewhere.”

“We called him to the council, but he is otherwise indisposed.”

“How convenient for you,” Jaime said. There was some foul play here. “Tell me: did you think to call Lady Margaery and Prince Quentyn to this council?”
“They are diplomatic guests of the king, not appointed members of the council.”

“But I am. And I am telling you now that I am currently indisposed with my duties. Send someone else.”

“And who would you suggest, ser?”

There was no name on his lips, but Cersei stepped in. “Even if we do send Ser Jaime, we need not decide such things now. Qyburn, Ser Harys, Lord Tarly, leave us. There are things I must discuss with my brother.”

Tarly appeared not to hear her. “We cannot leave these things alone forever. They will not resolve themselves. Ser Jaime, maybe you should find some loyal men to ride as your captains. Ser Kennos Kenning might serve, and Ser Lyle Crakehall is newly returned from Sarsfield; I am sure he will not object.”

The queen: “My lord—”

“—I can lend you five hundred of my men, fifty cavalry, a dozen knights. But your provisions—”

“My lord,” said Cersei coldly. “I need to speak with my brother.”

Lord Randyll gave her a look of brief fury before backing out, Qyburn and Ser Harys following. No sooner had the door closed than Cersei’s rage returned. “Tarly is overstepping himself, Jaime.”

“You named him Tommen’s Hand.”

“Aye, because I thought it would make him amenable to my cause. Not because I wanted him to rule. He brought four thousand men, Jaime, but he acts as thought it were forty thousand. Lord Randyll would never have dared speak to Father like that.”

“If you had kept Uncle Kevan as your Hand—”

“Don’t you dare lecture me about Uncle Kevan.” The anger flashed erratically in her eyes, there one moment, gone the next. “Half of my council abandons me in my time of need, and half of them seek to overrule everything I say, as though a weak and feeble woman is incapable of understanding their big words.” She banged her goblet down on her desk. “Wine.”

Jaime filled her cup cautiously. Most days, Cersei was in her cups by evenfall. If she drank like this all the time, it was easy to see why. She finished half the cup in one sip. “And which are you, Jaime? Do you seek to flee from the lion’s den, or throw a rope around the lion’s neck?”

“I am whatever you need me to be, sweet sister.”

Cersei frowned. “I want you to be my brother. But you only want to be the Lord Commander.” She drained the wine. “I warned you of this.”

“What?”

“When you joined the Kingsguard, I warned you it would be a lifetime of cold beds and icy nights and chilly cloaks. I could never have loved you old and shrivelled like Gerold Hightower. And yet here you stand before me, a ghost in a shroud with one hand who barely remembers who he once was.” She laughed.

Jaime did not remember any of what she had just recounted. Cersei had encouraged him to join the
Kingsguard, as he recalled it. *How else will I see you in King's Landing, when I am queen?* Sometimes he wondered whether Cersei would have chosen Rhaegar over him. She'd promised him otherwise… but had some of her kisses felt final?

“I love you too,” he muttered.

“Do you?” She laughed. “Anyway. There is another matter, one I would sooner not share with the rest of the council until I have to.” She walked to her desk and pulled out a letter. Her fingers trembled a little as she unfolded it. Halfway through, she stopped to pour another cup of wine.

“You should be careful with wine,” Jaime said, against his better sense.

“Once you read it, you’ll be wanting a cup too,” she bit back.

She was not wrong. She passed the goblet to Jaime, but unfortunately he reached for it with his golden hand and sent the wine sploshing all over the floor. “Oh, leave it,” Cersei hissed, “let Joy Hill clean it up. It’s all she’s fit for. What do you make of it?”

“I… there is nothing to make of it.”

“They have my daughter.”

“I know, I read it—”

“They have my daughter!” Cersei banged her fist down on the table, sending the map figurines skittering. Jaime sensed she had been preparing this outburst all morning.

“Keep your voice down if you don’t want the whole castle to know.”

“Be silent. And don’t just stand there looking like a halfwit. A cripple is bad enough. What are you going to do about this?” She clenched her knuckles so hard they turned white.

“What can I do?”

“Kill Littlefinger, for a start.” Cersei began to pace. “Since your ears seem to be clogged, dear brother, I will tell you loud and clear: he has Myrcella! Captive! In a cell! What are you going to do?”

“Oh, I’ll just ride into Harrenhal, kill Baelish and Sansa Stark and all the lords of the Vale with my golden sword, and ride back out into the sunset on my pure white steed with the wind blowing in my hair.”

She slapped him. Jaime was still reeling from the blow when she set upon him. “If I had been wrongfully imprisoned halfway across the realm, what would you do then? Myrcella is no different. She is your daughter—”

“Yes. And you are doing exactly what Littlefinger wants you to do. Make no mistake, I would gladly have him beheaded if I could, but it is not so easy as dispatching an entire army to Harrenhal.”

Cersei balled her hands into fists. “I know,” she said at last, suddenly calm again. “But that is exactly what I intend to do. Which is why I need you to convince the king he needs to rescue Myrcella before Margaery Tyrell plants any ideas in his head.”

“You… want me to convince Tommen?”
“He listens to you. More than he does to me, anyway. Sometimes, I swear, that boy can be as wilful as Joffrey was.”

Fortunately he is far less prone to fits of insanity. “So you want me to convince Tommen to rescue his own sister?”

“Yes,” she snapped. “He respects you, Jaime. If anyone can convince him, it is you.”

Jaime almost laughed. If anyone can convince your sister, Ser Kevan had said when he arrived here, it is you.

“If not for me,” she said, “then do it for Myrcella.”

For Myrcella. He would never admit it in front of Cersei, but he doubted Myrcella was innocent of the things Littlefinger had accused her of. And saving her… well, some things are not possible. He considered writing to Brienne, asking her to help his daughter if she could. Or maybe that was a ludicrous idea. What would you do, Brienne, if you were in my place?

The wench’s face swum in front of him. I would know right from wrong, she said. And I would know my duty, too.

But what if your duty was wrong? Jaime did not want to continue the war any more than Tommen did… but he wanted to save his daughter… but he was under oath from Aegon to try and end all this… but his sister was appealing to him… but she was on the verge on madness… but if he did not listen to her, who would?

“I will talk to the king,” he said.

“Good. Another thing. Insufferable as he is, Tarly has a point about the ironborn incursions. I want you to talk to Lyle Crakehall, or someone else you think is responsible. I need this dealt with before Tarly forces it down my throat.”

“As Your Grace commands.” Jaime bowed and left her.

He decided to leave the matter of Tommen until the evening, as the king would be more likely to listen if Jaime did not intrude on his daily routines. He would use his regular evening visit to discuss the matter. No harm would be done from seeking out Strongboar, though. The knights in the training square told him he was in his chambers. Ser Lyle’s squire told him he had gone to visit a brothel. The whore, after much chagrin that he was, in fact, not searching for a bedmate, told him Ser Lyle had headed out into the city. Jaime went back to the knights, asked where Lyle liked to drink, all the while wondering whether it would indeed be easier to ride to fight the ironborn himself.

It was past noon when Jaime finally discovered Ser Lyle in a winesink in a seedy quarter of Lannisport. Garrett Paege waited out front with the horses. “Keep your sword ready,” Jaime warned him, “and try not to get stabbed.”

Strongboar was not pleased to see him. “You’ve got half a hundred jumpy little squires following your footsteps, Jaime. I come to this place because it’s quiet. It’s hardly going to be a secret anymore when people hear you came here.”

“Well,” said Jaime, “for what it’s worth, I doubt I’ll be coming back anytime soon. This is a little grimy for my liking. I’m afraid I also visited your ladyfriend. The redhead. Oh, nothing like that, but don’t be surprised when she starts asking after me every time you climb on top of her.”

Ser Lyle looked as though he might kill him. “So: you’ve spoiled my afternoon, and probably quite a
bit more than that. What do you want, Jaime?”

“It isn’t a matter of what I want. It’s what my sister wants. What the king wants. And my nephew can be very generous when it comes to his friends.”

“Do you think I could get a ship named after me?” Ser Lyle joked. “One of the ones they’re building out on the bay.”

“Probably not. Cersei will give them names like Pride and Glory.” And Avarice and Beauty, and Fickle and Radiance.

“I swear, your sister’s got half of Lannisport working on them. Why? Who are we sailing against?”

“Now there’s a question.” The whole world, if Cersei has her way. “The ironborn. Though you won’t be sailing. You’ll be riding. At the head of an army, carrying the king’s banner. You’ll have a dozen squires to attend to your needs, a whole train of lovely ladies if you want them, and an unhealthy number of lesser knights and lords to bow and scrape to your every command.”

Ser Lyle frowned. “The ironborn?”

“There have been raids up on the coast near Kayce. We need someone to see what is going on. It might be the ironborn, it might be Stannis, it might be both.”

“Oh, good. Another war.”

“You seem disappointed.”

“I don’t have the appetite for it.”

Now it was Jaime’s turn to scowl. “What do you mean? I’ve known you to keep fighting for days without rest.”

“Days, Jaime. Not months. Not years. When your father sent me out from Casterly Rock to harass the Riverlands, he said the war would be done in three months. Then the Young Wolf broke your host beneath the walls of Riverrun and we kept fighting all year, up and down the Trident. Darry, Maidenpool, the Green Fork, The Fords.” He counted the battles off on his fingers. “I spent half a year in Pinkmaiden Castle after they took me at The Fords. Then we had the Red Wedding, and Joffrey’s wedding, and Tommen’s wedding, and there was peace, for a time. But then it was back north to help you with Raventree and Riverrun, and then we were fighting Stannis all the way down the Blue Fork, and then there was the Tumblestone and I thought everything might be over... but no, we came back west, there was the Golden Tooth, Sarsfield, Lannisport... and now I return here – I missed my wife dying in childbed, my son doesn’t know me anymore – and you want me to head out again? I’m tired, Jaime. I’m sorry, but I am. I’d tell you to find someone else, but you’ll have no luck. If you heard some of the things they say around the campfires at night...”

“What things?”

Ser Lyle says. “They say they’ll mutiny. When your sister says ‘go to war’, they’ll throw their swords down in the dirt and refuse to march. They’ve all lost brothers, fathers, sons. They don’t want to go any further. Any of them. They used to speak about it in whispers for fear of being heard. But now they talk about it freely at supper, and they say the same things at the high tables. You know how I feel, Jaime, don’t you?”

“I know my duty,” Jaime said. He wasn’t trying to sound cross, but it came out that way. “Sometimes there are things we hate doing, but we have to do them anyway.”
In the end Ser Lyle made some languid promises and said some words. Jaime did not think they meant anything, though.

“Any luck, ser?” Garrett Paege asked, as Jaime mounted up outside.

“Luck’s got nothing to do with it, Garrett. Tell me true: if I walked into a tent full of your King’s Companions and said we were riding to war again, what do you think they’d do?”

Garrett thought about it. “They’d pretend to be happy. They’d go out and sharpen their swords and practise their archery. They’d drink and laugh and boast about all the other battles they’d fought. I’d probably join in with them. I wouldn’t mean it, though. I killed a man at Lannisport, ser. But I’m not proud of it.”

“Nor should you be.”

“W-when did you first kill a man, ser?”

“I was fifteen. With the Kingswood Brotherhood. I cut his head off.” Jaime did not remember the man’s face, only the head spinning through the air.

“Are we going to war, ser?”

“I don’t know, Garrett. I don’t know.”

Jaime returned to Casterly Rock unsatisfied, with growing hunger in his belly. As luck would have it, Ser Loras Tyrell came in as he was settling down to a meal of sausage-and-pepper stew in the great hall. Prince Quentyn followed him.

“Ah, Ser Loras.” Jaime forced down a heel of bread. “Have you brought any good news for me?”

“I have news. Whether or not it is good is up to you, ser.”

“How many names?”

“Three. Ser Tion Falwell, the one we were watching when you left. Ser Symond Lefford. Ser Jaime Wyndhall.”

“Jaime? I am flattered.”

“Lefford is the best fighter of the three, but his temperament leaves something to be desired. There was a lot of hacking and slashing. The other two were good. Hardly knights of legend, but as you said, that might be a good thing.”

“Oh, indeed. Men like you and I need to be the sole recipients of glory. Send them up to my chambers this evening, after they’ve finished their training. Is there anything else?”

Prince Quentyn spoke up. “It does not concern the Kingsguard, my lord, but my lady wife was wondering when she might have an audience with the king. She has matters to discuss with him.”

“As do we all, Prince Quentyn. Perchance Lady Margaery’s matters for discussion concerned peace agreements, no?”

“I don’t know—”

“Come now, you’re Dornish; you can lie better than that.” Jaime was decidedly unimpressed by Prince Quentyn. “As it happens, the king is indisposed for the rest of the day,” he said. “Lady
Margaery had best wait till the morrow before consulting with him.”

He did not think his lie would work, but Loras and Quentyn exchanged a cautious nod. “Very well,” the prince said. “I will speak with my wife.” They rose from the benches and left Jaime alone.

Cersei would be pleased that he had managed to keep Margaery away from Tommen. He had bought her time, but what could she do with it? If he failed to convince the king, this would all be for naught.

Jaime spent a couple of hours doing nothing in the Kingsguard Tower while he waited for sunset to come around. He started a letter to Brienne, but after an hour of wondering how to phrase his problems the only word he had written was Brienne. He balled up the paper and threw it out of the window into the salt sea far below. *How long has it been since I was a child, and willing to jump down there after it?* No one would be jumping from the Rock today, though. The sea waves would be frigid; winter was making its slow and relentless progress from the north, as sure as anything. *Ned Stark is laughing in his grave somewhere. The Starks can endure winter. The Lannisters are strangers to it.*

But then again, Ned Stark was dead, so maybe he shouldn’t be putting so much stock in his warnings. *Look how much good they did him.*

It was close to moonrise when he went down to Tommen’s chambers. The king left him waiting outside the door for an abnormally long time before appearing in the doorway. His hair was a little dishevelled, his skin a warm pinkish hue. “Beloved nephew,” said Jaime, “you look as though you have been simmering in the fires of young lust.”

“Lust?” Tommen’s scowl was remarkably similar to Lord Tywin’s. “What lust? I was… chasing cats. Ser Pounce keeps… eating all my papers.”

Jaime stepped past him into the solar. “I hope you are well, Lady Eleyna!” he called. Then to Tommen: “Don’t worry, I won’t tell your mother.” *She’s like to have you both flayed.* “But if it does go beyond… ahem… make sure you do things properly.” Fathers were supposed to have this sort of conversation with their sons, weren’t they?

“Good evening, Ser Jaime.” Lady Eleyna appeared behind the king. “Excuse me, Your Grace. I need to see to a few things, but fret not, I will be back in time for supper.”

“Ah, to be young again,” Jaime said to Tommen. “I remember… lots of girls…” *And all of them named Cersei.* “You were lucky to inherit—”

“What do you want?”

“A conversation with my favourite nephew.”

“You don’t have any other nephews.”

*I don’t have any nephews at all.*

Tommens settled down in a chair beside the fire. “Have you seen Ser Pounce anywhere?”

“No. Why?”

“I told you. We *were* chasing cats. It’s a game, see. She’s my friend, that’s all, ser. I don’t appreciate you implying otherwise.”
“As you say.” This was not getting off to a good start. “There is a matter I’d like to put before you. Your mother and I received a letter this morning from Harrenhal.” He leaned towards the boy. “You may want to pour yourself a drink. It is not easy news to swallow—”

“Myrcella has been arrested,” said Tommen, almost boredly. “And imprisoned for attempting to kill Robert Arryn.”

Jaime was stunned. “You know?”

Tommen fidgeted in his chair. “I’ve known for nearly a week. Ty Frey – my friend from the Riverlands campaign – sent me a letter, telling me what happened. It’s not good.”

“You knew?” Jaime ran his hands through his hair. “You knew and you neglected to tell your mother?”

“I thought she’d only panic—”

“Don’t lie to me, Tommen.” He was becoming surprisingly adept at all these court games. “You haven’t told her because you disagree with what you think she is going to say.” It was another moment before Jaime realised the implications of that. “So… you mean to abandon Myrcella to Littlefinger?”

“No. I mean to act in the best interests of my people. If I send men to attack Harrenhal, they will die in their thousands. And when the Vale lords hear that Lannister men are on their way, do you think they’ll just let Myrcella go? No. They’ll use her as a hostage, and it might be they’ll maim or kill her. As you should know.” He nodded to Jaime’s stump. “Strategically—”

“Strategically it makes sense, yes. But she is your sister! You shouldn’t even dream of giving up on her, yet here you stand, willing to do just that.”

“I’m trying to save her! When you were a captive of the Tullys, did uncle Tyrion send an army marching into a death trap to save you?”

“No, but he sent men to help me.”

“And those men died, didn’t they? What do you propose I say to my men? ‘I need some of you to break my sister out of Harrenhal, but you’ll probably die trying?’ This mess is of Myrcella’s making. We told her to make an alliance with Robert Arryn, not try to kill him.”

“Littlefinger—”

“Even if Littlefinger does have some involvement, she shouldn’t have been such a fool to trust him!”

Jaime had to resist the urge to slap him. “Tommen,” he warned, “you are starting to sound dangerously like Joffrey.”

“How? By trying to spare my people a bloody war instead of… nailing antlers to their heads and flinging them over the city walls?” Suddenly he jumped to his feet. “Don’t you dare stand there and liken me to Joffrey! And while you’re at it, ser, maybe you should consider who it was who saved your brother!”

“You said some words to Mace Tyrell. It was your crown that saved Tyrion!”

“You think a crown saved your brother? Tyrion lived by my mercy and you know it!”
The room had suddenly gotten very cold. And looking into his son’s eyes, Jaime saw some of Tywin Lannister in there, buried deep down. But it was only there for an instant before remorse swallowed it. “I shouldn’t have said all that,” Tommen said. “But I meant some of it. Like what I said about Myrcella. I want to help her.” He balled his fists again. “Of course I want to help her. But I can’t risk the lives of thousands to save one. At least… that’s what I’ve been telling myself. I don’t know yet. I… don’t really want to talk about it. Just tell Mother… I’m having doubts.”

Jaime sighed. “She won’t accept that, and you know it.”

“It’s the truth.”

Was there any point in arguing? Let them finish this themselves, he thought. “As you say, Your Grace.” He headed for the door.

“Uncle,” blurted Tommen. “What do you think I should do?”

He could offer nothing but the truth. “If it were my sister,” he said, “I’d feel honour-bound to go and retrieve her… but I’m not a king. Our situations are very different.” But as he climbed the staircase to his sister’s tower, Jaime wondered if that was the case. He and Cersei had been steadily growing apart ever since Joffrey’s wedding. Today the rift was wider than ever, and tomorrow it would be wider still, and the day after that… Someday it will splinter and break into a thousand pieces, and love will turn to hatred.

Cersei was seated at her desk with a stack of papers, but she was not reading any of them. She seemed fretful. “Well?” she demanded.

“Do you want the good news first, or the bad news?”

“Spare me the performance, Jaime. Tell me what you have to say.”

“As you wish.” It would be better to start with the good, he decided. “I spoke to Lyle Crakehall. He will lead our men up to Kayce. That problem is resolved.” Truthfully, he had no idea what Strongboar would do, but they could cross that bridge when they came to it. “That was the good news. The bad news is Tommen—”

“I made a mistake sending you,” Cersei replied instantly. “I knew this would happen.”

“Did you know that he already knew? About Myrcella?”

That did surprise her. “Already… he already knew? And he did not mention it? We had a council meeting only yesterday. How… how…” She began to splutter. “How can he know?”

“A letter.”

Cersei was not really listening. “The Tyrell girl,” she said, “I can sense her hands all over this. She has been trying to turn Tommen against me from the day she arrived at Casterly Rock. Filling his head with fables and lies and her own plots…”

“Maybe so,” said Jaime. “But your theory is ungrounded. Tommen has not shown the letter to anyone, as far as I know. And I believe his objections are entirely of his own creation. He says he isn’t willing to risk thousands of men in a march on Harrenhal.”

“And I suppose you just acquiesced to this?”

“I am the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, as you said. I serve the king.”
“Don’t lie to me, Jaime. When did you ever serve Robert? Or Joffrey? Or Aerys… hardly an example of Kingsguard virtue, are we, now?”

Jaime’s temper flared. “I have enough people holding Aerys against me without adding you to the pile. Besides, what did you want me to do? Defy Tommen? Tell him it is wrong to save the lives of his men—?”

“I expected you to teach him the meaning of family.” She stood, seething, paced across the room to the window. “I should have expected something like this.” She walked back to the map table and picked up one of the red lions, as if to crush it in her fist. “So, then. It seems I will have to resolve this myself.”

“Cersei—”

“The king is not the only one who can raise an army,” she said. “I will hold another council when this news arrives publicly. All I need is Tarly’s permission as Hand and the approval of a majority of the small council.”

“Tommen will not like this.”

“Then Tommen doesn’t need to know about this.” She pointed him towards the door. “And he will not know, until the time comes for him to announce this in court. He will be hard-pressed to make any objections when it comes to saving his own sister. He cannot be seen betraying his own family.”

She seemed to be forgetting the time their father had put Tyrion on trial, but Jaime did not mention it. “As Your Grace commands,” he said, uneasily backing out. The huge enamelled giant Ser Robert Strong was outside her rooms. Jaime felt even more uncertain as the knight held his gaze. There is something not right about him, Jaime had decided. But he thought it best to put it behind him. If only he could do the same with everything else. Cersei is underestimating Tommen, he thought. If he gathers the Tyrells and Prince Quentyn to his side, he will have nearly enough of the small council to stop her plans. Which left only him, in the middle of it all, stuck between loyalty to his king and loyalty to his sister.

Nightfall found him back in the Kingsguard Tower. He was sitting by the window with a cup of wine when Garrett Paige came up to tell him three knights were without, sent up by Ser Loras Tyrell. “Send them in,” said Jaime. “One by one.”

The first knight had taken time to make himself look impressive. He wore his finest doublet and a sword with a jewelled pommel. “And who are you?” Jaime asked.

“Ser Tion Falwell, Lord Commander.”

“The knight of the motley fool.”

Ser Tion frowned. “If I were named to the Kingsguard, those would not be my arms anymore.”

“A good thing. A knight who bears a juggler in motley on his shield would seem to be an ill prospect for the White Swords.” Jaime pointed to the flagon. “Will you take a cup?”

“No, my lord. A… a Kingsguard should be alert.”

“True. But you aren’t a Kingsguard, so what do you know? Whereas I am, and here – can you see – is my wine cup. I see you took time to dress yourself nicely before you came up to my tower.”

“I thought I should present myself as I would if I were speaking with the king,” said Ser Tion.
“I’m glad you have your priorities in the right order.” Jaime scribbled that down on his paper. *Vain. Rash. Thoughtless.* “The Falwell colours are red and yellow?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Indeed. Yellow… yellow is like gold, only not as good. You are like a Kingsguard, Ser Tion. You certainly look the part, and Ser Loras has told me you are fine swordsman. But you aren’t a Kingsguard.” Jaime drew a line through Ser Tion’s name on his paper.

“Ser?”

“You can go now. Send the next one up. Ser Symond, I believe.”

The second knight was a Lefford, but unlike Ser Tion, he did not wear his house colours, favouring instead a brown leather tabard and padded breeches. Presumably he had come straight from the yard, though he barely seemed to have broken a sweat. He was broad in the shoulders and well-muscled in the arms and legs. “Ser Loras told me you were the best fighter of the lot,” he said.

“That’s because I am,” said Ser Symond. “And better than the Knight of the Flowers too, I reckon.”

“Are you certain? Ser Loras is rather good with a lance. For example, if I were to put you up against him in the yard for a tilt at the joust—”

“The joust?” Ser Symond laughed. “Of course it would be the joust. I cannot claim to have Ser Loras’s skill with long lances.”

Jaime wrote down on his paper: *A good fighter. An arrogant arsehole. Very well. Let us assume you are better than Ser Loras. Are you better than me?*

“I…” The knight chewed his lip. “Forgive me, Lord Commander, but you are a forty year old knight with one hand.”

“Yes. And I am Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, too. I think there might be a reason for that, don’t you?”

Ser Symond took the bait. “I fear it is not your fighting skill, ser.”

“I often think the same. Perhaps you are better than all of us, Ser Symond. But I don’t like you. Not one bit.” Jaime crossed out the second name. “Good night.”

The last knight up the stairs was the youngest of the three, somewhat nervous looking. “You are Ser Jaime Wyndhall?”

“I am, my lord.”

“I fear the Kingsguard already has a Jaime.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Hmm.” Jaime traced a word on his paper, but did not write anything. “And why should I name you to the Kingsguard, Ser Jaime?”

“That’s for you to work out, my lord. I… I will be diligent, brave, true… I could say many things, but I fear they would all ring hollow. Actions speak louder than words, my father says.”

“Your father speaks wisely. Do you take a lot of advice from your father?”
“Yes, my lord. He is older and wiser than I am.”

“My father was much the same,” Jaime said, half-lying. “I have a question for you, ser. What makes a good Kingsguard, in your opinion?”

“His duty.”

Jaime stopped with his pen halfway to the paper. “His duty? An… interesting answer. So: let me tell you what I think, Ser Jaime. You would be a reasonable Kingsguard. You have a certain… conscientiousness your peers lack. But I don’t think you want to be a Kingsguard. Which is a strange thing, as many boys would consider it the height of their achievements, but… I have to ask: why not? Is it love, mayhaps? Or do you have some other path in mind.”

“I don’t know which path I have in mind. But I would like to explore them.”

Jaime wrote a single word on the paper. “So you don’t want to be a Kingsguard?”

“…No.”

“Well. That makes it simple, then.”

It certainly did not. _Ser Loras sent me three knights_, Jaime thought, as the moon rose behind his desk and bathed him in light, _none of whom are right for the Kingsguard. Am I becoming too cynical in my old age, or is it something else?_

He glanced down at the parchment again, where he had written all the notes he needed.

_Vain. Rash. Thoughtless._

_A good fighter. An arrogant arsehole._

_Misguided._

The last niggled him most of all. _Misguided._

He could hear Brienne of Tarth’s voice in his ear again. _And who does that sound like, ser?_

The day had been an utter failure. He had failed to persuade Strongboar to lead the army up to Castamere, he had failed to convince Tommen to send men after Myrcella, and he had failed to find any knights to join the Kingsguard.

Was that really a bad thing, though?

Jaime summoned Garrett Paege back into the room. “Garrett,” he said, “if I told you I’ve failed in everything I’ve done today, and yet I’ve regretted none of it, what would you say?”

The boy thought about it for a moment. “Well, ser, I’d tell you put the wine away, for a start.”

Chapter End Notes
On the chapter title: In the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort experienced by a person who simultaneously holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values.

***

We've reached CHAPTER 100!

Not my favourite Jaime chapter, but there is a lot of competition. This was one of the longest chapters in the story until I cut it, leaving out quite a bit till the next chapter. There's actually not much I can say about this chapter, as a lot of it is setup and a lot of it doesn't really come into play until the next chapter, in which Tommen goes full Joffrey. It does have quite a few big character moments, but I'm wary of saying too much and leaving nothing for you to discuss in the comments.

***

The writing is going very well. I've got one big sequence to go, and a few resolution chapters here and there, but as I've said, everything is planned out, and it's now just a simple task of following the blueprints.
Chapter Summary

“I’ll raise my army, march into the north myself, and kill every last one of you.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TOMMEN

Tommen mashed the snow together with his fists, forming it into a low mound that would make up one of the castle’s curtain walls. He shivered a little. Even in his gloves and scarf and cloak, he was cold. The wind blowing into his face did not help. He brushed a crust of snow off his eyebrows.

“Come help me with this,” he said to Eleyna. “I need another tower, down there.”

Eleyna looked up. Her face was red from the wind, her hair frayed about her face. She looked most beautiful like this, thought Tommen, but did not dare to say it out loud. “You can’t order me round like that.”

He smiled. “Your king is commanding you.”

“My king can go jump off a cliff if that’s how he’s going to talk to me.” She knelt beside him. “But I’ll be gracious. What do you need?”

“I need…” He looked at her again. “I need… I don’t know. We… we could build a tower. Or a wall. Yes, that’s it. I was building a wall. But if you want a tower—”

“You’re turning red again.” She pressed her cold mittens to his face. “Sure you wouldn’t like to go back inside and warm up?”

Tommen was about to say yes, but then he saw a familiar face across the yard, staring deliberately back at him. “I will,” he promised, “in a minute. But first I need to talk to someone.” He stood. “Try not to knock anything down while I’m gone.”

Margaery was sitting on a bench beneath a tall elm tree, away from the snowball fights of the squires on the frozen pond. Tommen went and stood in front of her. “Loras told me you were looking for me.”

“I was.” She gestured for him to sit.

There was a long moment of silence. “How are you?” Tommen asked eventually.
“I’m fine.” Wind sighed through the branches. Up above a pair of robins were courting. “You know,” she said, “we haven’t really had that much time to talk. Alone, I mean.”

“You’re not here about—?”

“About King Aegon? Why would I be? Haven’t we settled that?” There had been news from King’s Landing of a great battle between King Aegon and his aunt Daenerys. The letters said Aegon had emerged victorious, but Tommen was not so sure. *Daenerys has dragons. How did he beat dragons?*

“So what do you want to talk about?”

A pause. “We were married once. That’s not something you can easily brush away.” Her eyes drifted back across the garden. “You like her, don’t you?”

“Who? Eleyna? What? No. We haven’t…” He faintly remembered kissing her when they were both drunk. But that all felt as though it had happened to a different person.

“Do you really think I’m so blind not to realise?” Margaery asked. “And do you think I haven’t heard about your betrothal—?”

“Yes, well, that…” No one seemed to know what had happened to the betrothal. It had never been official, so for all intents and purposes, it had never existed. *It was only Myrcella’s idea, and—* Tommen stopped himself. He did not want to think about Myrcella. “Does… does Prince Quentyn make you happy?” It seemed a good thing to ask.

“He’s… sober. Unsurprising. There was a time when I thought I wanted something else… but yes, he *does* make me happy.”

“That’s all I want for you, my lady. But… I think there is something more you want from me.”

She hesitated. “I still remember the first conversation I had with your sister. She said I should treat you kindly… and I don’t think I did.” She clasped her hands. “I suppose it’s guilt. As for why I’m telling you now… well, you often don’t appreciate things until after they’re gone.”

“I know what you mean.” *If they kill her, what will I remember of her? Will I remember her smile, her laugh, or just the mad look she had in her eyes that night before we went our separate ways?* His attention returned to Margaery. “I think I mistreated you too. It was just… I was… you remember the night, and…” *A different way. A new way.* He could not say any more.

“You don’t have to talk about if you don’t want to. I think you’d just had a bit too much to drink. It was best for both of us that we didn’t.” She sighed. “Anyway. The reason I’m telling you this now is because… well… I’m pregnant.”

Tommen swallowed. “Oh. That’s… good. I… is it a boy or a girl?”

“We don’t know yet. But… that’s why we want to get things done quickly. I want to be back in Highgarden when the babe comes, or down in Sunspear. Which means we can’t stay here much longer… which means…”

“You need me to sign those agreements *now*.”

“Yes. Or soon. I know you understand.”
Tommen’s mouth went dry. *I have to decide.* “Of course,” he said, as if it would be easy to give it up. “I’ll… have to think about it first, though. And I should probably talk with the small council. And Myr—” He broke off; he would not trouble her about Myrcella. “…and, um, if you need anything, like… um, pregnancy herbs or… something, you need only ask.” He stood. “I should get back. I’ve got things to prepare for tonight.” He was having supper with Princess Shireen.

“So of course. You are busy. I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

Tommen hesitated a while longer. *Can I tell her about Myrcella?* But by then, the moment had gone on too long. He turned on his heel and walked back through the trees. It was snowing in earnest now. He paused for a moment and watched the squires at their play. In a moon’s turn he would be six-and-ten, a man grown… but for now there was nothing to stop him from scooping up snowballs and joining the rest of them. He found Willem Frey and Rollam Westerling, and together they attacked the ringfort they had spent most of the afternoon building, and Tommen threw snowballs at them and laughed himself stupid, and for a time all his woes were forgotten.

But of course it could not last forever. At sunset he headed inside to prepare himself for supper. Pageboys ferried firewood up the stairs for his hearths, and the maids brought new rugs and tapestries to keep his rooms warm. Fresh rushes and herbs were laid down, silver cutlery and ceramic crockery, candles for the king, writing paper for the king, fish for the king’s cat. Tommen stood by the window, now dressed in a blue doublet slashed with wine red, while Eleyna sat crosslegged on the floor with Ser Pounce in her arms. “He reminds me of you,” she said.

“What?”

“Ser Pounce reminds me of you. Small wonder you get along so well.”

“How? He’s a cat, and I’m… not.”

“You’re both skittish.” She moved towards him. “What are you reading?” Tommen held up the book: *The Lives of Four Kings.* “There are only three copies of this book in all of Westeros illuminated in Maester Kaeth’s hand,” he said. “There were four, but Joffrey destroyed one at his wedding.”

“Read to me,” Eleyna said.

He cleared his throat. “It speaks in testament to Daeron’s success that we remember him so fondly as the Young Dragon,” Tommen read. “However, one must objectively question whether his Dornish wars were worth their heavy costs. He ignored the… in… in…”

Eleyna looked over his shoulder. “Insurrection.”

“—the insurrection of his Riverlords, and that would lead to trouble in the reign of his b-brother Baelor.”

“I like it when you read,” she said. “But you’re shaking. Are you thinking about your nightmare?”

“No.” The lie came easily now. “I don’t have nightmares.”

“You don’t have to lie to me.”

Tommen closed the book. “I don’t have to tell the truth either.”

“You should.” Eleyna frowned. “You shouldn’t keep secrets from me.” She sighed and passed him his cloak.
“It was about Myrcella,” he admitted. “Ty’s letter… I’m just thinking, Mother will find out soon. Maybe today. And then…”

“You’ll have to tell her.” Eleyna took his arm. “But you shouldn’t worry so much about what you’re going to say.”

“There are other things too.” Tommen pointed to the letter on his desk. “Bran still needs a reply. He explained all his problems. He says the dead are marching. Blue eyed demons with swords made of ice, and an army of corpses at the Wall.”

Eleyna smiled at him. “Are you sure he wasn’t just joking with you?”

“Bran wouldn’t do that.” Tommen was sure of it. “I said I’d send him supplies… but how is Mother going to react when I tell her that I’ll send food to save a Stark of Winterfell, but not men to rescue my own sister? I… I suppose I could ask him to write to Sansa. Maybe she can save Myrcella. Maybe.”

Before he could consider that, Willem Frey opened the door to tell them that Princess Shireen and Ser Davos were here, and would His Grace be wanting to entertain them in his solar awhile, or would they want to start their supper right away? “I’ll eat with them now,” Tommen said, already making his way down the stairs.

He wasn’t sure how to greet Shireen – she was his cousin, but also his enemy’s daughter – so in the end he gave her a smile and all the proper courtesies. Ser Davos afforded him a cold nod, and nothing more than that.

Tommen and Eleyna sat at one end of the table, Shireen and Ser Davos at the other, with a wealth of plates and dishes and tureens between them. The first course was a fish soup with clams and cockles.

“We had lots of fish on Dragonstone,” Shireen explained. “And that’s all that they eat up in the Vale. Isn’t it, Ser Davos?”

“It certainly is, my princess,” the onion knight replied. “On the Three Sisters, they call it singer’s stew.”

“When did you visit the Three Sisters?” Tommen asked.

“On my way north to White Harbor. King Stannis sent me to speak with Lord Wyman Manderly.”

“I’ve met Lord Manderly. He… he was very… interesting.”

Ser Davos met Tommen’s eyes and dared him to look away first. “He lost a son at the Red Wedding. As did the lords Umber and Cerwyn and Blackwood and—”

“And I lost a brother,” Eleyna said. “We all lost loved ones to Walder Frey’s treachery and duplicity.”

“Forgive me, my lady, but you are young and likely you have not realised that this was the work of Tywin Lannister. Perhaps if you knew of that collusion, you would not be so keen to sit at his grandson’s side.”

Shireen put down her spoon. “We shouldn’t be talking about this. Can’t we just sit and sup in peace? Please?”

Tommen nearly agreed, but then he remembered Captain Forley’s speech: they’re not just sons of someone else. “Ser Davos,” he said, glancing up. “You’ve lost sons to the fight against my family,
“Aye. And—”

“Then I don’t expect you to forgive me. Or to do anything except maybe… want to kill me. If that’s what you want, you will have to wait your turn. You’re not the only one who wants that. Sometimes, I want to join them myself. I don’t want to have a war, you know. But at the same time, I don’t intend to forget it. Actions have consequences, and we both know that. I wouldn’t—”

“A fine speech of empty words,” said Ser Davos, “but you are forgetting that they died in a war you started.”

“How? By being born? Your king claims that… that…” Tommen could not bring himself to say it.

“My king claims the truth, and only that.”

“Ser Davos,” Shireen warned.

“You are the product of incest—”

“—Ser Davos!”

“—between Cersei Lannister and the Kingslayer.”

There was a long silence. Tommen wavered uncertainly between staring hard into Ser Davos’s eyes and looking away. Shireen cut a slice out of the steak-and-kidney pudding and stared down at it disdainfully. “They wither and die,” Eleyna said.

No one replied.

“They wither and die,” she repeated, “when a child is born of incest, it is withered inside. Its blood runs thin and the smallest injuries make it bruise for weeks and months. Any sickness will carry it away in its cradle. And even if it survives that, it suffers from maladies of the mind that would leave it barely capable of speech, and ills of the body that leave it vulnerable to shaking fits and unable to walk or hear or see. If the king is born from incest, then how is he sitting strong and proud beside me?”

No one replied.

“Very well,” said Ser Davos at last. “Make your plea. I will listen.”

Tommern had made this same speech a hundred times before. “I want an end to it all. I want an end to people dying for me. I want you to go back to Lord Stannis and tell him that I don’t want the Iron Throne, Ser Davos. He can keep fighting for it, if that is his wish, but there is no need for him to fight me. All I want is the West, and to be left alone in peace with my people.”

“King Stannis will not accept those terms.”

“Then I will have to destroy him.” Tommen said it almost firmly enough to convince himself.

“You? A green boy with no understanding of war?”

He could not go back now. And he did not want to. “I’ve beaten your king once. That’s why all his tents and all his armies are gone from outside Lannisport, why he has broken and fled. Oh, I may be young, but I have won greater victories in two years than your king has in twenty.” The realisation of that left him breathing hard. I can do this. I can win wars. I can be a king. And maybe he could… if
they defended against the Targaryens from inside the Rock, they could hold out under siege for years. If they had big enough trebuchets and scorpions, they could kill dragons; he had read about in King Maekar’s *Treatise on Warfare*. But then there were all the people of Lannisport and the Westerlands beyond that, who would scream and burn when the dragons came with no shelter to hide them. “But I don’t want that,” he said to Ser Davos. “I just want what everyone wants. I want to go home.”

Seaworth considered that a moment. “None of us want a war, boy. But oftentimes men have no choice. King Stannis will fight to the very last breath, to the very last inch of soil he has to his name.”

“Perhaps he will. And you might join him, Ser Davos. You are my guests now, true… and I have no desire to break the sanctity of guest right, but if that is what I have to do to ensure a peace, I will. I’ll raise my army, march into the north myself, and kill every last one of you.” *I will not make the mistake that Daeron the Good did in being too merciful. A king must be strong.* He looked up, and this time it was Shireen’s gaze he met. He half-expected her eyes to be angry, but they were more disappointed than anything.

“Thank you, Lord Lannister,” she said. “Ser Davos and I will need some time to consider your proposition.”

The rest of the meal proceeded in chilly silence. When Shireen left, Tommen turned to Eleyna. “I shouldn’t have threatened them,” he said. “That was too much.”

“You did what you had to, and you sounded decisive about it. If you go back on it, you will lose that advantage.”

“I keep thinking back to the *Lives of Four Kings*… what would Daeron do? What would Viserys do? What would Lord Tywin do, if he was here?”

“But he isn’t here.”

“No.” Tommen considered that. “He isn’t.” *Lord Tywin is gone, and the Westerlands are left with me.* “Lord Tywin would tell me I was being ludicrous. That this is my throne, and I should keep it.” He curled his fingers into a fist. His hand still twinged. “My father would say the same. And Mother…”

“But you aren’t any of them.”

Tommen was about to answer when a door sprung open across the hall and his uncle Jaime was there. “I am sorry to have interrupted your evening,” he said, “but I have no personal interest in matters of the small council, so I thought I might share—”


“Your Grace… I thought it was your choice not to attend—”

*Mother is doing something she does not want me to know about.* He shouldered through the door and went down the stairs three at a time, nearly knocking over a maidservant on the way. He was at the door of the council chambers when his uncle caught up. Ser Jaime grabbed his wrist. “You might want to think this through, Tommen.”

“Think it through? They’re going behind my back. This… this is treason.” He shoved the door open. Every head at the table turned to stare at him: his mother, Qyburn, Ser Harys, Lord Tarly. The Tyrells were not present. “What is happening here?” he demanded in his king’s voice.
Queen Cersei was the first to speak. “Oh… Your Grace. We thought you were not coming.”

“Don’t lie to me. You never sent anyone to inform me. So, Mother, tell me what is going on here, before I start to think that you are fomenting treason.”

“We did not tell you because we thought it was kinder to wait—”

“Tell me.”

“Myrcella,” his mother said softly. “She is…”

“I know. About Myrcella.”

“Yes.” She nodded, barely listening. “I know this must be a shock to you. It did to all of us. But we’re going to put things right. I’ve written a letter for Ser Addam, telling him to return to the Rock. And we are gathering an army as we speak—”

Tommen took a deep breath. “There will be no army,” he said.

“Oh. Perhaps you did not hear the news entirely. Myrcella has been imprisoned.” She explained it as though speaking to a stupid child.

“I know. And imprisoned is not dead.”

She ignored that. “This is a direct attack on House Lannister. We must answer this fiercely.” Her eyes sought out Randyll Tarly. “How soon can you raise ten thousand men?”

“Imprisoned is not dead,” Tommen said again. “Myrcella got herself into this mess. She must get herself out of it. I will not send my men running in to die stupidly when we have just finished another war. You will not send this message to Ser Addam. You will tell the men you have already raised to stand down.” Once he had started, it was not hard to keep going.

“You are in shock,” Cersei said bluntly. “Qyburn. You should take the king back to his chambers. Perhaps some essence of nightshade to help him sleep?”

This is not kindness. This is attempted treason. The shock of the realisation almost made him lose his footing. “No. I am the king.”

“Tommen—”

“I am the king.” His anger was growing. “I am the king, yet you try to keep me ignorant while you raise an army?”

“You do not understand—”

“Oh, no. I understand perfectly. This council is adjourned.”

“The king is tired,” Cersei said again. “Qyburn, see him to his chambers.”

“Sit down, Qyburn, or I will have you killed.” For one moment, Tommen honestly meant it. “Mother, you will tell me what you have done, and you will tell me now.”

“I am Queen Regent,” she stated. “The Hand of the King has agreed to this, and the small council.” Cersei pointed at Lord Randyll.

“Well, then. In that case, the Hand of the King is sacked.” The words were out of his mouth before
he could think about them. “Sacked. Which makes me the sole power in this room.”

“Your Grace,” Ser Jaime started. “I—”


“Your Grace—”

“Go. I want to speak with my son alone.”

Tommen did not watch them go. Instead he fixed his eyes on his mother’s. He wondered if his expression matched the fieriness of hers. When the room was empty, he said, “You tried to raise an army behind my back.”

“How long have you known about Myrcella?” she asked.

“A week,” said Tommen. “Ty Frey sent me a raven.”

“A week.” She drained her wine cup. “You have known for a week, yet you have done nothing.”

Tommen did not answer.

“Nothing while your sister sits in a cell, waiting for you, praying for you. And I suppose you would have us do nothing now, too, lest we disrupt your alliance with your precious Lady Margaery.”

“Margaery has nothing to do with this—”

“The whore has everything to do with this. Mark my words, if her current approach had not succeeded already, she would have weaselled her way into your bed soon enough—”

His face burned. “You take that back. Take that back now.”

“Or what? You’re too weak to make that decision, and we both know it. So I will tell you what is going to happen. When the situation is announced in court tomorrow, you are going to give the order to raise an army to march against Harrenhal, to retrieve your sister, and kill every last one of her betrayers.”

“No,” said King Tommen.

Such a simple word. The word he had been searching for all his life. No. And here it was, laid out bare on the table in front of him. No. He squared his shoulders, set his jaw. “No.”

“No?” asked Cersei.

“No. I said no. You will not raise an army. You will do nothing. As I said, Myrcella’s fate is her own doing. She involved herself in a conspiracy, and I cannot afford to give up my only chance at peace because of her stupidity and yours. I am the king, and I am—”

She slapped him. It shocked him more than it hurt. In all the years, she had never hit him before. For a moment they stood, and Cersei looked as though she might even apologise, but in the end those were not her words. “Joffrey would never have fallen down on his knees like you,” she said at last. “You are weak, aren’t you? I thought you were my sweet boy, my innocent boy, but really you are just weak. Crying at the sight of blood, at the thought of war, at the very idea of tearing up the weeds. House Lannister will not bow to you, Tommen. Not to some meek boy who would discard the legacy of his grandfather and his brother and all those who came before him, and defile their
memories by bending the knee. The Rock is prouder than that—"

“I am the lord of Casterly Rock,” King Tommen said. “Lord Tywin’s heir. The gold is mine. The army is mine. It is all mine. You are the Queen Mother, nothing more.” He pushed back his chair. “And I won’t accept your defiance. I don’t know for certain, but I’ll wager that Ser Jaime came to fetch me for the council of his own accord, not because you told him to. You wanted me to miss all of this. So if you persist in your defiance, I have grounds to arrest you for treason.” With that said, he stormed out. Anger burned white-hot inside him. Part of him could not quite believe what he had said. Part of him wished he had said it all much earlier.

He shoved the door open. The room was dark, but Eleyna was still there, sitting on his bed. “I told her,” Tommen said. “I told her I’m not going to save Myrcella.” He wanted to scream it at someone. “She said I was a disgrace to her, but it doesn’t matter, because she’s only my mother, and I’m the lord of Casterly Rock.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mother tried to stop me.” He let out a shuddering laugh. “But I sent the small council away, all of them, and now I can do what I want and we can get married and I saved all my men from pointlessly rescuing Myrcella—” Suddenly the laughter and the anger drained away and he could barely stand up any longer. Tommen slumped sideways into the wall. “—pointlessly rescuing Myrcella… Cella… oh, gods, Myrcella…” A huge hand was crushing his chest. He found he could not breathe anymore. He staggered towards Eleyna; she stepped back, looking frightened. I saved everyone and doomed Myrcella. I sacrificed my own sister—

All the breath came out of him in a shaky rasp and only then did he see his reflection in the mirror: the tears in his eyes. “I’ve killed her now,” he whispered, his words slurring. “I’ve killed my…” But I saved them. But I killed her.

Across the room, Myrcella’s last letter still lay on his desk. Tommen did not know how he made it there, but suddenly it was in his shaking hands. I hope this letter finds you well, it said mockingly. Everything is as it should be in Harrenhal. You will have your army very soon. That was Myrcella’s handwriting, yes, but the words were shaky and fearfully written, and there were tear-stained blots on the paper. He should have noticed that. Myrcella never cried. Never. But she cried for me.

Once, when he had been very small, she’d found him hiding under his bed, cringing away from the darkness. What are you afraid of? she’d asked him. The dark, he replied, I don’t like the dark. Anyone else would have laughed at him for that, but not Myrcella. She was wrong sometimes, yes, and sometimes her wrongness made her cruel… but in the end, it was all for him, always for him. He could see the fire in her eyes when she loved him, bright, angry, unquenchable. And I have just abandoned her to die. He stared past the letter and out to the window. For one mad moment, the void beckoned to him. “All it would take is one step,” he said aloud, “and I would fall as Bran fell, break as he broke.”

“But you won’t,” Eleyna said. He had nearly forgotten she was there.

He shivered. “It would only be right. I made Bran fall in the first place. He should have come with us on the hunt. I might have been able to convince F-Father, b-but… I didn’t…” His breaths came rapidly now. “I… it was always me. First Bran, not Myrcella. She is probably dead already.” He turned back to face her, teary-eyed. “I’m sorry. A man shouldn’t cry, I know, but… I don’t think I’m much of a man. I don’t want you to… to…”

The next thing he knew she was sitting on the bed next to him, her fingers in his hair, the way Mother used to do it. I betrayed her too. He tried to tell Eleyna as much, but all she did was whisper
softly at him until he was calm again. Then her hands began to creep up the buttons of his doublet, and then to the laces of his breeches. She met his eyes. “You aren’t alone. I want you to know that. And… I don’t think you have to be ever again.” Her hands enveloped his. “It’s… like armour, and it’s like a battle, trying to get to you, but… if I take off mine, will you take off yours? Just… just to make your guilt go away?”

Tommen wanted to. But not like this. “If… if we did, would it be your first time?”

Eleyna picked at her nails. “Yes.”

“I have to ask you, then… a man should… well, I want to. But I don’t want you to do it just because… because you pity me. But… I want to. When I look at you, I… I sometimes I wonder what is under your clothes. And once I dreamed that…”

“Sometimes I wonder what is under yours,” she said. Her fingers played with the hem of his shirt. “And it’s not out of pity. I promise.” Her voice was earnest, honest, and tender.

“Alright, then.” Tommen’s fingers were shaking, so Eleyna had to unlace and unbutton both of them. It took only a minute, and there they were, in their cold, pale skins, lit only by the moonlight outside. He chanced a look at her bare breasts — slightly small, quite round and entirely unblemished — and caught her glancing down into the golden hair between his legs. Goosepimples rose along their arms.

“Strange,” she murmured. “I didn’t think it would match.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Would… would you like to touch me now?” asked Eleyna.

Tommen’s only answer was a dry-mouthed nod. He extended a hand to her neck, ran it down over her breasts, lingering half a second, down to her navel, and finally towards her legs, where he stopped. His hands stiffened, his breath hitched. His heart was pounding, his head was throbbing.

“Can… can I touch you?” she asked.

A long moment. Deep breath. Another shy nod. “Okay. But…” Deep breath. “Eleyna, I have to tell you something first. You’re the first… you’re the only person I’ve ever told. Ever. And you have to promise you won’t tell anyone. If you do… you… you’ll never see me again.” Because I’ll kill you. I will.

She nodded. “I promise.”

“The reason I’ve never done this before,” Tommen said, breathing deeply, “with you… with Margaery… with anyone… is because I was frightened. Because someone else… someone did things… before. I… I was eleven.”

“Joffrey.”

“Yes. It was Joffrey. He came to my room. He brought Ser Mandon, the Kingsguard with the dead eyes, and he had a dagger. He put it under my throat, and… ‘No one will hear you scream,’ he said. ‘You’ll just die choking on your own blood.’ I asked him why he was there. He said he wanted to hurt me, because I had embarrassed him. He said he would hurt me in a different way to the usual. A new way. And he… he made me do things. He took out his… thing… and made me touch it. He made me… eat… I… I don’t know what he did in the end… I don’t know if he managed anything, but if the Hound hadn’t appeared, then…”
Eleyna squeezed his shoulder. “If… if you don’t want to…”

“I want to. I have to. Because if I don’t, I’ll always be afraid.” Another deep breath. “And besides, I’ve told you now. So we should…”

“Yes. If you’re ready… if you just get on top…”

Tommen put a hand on her waist. “Can I kiss you a few times first? I just like how it feels without anything between us.”

Sometimes the wonder of a thing is measured in how much it consumes everything else. His worries about Myrcella were not extinguished, but they were enough to fill him with a different goal entirely. Their joining was clumsy and shy and sweet as summer wine, but by the time they finished there was enough of him in her to seal their fates forever. He wrapped her up in his crimson-and-gold cloak, with the lion on the back. “I am yours,” he said, “and you are mine.”

The hours that followed were as close to bliss as Tommen had ever come. The snow started to fall outside the window, but with Eleyna in his arms, a log fire burning in the hearth, and Ser Pounce curled up unceremoniously by his feet, he was not at all cold. He took her three more times. They drank two flagons of hot wine and whispered secrets and silly stories and kissed in every way they could. “I hope this night never ends,” he told her, “but even if it does, you shouldn’t worry. I’m going to marry you soon. Oh. If you want that.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “I do. I really do. I only want this. I’d give away the kingdom, if I could have this, every day for the rest of my life.”

“I’d like that too.”

“Everyone talked about it,” he said. “They talked about how it feels, how it looks, how it sounds, and all the girls they’d done it with. But they never talked about why they did it.”

“What do you mean?”

“They only talk about lust. They never talk about the way you laugh or the way you speak to me or how you care about my books and my cats and my worries and everything. They never talk about love. I don’t want to lust for you. I don’t want that with anyone, and I don’t want to do this with anyone ever again. I want to protect you.” He sat up suddenly in the bed. There was a winter breeze through the window, but he was not cold at all. “And… thank you, Eleyna.”

“For what?”

“For making me realise what I have to do. I have to accept Margaery’s offer and give up my crown. I have to listen to Princess Shireen, and give her what she needs.” Tommen looked across the bedchamber, to where the Lives of Four Kings sat open on his desk, questioning him, daring him. It’s not just history, he realised. It’s an invitation. It’s an open book. “Because… because it’s important to be a good king,” he said. “But it’s more important to be a good man.”

Chapter End Notes

King Tommen has entered the game.

"The King Who Fell" is as close to perfect as you're going to get from me (in my humble opinion). I love the big battle chapters as much as the next man, but this, this is
the culmination of a huge character arc. It was one of the hardest chapters I've written, and probably the one that I've written the most partial drafts of.

I doubt this will hold as much significance for you as it does for me, but if you remember that A COAT OF GOLD was originally a story about Tommen stepping up to the plate, then you might see how important this is. It's making a man out of him - both figuratively and literally. And that's perhaps summed up best by this one line, which is one of my favourites in THE CHANGING OF SEASONS overall.

“No,” said King Tommen.

Inspired by the High Sparrow's line from AFFC, Cersei X; which essentially sparks a huge change in the KL plotline.

There are two other revelations at the end here which are hugely significant: Tommen blames himself for Bran's fall from the tower - then again, as we know, he has a tendency to blame himself for everything, and the revelation about a new way, which I'm sure some of you have guessed by now given that it comes up in every one of his POVs. It's a dark route to go down, and I did think about omitting that, but I think that would be fundamentally dishonest to the character.

I guess you can say that Tommen has lost some of his morals in that he has abandoned Myrcella, even if he was apologetic about it. And his shouting at Shireen was quite Tywin-like.

Also, it's important not to discount Jaime's part in this. Something which will have repercussions going forwards if/when Cersei finds out...

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The only other thing I can say is: please comment on this chapter. I know I made a similar appeal not long ago with "The Dance of Dragons", but this is one which I think has huge significance in the character arc of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS.

Thank you all for your continued support.
The Girl Who Died

Chapter Summary

I am being led away from the road, to somewhere else.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the epitome of the unreliable narrator. Bear in mind that what you're about to read may be partly or entirely untrue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THE GIRL WHO DIED

Gulls flew in circles above her head: caw, caw, caw. Arya wondered if they were screaming or singing. If they were singing, it was not a song she knew. Maybe she had known songs, once, but there had been no music in the House of Black and White, and there was none in her empty mind.

The beach was black. Ash had swallowed the sand entirely and left only a few sad grey weeds and fronds of seaweed above the surface. The air stank of brine, and her eyes hurt for no reason at all. When she said, “I am Arya Stark of Winterfell,” sand ran from her mouth and down her chin, and she spat out two mouthfuls of grit. When she stood up and put her boot down, a snail’s shell crunched underfoot, its speckled black and grey whorls shattered across the sand.

Why did I go to sleep here? She had tried to reach Gulltown, of course; she had walked for hours last night, almost till dawn, hoping to reach the city, and yet she had given up just in sight of the walls. Vague, half-recalled memories flashed behind her eyelids. I left the ship. Both of the ships. She chewed her lip. Where am I going now?

Gulltown, she decided. That made sense. Gulltown, before anywhere else. Then...

Arya stumbled up the beach, towards the wooden stairs that had been cut into the cliff face leading up. When she reached the top, she turned to survey the sea. The tide was out; it was mid-afternoon, by her reckoning, and the water was grey and misty. The Mountains of the Moon were transfixed in the vague orange glare of the sun.

A small stone gate in the southern wall was her way into Gulltown. From there, Arya wandered down cobbled main streets and wynds, between buildings bleached by black wood-smoke. It was mostly by blind luck that she happened upon the inn. It was a wood-and-stone building, three floors,
backing out onto the city ramparts. It might have been impressive, were it not overshadowed by the much taller city watchtower directly behind it. A much-maligned copper sign declared it to be the *Cat and Cockerel*, and the crude likenesses of those two animals were drawn below.

Arya had always been more of a cat than a cockerel. *Cats are quick, and quiet, and clever. Fear cuts deeper than swords.* Her name had been Cat, for a time, but now it was safe for her to call herself Arya Stark of Winterfell. A girl who was supposed to be dead.

She wondered if the family she’d left behind had missed her during the years she spent in Braavos. But why would they, when she could not even remember their names? She remembered Jon Snow, but Jon wasn’t her brother, was he? He was only her half-brother. And besides, Jon was at the Wall, a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch; he could not help her. Other than that, it was all a vague haze of names without faces and faces without names. Arya had escaped the Faceless Men, but she could not escape what they had done to her.

No good would come of dwelling on all this, though. Arya pushed open the door of the *Cat and Cockerel* and went inside. The room was ill-lit and grimy, that dusky orange colour that soaks up poppy smoke and drunken belching and dirty fingernails and the smells of blood and leather. Arya tried to not to meet any of the patrons’ gazes as she wandered up to the counter.

“Can… can I have a room, please? Just for the night?”

“Will you be wanting food, too?” The proprietor was the worst sort of innkeep, a man who would sooner stab you than merely rob you of your silver; his arms were the colour of raw meat to the elbows.

“Yes. Please.” Arya held out a handful of coins. “And a tankard of ale. Two tankards. Please.”

“Aye, I’m getting to that.” He slammed the tankards down on the table, refusing to meet her eye. It was best if she just thought she was some scared little girl in a bad place, Arya decided. But if he had any ideas, she would quickly show him otherwise. Needle was tucked into her belt, though she kept it hidden.

She went and found a table by the window. The glass was so grimy that she could barely see anything outside. *It is like being back at Pynto’s,* she thought, remembering her time as Blind Beth, begging outside the inns of the Happy Port. *If I tried to beg here, the innkeep would probably come out and beat me.*

She sat by the window and drank down both tankards as night slowly fell. Arya listened for news from the Riverlands, or from the North beyond that, but there was nothing of much interest – and if there was, she did not recognise the names they spoke. “Lord Baelish has called old Bronze Yohn down to Harrenhal,” one vinegary-looking sailor said, “for the trial of the princess.”

“He won’t answer, ‘course,” said his drinking companion, “he’s been fighting that war for ages. He ain’t gonna give up now.”

“He is. It were Lord Stannis that he fought for, and Lord Stannis is dead. That’s what I heard, at least.”

A third man cut in: “I know a man who knew a man whose cousin—”

“Nobody gives a bleedin’ fuck. Just give us no more wars; let us live through the winter in some peace. Seven knows its gonna be hard enough as it is. What with the whole country burning up again. There’s been a battle down in King’s Landing, you know.”
A merchant from the next table joined in. “Whole river’s on fire, they say. That Queen Daena burned it all up with her dragons, then she fell off over Blackwater Bay and got drowned.”

“That’s not so,” said the first sailor. “It were that King Aegon that got drowned. And it’s Queen Dan-air-ees, not Queen Daena. She won, but all of her dragons died, and the city burned down.”

“She was riding the dragon, you fool. If the dragon died, so did she. And the Dragonpit blew up, they’re saying, up on Rhaenys’s. All of Flea Bottom burning, too.”

“Well, Her Queenliness ain’t like to be down in Flea Bottom, isshe? But she died anyway. An’ your forgetting all the ships too. This King Aegon had some massive fleet, see.”

_That’s not true_, Arya thought, _it was the Sealord who had the fleet_. After the battle at the Arsenal, she’d had to get out of Braavos as fast as possible before the Faceless Men came after her. So she stowed away on a ship to Gulltown, because it was the only one she could find that was going to Westeros, other than those headed for King’s Landing. Arya wasn’t entirely sure where Gulltown was at first, but from the sailors’ conversation she pieced together that it wasn’t in the North, but somewhere not too far away. Hopefully she could be at Winterfell in a couple of moons. If she remembered where Winterfell was.

She soon discovered that the North had a port called White Harbor, but the Shivering Sea and the Bite were too cold and stormy to sail, and besides, no one was headed that way – or out to sea at all, for that matter. “And fat Lord Manderly’s closed the port too,” one of the sailors mentioned in passing, “I tell you, he’s got half o’ the Northerners up there, in his fat little castle.”

When the patrons had gone, Arya decided it was time to go up to bed. That night, in the darkness of her room, she dreamed of wolves howling, along the banks of a dark blue river. The water stirred, as though a monster were lurking in its depths. And across the riverbank Arya saw someone else. A woman in a long grey cloak, veiled, unafraid and entirely alone. A woman she nearly recognised.

The next morning, she broke her fast in the common room on hard bread fried in bacon grease and some mealy porridge, and walked to the city’s western gate. She found the stables without incident, but she changed her mind and headed over to a cloak-seller first. It had been a long time since Arya had travelled with a cloak, but she was well aware of the benefits of one: not only would it came the rain and snow off, but you could hide your face with the hood when you did want to be seen, and it would be useful for concealing Needle from travellers who might remember a girl travelling with a sword. _And you can never have too many pockets_. Yoren had told her that.

It was not until she had bought the cloak that Arya realised she remembered who Yoren was. Only vaguely, but she recalled his smelly black coat, and how he had tucked her head under his arm before sawing away at her hair as the tears ran down her cheeks and they moved away from her father’s body. It was strange that she remembered some things and not others – she remembered Jon Snow and her father and vaguely her mother and Robb and Sansa, and of course she knew Bran, who visited her sometimes in her dreams and was probably her brother. She remembered boys called Hot Pudding and the Bull, or maybe they were the same boy, and she remembered the red priest from the Brotherhood and Lord Derrick, whom he served. But surely they were not all the people Arya Stark had ever known.

Arya went to the stables with her new cloak and her stolen bag of money, and picked out a horse: a piebald gelding with a slightly angry look, well suited for distance travel, or so the stablemaster told her. She handed over the coin and the stableboy offered to help her mount, but Arya shrugged him off. It had been a long time since she had last ridden a horse, but it would be easy enough to get back into, she hoped. “Not like that,” Arya said, “I want to ride astride, not sidesaddle.”
The boy bowed. “As m’lady commands.”

*As m’lady commands.* That dislodged a memory that was locked away far inside her, but she could not remembering where it was from, or whose words they were. “Thank you,” Arya said mildly when the stableboy was done. Then she mounted up and started out onto the dusty road. A mile out from Gulltown she took a right turn onto the cobbled road that wound over the green hills towards the horizon. Beyond them lay the Riverlands and the North, and the memories that would hopefully return to her.

The road was oddly quiet, as though all the people were sleeping. Arya vaguely remembered a different road, and a different time, where thousands of carts filled with refugees headed in the opposite direction to them, and womenfolk shouted that the war was *that way*; why would they be so foolish as to go north?

She was passing through a copse of cedar trees shortly after sunrise on the third day when she sighted a wagon being pulled along by an ancient limping mare, and atop the wagon a fat black dog, and a septon walking barefoot beside it. They were coming up towards an intersection in the road, and Arya knew that they would meet at the same time. She spurred her horse on a little, but it refused her command fervently, and by the time she had him under control again the septon was hailing her and it would have been rude to turn away.

“Good morrow,” he called out. “Good morrow to you, my lady!”

Arya squinted, wondering if she had known him before. He was a big man, with shaggy grey hair and a big windburned face; his leathery hands suggested he might once have been a blacksmith. Arya noticed he was entirely barefoot, though his feet were so rough and callused they might have been leather soles. *He is a penitent,* she decided, having seen such men outside the Sept-beyond-the-Sea. “Good morrow,” she said back, drawing her horse to a halt in the middle of the road.

“Are you travelling towards Saltpans, my lady?” he asked her. “If so, let us share the road together; it would not do for you to be alone.” He had a wide, almost comical smile. “I am Septon Meribald, travelling brother and penitent sinner. If you have confessions to make, or questions to ask, I am at your service, though I humbly admit the skills of reading and writing are beyond me. And if it is guidance you are seeking, look no further, my sweet lady. Lady…”

Arya decided that she would sooner not tell him who she was, but there was no false name on her lips. “I’m… me,” she said after a pause.

“Lady Me.” Septon Meribald did not know what to make of that. “As you will. Have no fear, I have travelled with those who are unwilling to disclose their identity publicly. And I am as honest a confidant as you are likely to find in these parts.”

It was a strange thing for Arya, having lived around deceit for so long, but she could not detect any malice in his tone. “Where exactly are you headed?” she asked.

“For the septry on the Quiet Isle, which lies on an island in the Bay of Crabs ‘cross the river from Saltpans. The Elder Brother of the septry is a good friend to me and Dog.” He gestured to the dog, which had stood up in the wagon and was now busy barking.

Arya pointed to the wagon. “Why don’t you ride in the wagon?”

“Walking is my penance, Lady Me. The wagon is a luxury reserved for those without alternative. Though, truth be told, Dog is not without alternative. No, he has merely grown fat and lazy in recent months. There was a time when he could run half a hundred miles without stopping for breath.
Hmm… well, I confess, that is an exaggeration on my part, but my point is that the weather is not always kind to us. During summer and high autumn we travelled afoot: me, Dog, our donkey, and whatever travellers joined us on the road. But now time is short, and fast travelling is necessary if we are to make our circuit in the time we once did. And so while I walk where I can, sometimes I must needs ride in the wagon with the help of the mule that the Elder Brother and the Smith Above so kindly gave me.”

In the wagon, Dog barked.

Arya frowned. “You have a dog called Dog?”

“Well. He must have a name, but he has not told me it. So until such time as the Father Above grants him the gift of speech, he must remain Dog.”

Dog barked.

Septon Meribald tapped his oaken quarterstaff against the snowy cobbles. “Two is safer than one on the road, and I would be doing my duty poorly if I let a lady ride alone and without companions in all this snow. There are things that would make your heart miss a beat out here, my lady. Outlaws. Wolves.”

_I had a wolf, once._ Had her wolf been called Wolf? Arya thought not. “Thank you,” she said. “I would be honoured to accept your company.” Septon Meribald was a good deal friendlier than anyone else she had met in a long time, and it would not hurt to have some information on the situation in the Riverlands. Besides, what he’d said about the dangers of the road was true; Arya reckoned she could handle outlaws and wolves, but she would not refuse help if it was offered. _And he is not a Faceless Man, for certain._ Faceless Men did not go barefoot, and they did not smell of road dust and wet roughspun as Meribald did. She knew that wasn’t true, that a Faceless Man could masquerade as anyone, but she tried to convince herself that it was.

It was slow going at first, until around midday, when the snow thickened and Meribald decided that the Father Above did not want him to get frostbite, and so he climbed up into the wagon, whereupon Dog’s excited barking resumed.

“You will forgive Dog, I hope,” said Septon Meribald. “It has been so long since he and I have entertained company on the road. Winter is not a popular season for travelling.”

“They say this winter will be worse than most,” said Arya. She’d heard that in Gulltown.

“They say that every winter.” Dog jumped up into the septon’s lap; Meribald scratched him under the chin with a leathery hand. “But this winter, I think they speak the truth, for once. Winter is not only a season of cold, my lady, but a season of discontent for all. Crops do not take root in the fields, but children grow old and weary when they see death for the first time, and pestilence, and famine. Hunger gnaws at their bones. The hunger is something deep-rooted and carnal, and it forces them into sin. They steal chickens from old widows, they raid village granaries, they pelt houses with pebbles and rocks, and from there it is not long before they are burning the houses, and killing the man, and carrying off his wife and daughters to their beds. They grow lean and feral, and they are still hungry. We spend all summer trying to frighten them off, these boys turned to outlaws and broken men. We make penitent sinners of them with whip and scripture, but when winter returns they go back to their old ways, and a dozen other hungry boys join them.”

“What about girls?” Septon Meribald had not mentioned girls.

“Oh, the womenfolk sin wickedly in other ways. But theirs are more often crimes of necessity. Your
pardon, my lady, but would you not resort to peddling your flesh if it were the only way you could afford to feed your starving babe?"

Arya did not see how it was any different for men – *they kill for their wives and children, don’t they?* – but she nodded nonetheless. “Many women would. But sometimes they find money for their children, and continue regardless.” These were women like the Sailor’s Wife in Braavos, who was rich as the Sealdor, they said, but kept on being a whore anyway.

Septon Meribald nodded. “A penitent’s path is far harder than a sinner’s. It is the only way to enter the seven Heavens, but living your life with the only purpose of entering the Heavens is an indulgence in itself. And speaking of indulgences, the road is clear now for me to walk.” He jumped down from the cart. Dog went on barking, somewhat erratic now. Meribald gave him a quizzical look, and turned to Arya. “Our brave Ser Dog has smelled something.” He turned his walking staff in his hands. “Come then, you blessed fool. Show us what you have found.”

Dog barked in the direction of the hedgerows on the left-hand side of the road. “Outlaws,” Septon Meribald informed Arya. “Two or three of them, by my reckoning. A scouting party, mayhaps.”

“Are they armed?” Arya asked, craning her head to look through the hedges. She could not see anything.

“Let us find out,” said Meribald. He cupped his hands to his mouth. “Come out, my unlawful friends! Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

For a moment, Arya thought he might have gone mad. Then there was a rustling in the undergrowth and three boys emerged, grubby-faced, by the side of the road. One of the boys had a sword, another a sling with a stone in it and a dagger in his belt, the third had only a big wooden shield.

Arya reached for Needle, hidden under her cloak, and curled her fingers around the hilt.

“My friends!” Septon Meribald called. “Good to see you! Have we met before, perchance? I see so many of you on the road.”

The three boys shifted uncertainly. Finally the biggest one spoke up: “Who the fuck are you?”

“Your language leaves much to be desired, my young friend,” said Meribald, “but I will tell you nonetheless. I am Septon Meribald, a travelling septon of the Riverlands. And this is my companion, Lady… ah, a lady who wishes to remain unknown.”

What is he doing? Arya wondered, as Septon Meribald circled back to the mule. “You are looking to rob us, I suppose? Well, have a care, Dog is armed and dangerous, and so am I. As for the lady, it would be a most grievous sin to harm her. Instead, why not come and partake in our luncheon? It is almost midday, and the three of you look starved, if you will forgive my presumption.”

None of the three boys looked as though they knew what that meant. The two smaller ones looked to their leader.

“Brothers, perhaps?” asked Meribald. “Or just three lost on the road?”

A long pause. The biggest boy lowered his sword a little. “Brothers,” he muttered.

Septon Meribald nodded. “Part of some sort of band, or surviving alone?”

Another resentful pause. “Alone.”
“Ah. I see. Well, it makes no matter. Come and partake in our meal.” Meribald went back to the cart. “You will find ripe pickings if you choose to be thieves. I have food for all three of you, but should you try and take it by force, I will be less forgiving.” He brought out a loaf of bread from the cart. Dog barked. “Bread and salt is a custom of hospitality in the religion of the Seven,” said Meribald, “though I have no salt for you.” He tore three hunks from the bread, and held his hand out.

The youngest boy came first. Then the middle brother, and finally the oldest one, his sword in hand all the way. As they came up close, Arya saw how muddy they really were. They all had blond hair, but it was so lank and matted that it looked more brown. Meribald bade the boys lay down their weapons. When they had grudgingly agreed, he seated the littlest boy on the back of the cart beside Dog and uncovered one of the hampers. Inside was cheese wrapped in cloth, cold roast beef, apples that had gone slightly mushy, loaves of white and brown wheat bread. The three boys tucked in eagerly. Meribald ate only bread.

Every now and again one of the boys would glance up at Arya, then avert his eyes quickly. The oldest one even blushed to see her.

Their names were Willem, Hugh and Edd, from oldest to youngest, as they told Septon Meribald. They had been orphaned when Lannister soldiers killed their parents in the War of the Five Kings, and they had lived with their uncle for a time, but he had died three weeks ago. “Your parents’ killers will have justice,” said Septon Meribald, “the Seven demand it.” That was enough to reassure them. *They’re so stupid,* Arya thought. *How will they ever survive alone?*

Willem was uneasy throughout. “I have to keep the other two safe,” he told Septon Meribald, while Hugh and Edd were searching for frostberries in the undergrowth. “I have to. But I don’t know where to go.”

“The Quiet Isle welcomes men and boys of all ages,” said Septon Meribald. “But I do not think such lively boys as your brothers will be content to live in silence. The Gates of the Moon is not far from here, a swift journey on safe roads,” said Septon Meribald. “Can you read and write, boy? It does not matter. You will not find Lord Nestor lacking for servants, I am sure. Head up to the castle and present yourself at the sept. Castle septons always need boys to melt the wax for candles or to clean the alcoves and nooks and crannies.”

That advice given, Meribald sent them on their way with enough food for half a week, a purse of pennies, and a pat on the head. He and Arya did not really talk until supper that night, but as they were finishing the charred remnants of a salmon, Meribald said, “You will be wondering why I helped those boys, I suspect.”

“You are a septon. You help people.”

“So I like to think. Alas, those boys are as likely to be murdered by real outlaws or wolves as they are to reach the Gates of the Moon or some other safe refuge. I will pray for them, but I have no way of promising their safety. But I like to think that for a time, I made them feel loved. Just a smidgen of the Mother’s love can prove an antidote to years of neglect and loneliness. That is how we stop them from starting down the sinner’s path.”

He sounded so sincere that Arya almost believed him.

That night, as Meribald slept on the cold hard ground, she saddled her horse and rode off into the night. Arya considered taking his provisions, but she thought that an unnecessary unkindness, and besides, she was certain Dog was watching her like a guardian. She left Septon Meribald behind in his muddy bed, and continued down the high road alone.
It was a hard, rocky road, difficult by darkness, and after a time the snow rolled in once more, and the path disappeared in front of her. Suddenly she was alone again, with the howling of the snow and the wolves. Arya could not say which way she was going anymore, so all she could do was press onwards, on and on. *I am being led,* she thought. *I am being led away from the road, to somewhere else.* She shivered despite herself, and tried to hide it. *Fear cuts deeper than swords.* The fear went away after a time, but the sense of apprehension did not. That only grew and grew.

She could not say how she found them in the end. Perhaps it was inevitability, perhaps it was fate, or perhaps it was some other power, like the wolf-sense that kept calling to her by night. Whatever it was, it led her to a wooded clearing off the beaten track, and there she found them: in cloaks of seemingly every colour, a hundred men or more, and women too. They sat hunched around cookfires, sleeping, waking... preparing. Some paid her little heed, but others gawked like they’d seen a ghost. And one of them – a young man with dark hair and heavy, thickset shoulders – she thought she recognised him.

A red priest stood up behind the main firepit, smiling. “I told you she would find us,” he said to his gathered companions. “I told you.” He ushered Arya closer, and that was when she remembered. *Thoros, his name is Thoros. I dreamed of him, back in Braavos.* She stood before them, feeling apprehensive, trying – and failing – to conjure up some other names. “Where...?” she managed to say.

“Arya Stark of Winterfell,” replied Thoros of Myr. “You are a long way from home.” He held out his hand. “Come, now. We have been waiting for you.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to all my readers for all their support with the last few chapters, particularly the most recent one, where I had a frankly staggering and very heartening response in the comments.

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I’m about 80% happy with this chapter. I don’t think it was quite as good as it could have been - the beginning worked out as intended, but some of the explanations were a little contrived. And I had to cut my original ending scene, which is a terrible shame as it was one of my favourite scenes in the whole story, and tack on this ending in its place, which is why it seems a little abrupt. Hopefully the original ending scene will be released in some form in the next Arya chapter, and if not that, then it will be a deleted scene.

It was, however, fun to bring Meribald back. Yes, his circumstances are pretty doubtful, but I thought he was the right person to help bring Arya ‘back on track’, and I wanted him here after he missed out on appearing in *A COAT OF GOLD.*

Note: Though Arya meets the Brotherhood at the end here, LSH is not currently with them - as alluded to during her dream in Gulltown.
Iron Emmett stood in the middle of the training square, casting each of his recruits the same critical look. Jon waited with him, in padded leather and armour, one hand on his longsword, the other hooked through his shield straps.

Emmett had nearly fifty with him today. The wildling boys and girls outnumbered the others three to one – the others being Night’s Watch recruits and Mole’s Town folk.

“Too many of you are slack with your footing,” Emmett shouted. “Jace, Ryn, Fygar, come face the Lord Commander.” Jace was a Riverlander lad of about sixteen years, with a lean face and a mop of untidy black hair, who reminded Jon a little of Satin. The other two were wildling boys of fourteen: Ryn tall and lanky, Fygar stout with thick stumpy arms. “Attack the Lord Commander, now,” said
Emmett.

Jace frowned. “All three of us? That’s…”

“You don’t hear his lordship complaining, do you? Now attack!”

They attacked. Jon was ready for them. The wildlings came first; they were wild and undisciplined in their attack, and easily defeated once Jon fought them off balance. He wove between them, using their own momentum to trip them or turn them aside, and whapped them on the back as they stumbled past him. Jace stayed up a little longer, but he seemed almost afraid to hit his commander, and very soon he was down as well. “Don’t hold back, even in training,” Jon said, helping him up. “Wights won’t be nearly as kind as your training partners.”

Iron Emmett agreed. “Those of you who were out beyond the Wall saw what they can do. Hesitation is no friend of yours, nor is mercy.”

Jon might have put that differently. We need all the mercy the gods are willing to give us, he thought.

Emmett pointed out that all three of the recruits he’d sent at Jon had been off-balance. He corrected their feet and had them pair off across the yard. “Get your feet wider apart!” he shouted as he made his way through them, and, “Put some more into your swing, he’s not made of glass!” and, “Aye, she’s a girl, but she’ll kill you all the same, Kory!”

Admittedly, Emmett was a kinder master than Alliser Thorne, and far more willing to bestow compliments when his recruits did things right. Come sunset, when the recruits went into the bathhouse to wash or into the common hall to sup, Emmett brought a skin of snowmelt and offered it to Jon. “They’re not bad,” he said. “Better than they were, at least. That means I’m doing something right.”

“Will they be good enough to face wights?”

“With swords, yes. Bows are a different story. Some of them are good. Very good. A few are better than I’ll ever be, aye. But most of them are plain awful when it comes to shooting from fifty yards away, never mind from seven hundred feet up.”

“Take archery training more often, if that’s what it takes. And you’re going to have be better than all of them if you want to make them better. I’ll bring Ulmer in if that’s what you need.”

Emmett turned his head and spat. “Ulmer’s an arse. Mind you, he knows a few things about a bow… as you will, m’lord. Seems to me the old hates don’t matter so much any more.” He tossed up his sword. “Want to spar some? You look like you could do with a good fight.”

Jon shrugged. “I’m not as well-practised as I used to be.”

“And I’ve been learning some new tricks.” Emmett donned his helm. “Well, nobody ever said life was fair.”

They took their places in the yard and commenced. Jon tried to knock Emmett back, but the ranger had grown faster and stronger and better in almost every way since their last meeting, and very soon he found himself outmatched. His foe’s sword came down hard across his knuckles, causing him to drop the blade.

“Not quite the showing you’d hoped for, eh?” Emmett helped him up. “Especially with her watching.”
“Who?” Jon asked, turning. “Oh.” From the balcony, Val stared down at him with frosty eyes, a flicker of a smile on her full lips.

“I reckon she likes you, m’lord,” said Emmett, “the talk is, you mean to get her into your bed.”

Jon felt embarrassment colour his cheeks, but disguised it as anger. “And do you believe them?”

“No, m’lord. You’re too damn honourable for that.” Emmett pressed him again. Jon moved just in time to parry Emmett’s next three blows, before backing up in the shadow of the courtyard wall. Emmett’s next thrust scraped off the stone. Jon turned back into the middle of the yard, regained his footing, and advanced quickly upon his foe, cutting right, left, left again, high, low… till Emmett caught his strike between sword and shield and twisted, sending Jon’s sword flying. For a moment their eyes met… and Jon rushed him, sending a knee up into Emmett’s belly even as the ranger raised his sword. They both tumbled over, and for a while grappled on the ground, reduced from fighters to brawlers, till Emmett kicked Jon hard in the thigh, forced him off, and brought his sword to Jon’s throat. “You’re dead, m’lord. Sorry.”

“I would be, but I have Ghost on my side.”

Emmett turned suddenly, shock on his face. Jon laughed. “Alas, Ghost is not here,” he said, “so I am dead.” He had been forced to send the direwolf away during the day, to stop him from terrorising the livestock of the free folk.

“Again, m’lord?” Emmett asked, taking his position again.

“I wish I could. But duty calls. The wildlings will be meeting in the Shieldhall in an hour.”

“Do you really think they’re going to choose anyone, m’lord? Honestly? I saw two of their chiefs fighting only this morning. Not just sparring, but properly fighting. Sometimes you just can’t get people to work together.”

“Let’s hope you’re wrong,” Jon said, and stomped off to the armory. He took off his armour and went next to the bathhouse, to sluice the dirt and sweat from his skin, then dressed again and went up to his solar.

Clydas was waiting with the day’s news – or lack thereof, to judge from his glum expression. “Any luck?” Jon asked.

The old man rubbed at his eyes. “No ravens, my lord. Perhaps we hoped for too much.”

“If they want to claim the realm, they should defend the realm,” Jon said aggrievedly, though he knew it meant nothing. We are on our own.

“Men lie, even kings.”

“Especially kings.” What was it Stannis said? Jon heard the king’s words now, clear as day. “I was trying to win the throne to save the kingdom, when I should have been trying to save the kingdom to win the throne.”

Forget your throne, Your Grace, Jon would have said, had Stannis standing before him now, and save the kingdom, as you promised. Save the world, and everyone in it. But Stannis was too proud by half to come answering the bastard boy commander’s calling – if he still lived, that was.

Jon sighed. “Thank you, Clydas. Don’t hesitate to tell me if any ravens come.”
“If they do not come soon, my lord, they may never come at all. This blizzard is drawing closer…”

He had no time to deal with this now. “Thank you, Clydas,” he said again, dismissally.

Clydas had been gone barely a minute when Dryn arrived with Alys Karstark and her husband Sigorn, the Magnar of Thenn. Jon had been meaning to see Alys for days, but he wished she had not come now, when there was so much else on his mind. And he wished she had not brought Sigorn with her, since he was quick to anger. “Lord Magnar,” he greeted. “Lady Karstark.”

“Lord Snow.” Alys had a hand on Sigorn’s arm, as if to restrain him. Jon silently wished her good luck with that. “I hope we haven’t inconvenienced you too much. I thought it best for us to come before the vote. Sigorn is running—”

“I have no part in the vote of the free folk,” said Jon. “If you want my support, Sigorn, I cannot give you it.”

“And neither will the free folk,” said Sigorn. “The people of Thenn are frowned upon by the milk drinkers of the valleys. The free folk will never choose a Thenn.”

Jon frowned. “What point are you making?”

“Thenns are the strongest of the free folk, and I am their strongest leader, Lord Snow,” said Sigorn. “But I will not be chosen, for they hate my people. And we hate the ice-river clans. The Frozen Shore men hate the Frostfang men. Everyone hates the cave dwellers. None of us will ever be chosen through a vote. You say the free folk must unite behind one leader. Well, there is only one way that will ever happen. The same way Mance did it, and Bael the Bard and Raymun Redbeard before him. Anyone who names himself King-beyond-the-Wall through a vote will be no more our king than Gerrick Kingsblood.”

Of course, he’d known that it would come to this, but he’d expected the wildlings to figure things out somehow. “The vote is of little consequence, Sigorn,” he said, “you’ll lead the Thenns same as you did under Mance, but while you are behind our Wall, you must abide by the laws of our land, even if you do not believe in them. The Night’s Watch has a leader. The Northmen have a leader. The free folk must have the same.”

“A law you do not believe in is no law at all,” said Sigorn.

“It is. It must be. Else there is nothing to stop rape and murder and all of us being eaten by the ice-river cannibals.”

Sigorn gave him a long hard look, followed by a wordless nod, and then stomped off. His footsteps thundered all the way down the stairs.

Alys turned to Jon. “I apologise for my husband.”

“There is no need. Sigorn put it well. Most of the free folk will just shout and rage at each other down in the Shieldhall.”

She raised an imaginary cup in toast. “Ah, the subtlety the Magnar of Thenn. Will you be joining us downstairs?”

“Aye. But I’ll only sit at the back. If they see me interfering, it will only be a matter of time before they start making accusations against the Watch.”

“Are you trying to civilise them, Lord Snow?” Alys asked. “That’s how you and your brothers
choose your Lord Commander, isn’t it?”

“Our rules are more stringent. Any brother wishing to become Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch must amass two-thirds of the votes of his brothers. The choosing can take many months, even years.”

“But they chose you quickly.”

“Yes.” And I may never understand why. Sam Tarly had deceived Cotter Pyke and Ser Denys Mallister into throwing their support behind him, true, but Jon did not understand how that had been enough. Were there truly no brothers better suited to take up the Old Bear’s post?

Enough doubts, he thought. Kill the boy.

“Lady Alys,” he said, “I must appeal to you now as a Karstark, not as Sigorn’s wife——”

“I am nothing if not a Karstark.”

“Indeed. Are you aware that the Watch’s stores and granaries are… less full than we’d like them to be?”

“And I thought we were having an honest conversation,” Alys said, half in jest. “I am aware, Lord Snow. Your brother Tollett spends half his time grumbling about it.”

“Then you know that it will be mere months before we are down to sawdust and turnips. And this coming war will last longer than months.”

“I wish I could help you, Lord Snow. I really do. But it is my brother who rules Karhold, not I, and I know what Harry will say, what he must say. His own people come first. Whatever small surplus we have in our larders must be saved for them if the winter runs as long as they say it will.”

“My lady, if the Others breach the Wall, the winter will never end.” He sighed. “When you came to Castle Black, you asked me to save you. Now I beg you to save us. It will be difficult for the people of Karhold to endure, yes, but not impossible.”

“Something tells me that you mean to impose this on us, regardless of what we have to say.”

“I have no power to do that.”

“But your brother does. If the Stark in Winterfell orders that we send a portion of our harvest to the Night’s Watch, we as his vassals are honour-bound to do so. Some may refuse, aye, and none will love you or him for it——”

“If it is a choice of being loved by the people of the North or starving to death, I know my answer.”

“Wise words. But words are wind, and besides, this plan of yours is flawed. The supplies of the Northmen will give you another year at most, or more likely not even that. What will you do afterwards? It is the south where you must seek support, Lord Snow. The Tyrells and the Dornishmen——”

“I do not know any Tyrells or Dornishmen.”

“You have a sister, Lady Sansa.”

“A half-sister.” As she never failed to remind me.
“Be that as it may. I’ll wager she knows a few southrons, though, be they Tyrells or Dornishmen or… seven hells, even the bloody Lannisters might help if you ask nicely.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. Nonetheless, you have a point. What harm can it do?” Jon stood up. “Should we go to the Shieldhall?”

“Are you offering me an escort, my lord?” Alys teased.

“I may be bastard-born, but I am not entirely devoid of courtesies.” He held out his arm.

“No,” Alys said as they went down the steps and into the wormway. “But you are sullen. And Castle Black is looking rather sullen under your leadership too, Lord Snow.”

“What would you have me do? Decorate it?”

“Even the smallest things may help our morale. Oh, the Others can kill us, and they can make us fearful, but they cannot extinguish our hope entirely. You have hundreds of warrior women living on the Gift, ‘tis true, but you have hundreds more who have never known any life other than making their husbands’ homes into places of comfort. Forgive my crudeness, Lord Snow, but the hospitality of Castle Black is shit.”

“I’m sure the stewards will be happy to hear it.”

“Take your men out of the kitchens and pantries and put them up on the walls. Women may be weaker than men, but they are better when it comes to serving as stewards. We’ll put some good food in your bellies and make your sleeping quarters more comfortable. We can make gloves and hats and blankets. We have old remedies for ailments and chills and sicknesses. We will work harder and better than any of your men.”

“Gloves will not save the Wall, my lady.”

“How do you know?”

Jon shrugged. “Again, what harm can it do? I think I have time for a meeting tomorrow. Bring some of your… lieutenants… to talk this through. There will be obvious problems with having women all over Castle Black, as I’m sure you’ve realised.”

“Your brothers have taken a vow of chastity. They have sworn to take no wives and father no children.”

She was leading him on, Jon knew. “A friend once told me that our vows do not explicitly forbid us from lying with women. And besides… vows can be broken. A man may have faith in a vow when he swears it, but when the time comes…”

“And how do you know this?”

How was he supposed to explain Ygritte to her? She was sweet and fierce and funny. She was kissed by fire, and she burned as bright as any star. She was life and love and hope, and when she left me, I changed. He gave Alys a look. “Because I’ve been there myself.”

She did not pry any further. By then they were at the Shieldhall. The wildlings crowded to the front, while Jon and Alys found a bench at the back. Gradually the hall filled up, and very soon they were pushed back against the walls, and the wildlings were crowding out into the wormways. Some contenders had brought champions, dressed in the furs and feathers of their respective tribes, with shields and drums and skinpipes that fought each other to be heard. When the hall was full to
bursting, Crowfood Umber and the Norrey went up on the dais. Neither of them were of the free folk, but they were respected by them, and remained impartial.

And they were loud.

“SHUT IT!” Crowfood bellowed, while the Norrey blew his massive warhorn and drowned the rest out. “RIGHT!” Crowfood went on. “Some of you seem to think you can lead the free folk! Well, that’s for everyone to decide. At the end of this evening, we’ll have a vote, and anyone who gets more than half of the votes will become your new leader. That’s all we have to say.”

They left the dais. Drums started to beat again as the first man took the stage: Tormund Giantsbane, Tall-talker, Horn-blower and Breaker of Ice, Husband to Bears, the Mead-King of Ruddy Hall, Speaker to Gods and Father of Hosts.

“You all know me!” shouted Tormund. “I was at Mance’s right hand. Some of you will call me out on that, call me Mance’s whipping dog. And aye, he was cleverer, and he was quicker, and he might’ve been the better fighter, and he was a better leader than any of us. But he didn’t do that alone. He needed me. And so did the lot of you. I led the host to Hardhome to save you from the Others! I led us back to Castle Black with the Others up our arse! And before that, I was the first one to talk with the Lord Crow about saving you all!”

“TORMUND!” roared the front benches. “TOR-MUND! TOR-MUND! TOR-MUND!”

A warhorn cut through it all. “You are a great sack of wind, old man!” shouted Alfyn Crowkiller, jumping up onto a table. “Give it five years, and you’ll be shitting yourself to death!” He stared around the hall. “We’ve all heard the story about the bear that bit Tormund’s member in half! I’m willing to bet it bit off more than half! If you choose Tormund Giantsbane for your leader, you’re choosing a cockless wonder! The only cock he knows is the Lord Crow’s, which he’s nearly choking on! Choose him, and you’re choosing a crow!”

Alys Karstark turned to Jon. “They are not kind to you.”

“I don’t need them to be;” he replied. “What I need is for them to make a choice. It does not matter who—”

“Don’t lie, Lord Snow. You have a horse in this race as much as anybody else.”

Up on the dais, Tormund was retorting to Alfyn’s insults: “And you think it would be better to choose a crowkiller? Now, when we’re hiding behind the crows’ Wall! I don’t like this any more than the rest of you, but I know we can’t stand alone!”

Soren Shieldbreaker banged on his shield for attention. “You’ll just give us more of what Mance gave us.”

“Aye, I’ll give you that. Or near as I can. But we were good with Mance. He got us through the Wall, away from the Others. If he were here, he’d tell us to find a bit of sense.”

“How can you know what Mance would want?”

“He can’t,” shouted a woman’s voice. “But I can.” Val, Jon realised. “Tormund’s not Mance, but he’s the closest you’ll get. Aye, he’s getting old, but he’ll fight till his last breath, we all know that, and he’s led in the past. More than you have, Crowkiller. You can’t work with the crows or the Northern lords—”

“We’re free folk, woman,” snarled Crowkiller. “Not Lord Snow’s pet, as you seem to be. Tell me,
do you and Tormund get down on your knees for him together—?"

Jon’s heart was thundering. He was half-tempted to jump on the table then and there. But even then, his words would have been have drowned beneath a tirade of shouting. In the Seven Kingdoms, if you spoke to a woman as Alfyn had, you would be known by all as dishonourable, but the free folk did not have the same concept of honour. Women would fight for themselves. Val leapt onto the dais. “No,” she shouted, “but we’ll take you down to your knees together!”

“Spare me, woman,” said Crowkiller. “They’re only listening to you because your sister crawled into Mance’s bed.”

“Don’t you dare speak ill of Dalla—”

“Alfyn is right,” called Morna o’ the White Mask. “Val, you should go back to playing wetnurse for Mance’s son.”

_Gilly’s son_, Jon thought. The boy was a year old now. He had half a mind to send the babe on a ship back to Oldtown to his mother, but it was too much of a risk, and he could not send his brothers away on such a thankless mission. So he had given the boy over to Val and half a dozen wetnurses, and hoped Gilly would not think badly of him for doing so. Mance’s real son was still at Horn Hill, with her. She and Sam had named the boy Aemon Steelsong, according to Sam’s last letter.

“There have been six Kings-beyond-the-Wall since Joramun,” said Morna. “And all of them have failed, even Mance. Seems to me that there should be a Queen-beyond-the-Wall instead.” That brought a roar of laughter at first, but the sound of drums and chants of “MORNA, MORNA!” threatened to overtop them. “Oh, you can laugh,” the woman in the white mask said, “but all I see are cravens who are afraid of their women. Tormund Thunderfist, I know your wife rules you at home. And you, Alfyn Crowkiller, you’re a slave to any woman who’ll pinch your little cock for you. Not that I blame you; must be hard to find a woman with a face like that.”

“Says the woman who hides away behind her mask,” retorted Crowkiller.

Morna grabbed her wooden mask, and tore it away in a swift, practised motion. The cheering and jeering died down together for a moment as all turned to look. “I see you now!” Morna shouted. She was beautiful, Jon judged, with hair as red as Ygritte’s – _kissed by fire_ – and sharp blue eyes. But he saw why she hid her face too; there was a scar all down her right cheek, crossing over her eye, a bright line of puckered flesh that was there for all time. “I see you, and you see me. I am not afraid of any of you!”

“You are a woman,” Tormund said, pushing to the front of the dais. “A brave woman, aye, but still a woman—”

“And you are an eunuch, Thunderfist,” shouted Sigorn, standing up. Meanwhile Alys Karstark put her hands over her eyes. “Oh, gods,” she muttered.

Tormund let out a great, rolling laugh. “I’d sooner be an eunuch than a _Thenn_! Who’d vote for a _Thenn_?”

“Anyone who wants to stay alive, I think. Look at your folk from Ruddy Hall, Tormund. Forgotten and decimated by the Others. How many of your own people did you abandon in the Haunted Forest, your brothers and cousins and tribefolk? How many of those you ruled over at Ruddy Hall are here now?” He shook his head. “Barely half, I think. Whereas nine out of every ten of the Thenns have made it back to the Wall. I don’t leave my people behind, Tormund! Ask any one of them! After the battle, I risked my life to go back for the wounded and the fallen! I do not give up on
The Thenns blew their horns and banged their shields. “SIGORN KING!” they bellowed, “SIGORN KING! SIGORN KING! SIGORN KING!” But while the cheering lasted a while, it was quickly drowned out again.

“Well,” said Alys to Jon, “that was that. Oh, he’ll keep arguing, I know, but they won’t choose him.”

“This will be a long night,” Jon said.

“Yes. But luckily for you, Lord Snow, I think you’ve got some respite.” She nodded across the hall. Dolorous Edd was picking his way through the wildlings towards him. He knelt to whisper in Jon’s ear. “You have a visitor, my lord. Lady Melisandre, the red woman.”

“The red woman? Here?” As if this night could not get any more complicated.

“But this might take hours. And Melisandre will not be happy with that. “On second thoughts,” he said, rising. “I’ll see her now.” He pushed his way through the crowd and snuck out the door while the wildlings were busy watching the dais.

It was a whiteout in the courtyard. Melisandre of Asshai stood shawled in heavy red robes, with two horses and a squire at her side, shivering in similar garb. Jon was startled to see Ghost standing with her. She brushed the fur over his ears. Already Jon felt uneasy.

“Welcome to Castle Black, my lady,” he said. “Be careful with Ghost. He is known to bite.”

“He is merely cautious.” Melisandre tickled his snout; Ghost sat down obediently on his haunches. “Like the boy who raised him.”

“I am no boy,” said Jon. “And Ghost is no pet, and not to be treated as such.”

Melisandre shrugged. “As you say, Lord Snow.” She moved away from the direwolf. “I beg pardon for my brusqueness, but might we get inside and out of this chill? We would both be so much the better for it.”

“I did not think you felt the cold. “As you will.” He ushered her up the stairs. Edd led Melisandre’s squire to the stables to unburden their horses.

“I met your brother at Winterfell,” said Melisandre as they went through the door.

“Bran? How was he?”

“He seemed well… though that castle is full of dark things, Lord Snow. I worry…” She trailed off. “I thought you would have moved into the King’s Tower.”

“Why? I am no king.”

“I never said you were. But the King’s Tower has more comforts than your present chambers.”

He did not like her prying. “The King’s Tower is occupied by a score of Northmen and their retinues,” Jon told her flatly, “the lords Umber, Karstark, Harclay and Wull, Flint and Mormont and Tallhart, among others.”

“Fine men all, I’m sure,” said Melisandre. “I would be willing to share the Tower with them. I do not sleep much, so they will not be disturbed by me.”

“Very well,” Jon said. “You shall have rooms in the King’s Tower as you desire. I cannot promise
you many guards, but I should be able to spare a few rangers—"

“Oh, I would rather you did not,” she said. “I wouldn’t want my presence to be overly imposing, and
neither would you. Men are seldom keen to welcome a priestess of R’hllo.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Jon muttered. “The wildlings will not welcome you either. Most follow the
old gods of the forest—"

“Fear not, Lord Snow. I will not burn your magic trees.”

“They have no love for the Lord of Light,” he warned. “Especially after you made them burn their
gods—”

“When the Others come, they – and you, I think – may sing a different song. The fire that burns
against the cold, so say your vows. The Lord is a god of fire—”

“But if you provoke them—”

“They may try to kill me. And they would not be the first to do so. As you can see, none of them
have succeeded yet.” She took a breath. “I suppose you must be wondering why I’m here, and not
with King Stannis.”

Jon said, “I sent a letter to King Stannis a week ago. He has not replied.”

“I am not surprised. The Tullys have taken back Riverrun. Queen Selyse is dead. The Onion Knight
and Princess Shireen have disappeared westwards.”

“Selyse is dead?”

“I burned her alive,” Melisandre said flatly.

“You burned her alive?” How was he supposed to reply to that? “I… I take it you do not serve
Stannis anymore, then?”

“I never served Stannis. I serve R’hllo, now and always, and he commanded me to advise Stannis.
But I did not serve him. I was mistaken. I thought Stannis was the true heir to the Iron Throne, and
Azor Ahai reborn. He was neither.”

“That does not explain why you are here, though. If you are looking for Azor Ahai, why look to the
north?”

“The Lord told me to come to the Wall to await Azor Ahai reborn. My guess is that he will be here
soon. While I am waiting, I see no harm in aiding you and your sworn brothers to defend of the
Wall. When the promised prince arrives, you will have to work with him as you did with Stannis.
The Night’s Watch is part of the Great Army, I have seen it.”

“You will forgive me if I am sceptical of your visions. A grey girl on a dying horse. Daggers in the
dark. Neither of them came to pass as I expected.”

“Then the fault lies with me, not with the Lord. I see things, yes. That does not mean I always
understand them.”

“Sorcery is a sword without a hilt,” Jon said. “If you cut yourself with it, I do not want you bleeding
all over Castle Black.”

“Have no fear,” replied Melisandre. “I do not bleed easily.”
“I do not want you cutting anyone else with it either.”

Melisandre gave him a look. “All great victories require sacrifice, Lord Snow. Azor Ahai sacrificed Nissa Nissa to temper the flames of Lightbringer. There will be more sacrifices ahead.”

“I will not have you burning men in the yard.”

“Not even one?” she teased. “Oh, you are sullen, Lord Snow. And to think, I’d almost missed you.” Melisandre stood up. “You remind me a lot of Stannis, you know.”

“How so?”

“You are stubborn,” she said, opening the door behind her. “And determined.” She stepped out into the snow. “And a fool.”

Jon stood alone at his desk for a long time, getting colder every minute. Ghost had left while they were talking, heading out into the snow. *The night is dark and full of terrors.* Jon sighed and sat back. *I should go back to the Shieldhall,* he thought, but as he was rising to go, Dolorous Edd opened his door. “They’ve had their vote,” he said, “everyone was getting tired of hearing Tormund talk.”

“And?” Jon asked, a little too hopefully.

“No one got half the votes, my lord. So we’ll have to do this again tomorrow. And the day after that. And the day after—”

“I get the idea, Edd.” He sighed. “Who got the most votes?”

“Tormund. But not nearly enough. Barely a quarter of the votes. Then Alfyn Crowkiller, and Morna Whitemask got a fair few, and then so many chieftains I couldn’t count them all.”

Jon sighed. “If only we could do as Sam did at the last election… if only we could trick them into choosing each other. Or convince them to make a compromise somehow.” He shook his head. “I don’t think the wildlings know what ‘compromise’ means.”

“Well, my lord,” said Edd gloomily, “if we wait long enough, the Others will start killing the contenders off. Then we might get somewhere.”

“If we wait long enough, the Others will kill us all.” Jon shook his head. “This cannot continue. I will think of something.” *But what?* And then there was Melisandre to deal with, and he was not looking forward to that. “Thank you, Edd. You can go now.”

Jon went to his bed and lay down. He watched the snow falling outside his window, flake by flake, gently lulling him to sleep. That night he dreamed of Ygritte, for the first time in a year or more. They were back in the cave again, and his arms were around her, his fingers squeezing bloody weirwood sap from her hair while red starlight flooded in. He wanted to hold her close, never letting go. Then she fell away from him, and the arrow was in her breasts, turning her to snow and smoke. “You know nothing, Jon Snow,” she said, melting in his hands.

Chapter End Notes

"Kissed by Fire" is a chapter title I've been meaning to use for a long time, but until now
it never really seemed right. But here we are, and here it is - when better to use it than in a chapter that deals with the wildling traditions and Melisandre and Jon's lamentations over Ygritte?

On a mostly related note, the Season 3 episode "Kissed by Fire" is one of my favourite GoT episodes, and one that is criminally underrated. It's incredibly well paced, and has a very strong motif of truth and honour running throughout. I'd rate it above "Battle of the Bastards" and "And Now His Watch Is Ended". Well worth a rewatch.

I think this chapter has a certain 'midseason episode' feel to it, in that it doesn't really start anything new, but doesn't really resolve much. It's all about building on the various subplots that make up the Castle Black story - some of these subplots will be left unresolved, and there are a LOT of threads to tie together before chapter 120. That being said, the Northern plotline is proving to be a lot of fun for me. I hope you're enjoying it, too.
Lady Barbrey Dustin was a severe and humourless woman with a frown as cold as an icicle. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting,” Bran said to her. It was around midnight, and he had dressed hastily, looking somewhat unlordly.

“No matter,” returned Lady Dustin. “We all wait upon the pleasure of the Starks of Winterfell.”

Bran was not sure how to reply to that. “Hal told me you had concerns to share,” he said, trying to resolve this quickly. He was still blinking sleep from his eyes.

“Did you not receive my raven?”

Bran glanced at Maester Wolkan. The maester shook his head slightly. “I’m… afraid not, my lady,” he said, “truth be told, I do not really know why you are here in Winterfell. There have been… rumours from the Stony Shore and Moat Cailin…”

“Then allow me to confirm those rumours for you. There are ironborn raiders up and down my coastline – stretching from Sea Dragon Point all the way down to Blazewater Bay. Barrowton, Rillwater Crossing and even Torrhen’s Square are threatened.

Torrhen’s Square. This was starting to become horribly familiar. That was where Theon attacked.

“We were not made aware of this,” said Hal Mollen.

“I sent you half a dozen ravens. Though I fear the lack of response should have told me everything I needed to know.”

Bran spoke in his lord’s voice. “I am sorry we could not support you in your time of need, Lady Dustin. I will send men to help…”

“Oh, it is far too late for that, Lord Stark. The most you can do is say prayers for the dead and their families. By the time I get back to Barrowton, the ironborn will have burned my lands to cinders. Not that there is much left to burn now that the Night’s Watch has taken everything.”

“How many?” Hal Mollen asked. “How many raiders?”

Bran felt his heart stop beating. Theon only needed a couple of hundred to take Torrhen’s Square, he recalled. “Thirty… thousand? Are you sure?”

“No. But it is more than I can cope with, and more than you can cope with, most like. Nonetheless, in times of need, we all defer to the better judgement of House Stark.”

“This… this is…” Bran could not find the words. “We can’t attack them. That’s what Ser Rodrik did last time, and that’s how we lost Winterfell. So we’ll have to… defend.”

“Defend,” Hal agreed.

“I’m glad you’re making decisions,” said Lady Dustin sourly. “But none of this will save my lands, will it?”

Bran shook his head. “My lady… we do not know enough… we do not know who leads the ironborn, for a start.”

“Well, I expect you will soon find out. They’ll be coming for Winterfell next. I imagine you’ll want to save your own people.”

“And what about you? If you need our hospitality—”

“Need?” Lady Dustin snorted. “We’re headed for the Dreadfort, Lord Stark. Lady Jeyne is terrified of this place, and with good reason, after everything the Bastard did to her. It is a rare thing to say that we will prefer the hospitality of the Dreadfort, but there are still men there who will welcome Lord Roose’s daughter-by-law and his grandson.”

“Mance Rayder is the lord of the Dreadfort,” Bran said. Mance Rayder was dead, too, but he did not tell her that.

“According to Stannis Baratheon, yes. But I do not see Stannis Baratheon here, only his empty words from your mouth. And—”

“—words are wind.” The Northmen were fond of telling him that.

“Indeed. Is Stannis Baratheon your king?”

“We will not stop you from going to the Dreadfort,” Hal Mollen said before Bran could answer. “But if you mean to do so, you should leave soon. There is a blizzard coming, and soon all the roads will be blocked.”

“Oh, have no fear,” said Lady Dustin. “I do not intend to stay here a moment longer than I have to. Now, with your leave, Lord Stark, I need to return to my household. It has been a long journey.”

When she was gone, Bran sat down, still rubbing sleep from the corners of his eyes.

“How long will it be till the storm gets here?” Hal asked Maester Wolkan.

The maester shook his head. “Impossible to say. But we have days to prepare, not weeks. We have enough food in storage for a year or more before we will have to appeal to White Harbor for provision. The cellars have grit and salt to clear the roadways as much as we can. But whatever ravens we need to send must be sent soon. If this blizzard is as big as I think it will be, it may be impossible to get messages sent and received.”
Hal nodded. “Let us hope it holds the ironborn up as well. Surely they will not attack Winterfell in this.”

“Then they’ll just attack our people,” said Bran. “Our bannermen, their castles, their farms. We have to do something.” The threat felt rather surreal. “They must have shot down Lady Dustin’s ravens,” he said, “that’s why we didn’t get them.”

“I think so, my lord. But the question remains: what do we do now?”

“We have to call our bannermen to Winterfell’s defense,” Bran said at once.

“Our ravens may not reach them,” said Hal. “And even then, their armies would have to trek here through the snow. It would be impossible, my lord.”

“Surely it is better than doing nothing, though.” Bran turned to Maester Wolkan. “Will you send some ravens, maester? I’ll come and tell you what to write.” Even though he was tired, he didn’t think he’d be able to sleep tonight.

“As my lord commands,” said the maester.

They left Hal alone to think up preparations for Winterfell’s defenses. Hodor carried Bran up to the maester’s turret, next to the library. The room held a sort of melancholy air for Bran, given that it had once been Maester Luwin’s. The tower had been badly scorched in places by the Boltons, so it was not quite the same as it had once been, but it still carried memories of spidery handwriting and maps on feathery paper and jars of bitter healing herbs. “I can teach you history, healing, herblore,” Maester Luwin had once said, “but, Bran, no man can teach you magic.”

Look at me now, Bran wanted to say. As though Luwin’s ghost would somehow hear him.

“Lord Manderly has the most soldiers of any of your lords bannermen,” Maester Wolkan said, “if I may, we should dispatch the first bird to White Harbor. And another to Karhold, and another to the Ryswells, though they may be dealing with problems of their own.”

“And to Ironrath,” said Bran. He was certain that Larence and Talia would help him, and Larence was the Lord of the Hornwood, so he had enough men to make a difference.

“As my lord commands. What should I write?”

“Write that we need help. No, write that we appeal to their loyalty. I don’t know… tell them the truth.” His lord father had never lied to his bannermen, and they always answered his call, even Roose Bolton. “Tell them that the ironborn have come, and it is in our common interest to stop them.”

Maester Wolkan scribbled down some notes as Bran watched. Winterfell’s new maester was a younger man than Luwin, but moved with a quiet, knowledgable efficiency. Bran searched for a Valyrian steel link on the chain around his neck. He did not find one, but he decided to ask his question anyway. But before he could do so, the door opened and Meera came in, carrying a dusty book under her arm. “Maester, I need you to look at something for me,” she said, before seeing Bran. “Oh. Br- Lord Stark. I didn’t think I’d see you here.” Her voice was a little chilly.

“I was talking with Lady Dustin,” he explained. “I came up here to finish some letters.”

“Why?”

He wondered whether he should tell her. Meera was bound to worry, and that was hardly ever good.
But I should not lie to her. “We’ve got ironborn on the Stony Shore,” he said, “like when Theon attacked us last time.”

“Oh.” She swallowed. “That’s… not good news.”

“I know. But you shouldn’t worry. They’ll never get here through all this snow. And besides, I’m calling our bannermen to help defend us. You’ll be safe.”

“I don’t need to be kept safe,” Meera snapped. “I can defend myself, remember. And…” She stopped herself.

“What are you doing here?” Bran thought it best to change the subject. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“Reading. As always. Searching for more mentions of the Others, and how to defeat them. And for once, I might have found something. But it’s written in an old language, and I don’t understand it.”

“I… I could help.”

“Why? Do you understand the Old Tongue?”

“I… no,” Bran coloured a little. “Sorry.”

“But I thought Maester Wolkan might know something. That’s why I came here.” She stepped past his chair and passed the book over to the maester. “There’s a passage about the First King,” she said, pointing. “I’ve seen those words before, but I don’t know what they mean.”

Maester Wolkan squinted. “The… sword… yes, the sword… is the… seer… the… I don’t know that word, but it could be shield… the shield is the see… no, that doesn’t make sense.”

“The sea?” Bran asked.

“No,” said Maester Wolkan. “The see. Like seeing. Unless… hmm, maybe it does mean that. It could be some sort of phonetic… mistranslation. The sword is the seer, the shield is the sea.”

“There are the Shield Islands,” Bran said, remembering his geography. “Down off the coast of the Reach.”

The maester squinted closer. “No,” he replied at last. “This is an older artefact of the First Men. One that dates to their earliest days, north of the Neck. And you mentioned the First King, Lady Meera. The same First King who is supposedly buried in the Great Barrow under Barrowton.”

“Barrowton?” asked Bran. “I could speak to Lady Dustin, if you like. She might let us know if there’s anything strange down there.”

“I don’t think Lady Dustin is the sort of person to go exploring ancient crypts and their history,” said Meera.

“All the same, she is the lady of Barrowton. Even if she knows nothing, we’d still need her permission to go into the Great Barrow.” And that is if it hasn’t already been overrun by ironborn. He held his arms up for Hodor.

“Where are you going?” Meera asked.

“To see Lady Dustin. Are you coming?”

“Now? It’s the middle of the night, Bran.”
“She won’t have gone to bed yet.”

Meera sighed as though lecturing a child. “It’s still the middle of the night. It’s... it’s rude to visit people so late.”

“Well, she came to visit me at midnight. I’m just returning the favour.” Bran did not wait for her reply; he knew she would have to follow him. “Bring the book.” Meera lingered behind for a bit, but she caught up with him and Hodor outside Lady Dustin’s guest chambers in the Great Keep. Lady Dustin was not alone inside; Robett Glover stood warming his hands over the fire, while Jeyne Poole sat shrunken in a chair, covered in lambswool blankets, her eyes fearful.

“Lord Stark,” said Glover. “I thought you had gone to bed.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” That was half the truth. “So I went to the library. And now I’ve come back to ask Lady Dustin something.” In the corner, he saw Jeyne Poole’s eyes flickering nervously towards him, then darting away just as fast. Bran could almost feel the waves of terror coming off her.

Lady Dustin gave him a rather bored look. “Ask away, my lord.”

“Meera, the book.” She put it down on the table. Bran pointed. “There’s a bit here about the First King. The one buried in the crypts under Barrowton—”

“Yes, yes, I know about the First King.”

Bran nodded. “Well, there’s this bit about a prophecy, written in the Old Tongue. The sword is the seer, the shield is the sea.”

“Lord Stark,” said Robett Glover. “Is this really relevant?”

“If we know what it means, we may be able to stop the Others—”

“You said that when you ordered my men to the Wall,” said Lady Dustin. “In your letter, you wrote, we may be able to stop the Others if you send us your men. So I sent you my men. Then you asked for food and supplies, so I sent you what you wanted. And then the ironborn descended on my lands, and are likely pillaging and burning my holdings as we speak, because I have no soldiers left to defend Barrowton, and not enough food to wait out a siege. And now you want my support for some ridiculous expedition into the Barrowlands—”

“The Others—”

“—will kill us all,” said Lady Dustin, tiredly. “But they cannot very well do that if the ironmen kill us first. Your dead men still have a three hundred-foot wall to get through. Once the reavers have burned the Barrowlands, they will come to Winterfell, mark my words. And if you think you can stop them with the threat of dead men, then you are as naïve as your father.”

She went on: “So here is what I am going to do. I am going to run away, to the Dreadfort, or to White Harbor, and possibly even beyond that. I have some friends across the Narrow Sea. You can have your little expedition to find a dead king’s tomb if you are so desperate. But I will not have a part in it, nor will I weep at your deaths.”

“My lady,” said Robett Glover before she could go any further. “Perhaps it is best to leave discussion of this till the morrow. We are all very tired. And you, Lord Brandon. You will need your wits about you when we discuss this with—”

“You abandoned me.” Bran looked around for the source of the voice, and was surprised to hear it
coming from Jeyne Poole, a soft, vaguely incoherent whimper. “You and Arya and Sansa, and your father, you all abandoned me. You don’t know what they made me do… what Littlefinger made me, and then they sold me, and then there was Ramsay, and he’d broken Theon and he broke me and all the walls were pressing down and—” She ran out of breath and dissolved into snivelling sobs.

Meera gave Bran a look, then turned to Lady Dustin. “Well,” she said, “I think we had better go.”

They went.

Back in his chambers, Bran was surprised to find new letters piled up on his desk. Maester Wolkan or one of his stewards must have put them there while he was with Lady Dustin. The letters were sealed with the black wax of the Night’s Watch, the dark blue of the Tullys and the crimson of the Lannisters. Jon, Sansa, and Tommen. Meanwhile, Meera went to the window and threw open the curtains. Bright moonlight filled the room… or so Bran thought until he realised that the whiteout was caused by the falling snow, not the moonbeams. “It will only get worse as the night goes on,” Meera said.

Bran opened Tommen’s letter first. It would be the easiest, he thought:

I’m afraid there will be a few delays in our preparations for winter. I’m surrendering the crown, you see, and that might take a while. Mother doesn’t like it, but it’s for the greater good, and it will help our people. I’m going to try and make an alliance with Stannis, too – if he is still alive.

There are other problems on our shores too. Ironborn reavers are coming up our coast, at Kayce and Feastfires. I’ve sent Ser Lyle Crakehall to deal with them, but even when our fleet is built they might be preoccupied with that. So that means I might not be able to send you supplies as soon as you would like.

But that’s enough about that. There was something else you asked me, about what do with your marriage. Your advisors might have told you to just seek the best alliance, but you need someone who can keep you company, too. Someone you want to spend your life with. I can’t really say anything more than that.

Lady Eleyna says hello. She’s my wife, by the way. Well, not yet, but she will be. I hope you can meet her someday.

Lord Tommen Lannister,
Lord of Casterly Rock

“Ironborn?” Bran frowned. “The coast of the Westerlands is being threatened by reavers, too,” he said. “It would seem we’re not alone.”

“Who leads them?” asked Meera.

“I don’t know. It can’t be Theon… or his sister Asha. She swore a vow, and I think she meant it. But their uncles are dead, aren’t they?”

“Not all kings of the Iron Isles have been Greyjoys. There are Harlaws, Goodbrothers, Kennings…”
“No. It was the Greyjoys. I know it was.” Bran put the letter down. “It’s all very surreal. They’ve just come so suddenly… I should be afraid, but I’m not. There’s no time.” He moved on to Jon’s letter:

*Things are only getting harder at Castle Black, Bran. We need help from the south more desperately than ever. Clydas has advised me to send messages to all the southern lords, but they will have more weight if they are in your hand. People will not take the Lord of Winterfell’s words lightly.*

We’ve had little word from the far ends of the Wall, with the blizzard rolling in. And the weather is only like to get worse, so you’ll need to write back quickly, or I might not receive your reply.

*We’re trying to choose a leader for the wildlings, to replace Mance. But none of them can live up to him – and it doesn’t matter anyway, as we’re having no luck on that front.*

*And we need more food. Our larders and stockpiles will last a while, but we’ll need your bannermen – and the southerners - to pitch in if we’re to make it through the long winter.*

*Things are bleak, but there’s no use in complaining.*

*Stay safe,*

*Jon.*

“Dark wings, dark words,” Bran muttered. “It’s only getting worse up at the Wall. They’re trying to choose a new King of the Wildlings, but they’ve had no luck.”

“No surprise there,” replied Meera. “From what I’ve heard of them, the wildlings aren’t meant to be led. Not unless they want to be.”

“Hmm. And I suppose they won’t be King-*beyond*-the-Wall, anyhow. They’ve closed all the gates through the Wall and plugged them up with ice and stone. The Others can’t get past, and the wights will have to climb.”

*Will they?* said a doubtful voice in his head.

“Jon can’t defend every inch of the Wall, though. There are twenty-one castles, aye, but there are long leagues between each in places. If they get through, we’re going to have to prepare to defend on our lands. And the ironborn are only going to make things worse…”

“Maybe it is Asha and Theon,” said Meera. “And you just don’t know it yet. But even if it isn’t… you could still talk with them. If they see the Others bearing down upon them, they’ll have to take our side. Or they’ll die like everyone else.”

Bran wished he could feel as certain as she sounded. “Yes,” he said, “yes, that’s probably it.”

“What about your letter from Sansa?”

“Oh, that’s… it’s nothing. She just wants me to do something, that’s all. It’s nothing.” He pushed the letters aside. “I should go to bed now. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”
Meera started helping him out of his clothes, but Bran warded her off. “I’m the lord of Winterfell,” he said, “I can get dressed myself.”

He did not fail to notice that she seemed a little pink, as though embarrassed. “Sorry,” she said, “I thought it might be faster.”

“There’s no rush.”

“Oh.” She turned away and went to the window, closed the latch. “It’s a cold night.”

“Yes. There’s going to a blizzard.” Bran frowned. “We won’t be able to see the ironborn through the blizzard. But it doesn’t matter. They won’t be able to march through this.”

“It’s a very cold night,” Meera said. Her shoulders hunched and shook. She sat down at the foot of his bed.

Bran looked away from her. Could this be… He did not think Meera would resort to such a thing. If he had been able-bodied, like Larence, he might have done something, but surely she was just joking with him. Me?

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out, “I’m sorry… when Melisandre came, and we had our argument… I…” He clenched his fists. “I wasn’t thinking straight. With what I said. She was trying some sort of magic on me, you were right… I might have given in to it, but Summer woke me up. I should have listened to you. And I’m sorry. For that.” And what I have to do…

“Summer… he reminded me who I am. And what I have to do. I have to stay in Winterfell, even if the ironborn are on their way… but…”

“Bran.” She gripped his hands firmly. “Don’t.”

“—but you don’t.” The words tumbled out. “Meera, I think you should go back to Greywater Watch.”

“Greywater Watch?”

“Yes. It’s… not safe here. I don’t want you to get hurt. I… when the snow gets here properly… when they get here, you won’t be able to get away, and…”

“Bran, we’ve talked about this. I swore to protect you. Not the other way round—”

“Yes.” He supposed it was true. “Only… I want to keep you safe as well. I have to stay in Winterfell, Meera. You don’t. So… so… I want you to make a promise.”

She put her hands on his. Bran’s fingers instantly felt clammy. “What is it?” she said.

“I… I want you to promise… when I tell you to go, you have to go.” I don’t want you to die for me, he thought, I don’t want to lose you the same way I lost Jojen. “You have to, Meera. Regardless of what you want or what you think. When the time comes…”

“Bran, I—”

“Meera,” he said firmly. “Listen to me, please. Promise than you’ll go when I tell you to. That you leave when I tell you to. That you won’t give up your life saving mine.”

She squeezed his hand, very slowly. “If… if I agree to that, how do I know you won’t send me away right now?”
“I promise you I won’t. But you have to promise too. Promise that you will.”

“I promise.” Her eyes reflected his, specks of blue in her deep mossy green. What was it Larence had said? *You could drown in her eyes…*

Bran was not really sure how he ended up kissing her. But somehow their lips touched, and he put his hand on her face, because that was what you were supposed to do. His own cheeks were burning. He jerked back. The whole thing lasted barely a second. And then he found he could not look at her again, and he wanted to her to go right now. “I shouldn’t have…” Bran whispered, though he did not think she heard him.

For a long time neither of them spoke. Bran looked away from her and out of the window. It was snowing. “It’s snowing,” he said. It was always snowing. “I… I think I should go to bed now.”

He did not really remember Meera leaving, or if he’d mumbled anything to her before she departed. The next thing he knew, he was alone in the dark, desperately trying to forget the awkwardness of what had just happened.

But how could he ever forget?

Futilely, Bran hoped for dreamless sleep. Instead, for the first time in weeks, he found himself slipping into Summer’s skin. Strands of silver moonlight drifted through the trees, soft as dewdrops, but around them the blizzard was white and raging and so heavy he felt entirely alone. Alone save for the crows. “Bran,” they said to him from above, blinking their empty black eyes, “Bran, Bran.”

Bran tried to call back, but he had no voice, only Summer’s low, hoarse growl. He realised then that the direwolf was entirely in control, and that all his thoughts amounted to little more than an irritating squawk in Summer’s mind. The wolf shook his head as if warding away fleas, then climbed down from the high branches and set out through the thickening snow.

Further into the white mists, shapes began to materialise, and then resolved themselves from vague nothings into tents and towers, with a few fires scattered here and there. The tents were made of thick grey canvas, the towers of black wood, and the banners above showed a great crimson eye on a grey field, supported by two black crows and topped with a spiky black crown. *Crow’s Eye,* thought Bran.

As Summer continued around the perimeter of the camp, new grey shadows appeared above him, stretching up and up, pillars and arches, with tents in between and dead-eyed sentries standing guard. It seemed like the entrance to some great stone mausoleum. The direwolf went on. His coat had become matted with snow, so he was as invisible as his brother at the Wall, and the guards did not so much as blink in his direction. Then the pillars came to an end; instead, a cave opened before him, glowing with a faint blue light. Inside he glimpsed statues and tombstones, rows upon rows of them in the underground dusk. *A crypt,* he thought, *a barrow.* So these were the tombs of the ancient Barrow Kings, who had ruled in these parts thousands of years hence, when the Starks ruled only a fraction of the North. And this was Euron Greyjoy’s army.

*Cold.* Summer’s voice was clear. His breath misted in the dark air as he crept closer towards the cave mouth… and down into the darkness. *Which way do we go now?*

The direwolf seemed to know. He went down one narrow passageway, and then another, where ice-crusted stalagmites and stalactites closed around him like great obsidian teeth. And deeper still, to where a frozen river came to its end over a black abyss, and half-frozen droplets fell endlessly into the night; where the path fell away and became jagged stone steps; where weirwood roots twisted serpentlike out of the ground, and entangled around his feet, slowly drawing their nooses tighter and
tighter. Sap was trickling out too, in time to a gradual, red heartbeat.

And then Bran heard voices. It was a strange language, but he knew he heard it somewhere before, even if he did not recognise the words. Under the hill, he realised. The Old Tongue.

Summer was hidden behind a tall pillar of black rock wrapped in frozen moss, up on a ridge above the cave floor. Down below, the path crossed an abyss... but on a solitary ice pillar at the centre of that dark pit, a shrine had been built. And Bran, seeing it, caught flashes of what it had been in a time before, through the eyes of the old, eternal gods: a mighty vault, built in the hardest, oldest stone, polished and entirely unblemished. Tablets of obsidian and bronze stood clustered around a sarcophagus, inlaid with exquisite runes. There were statuettes and carvings in obsidian, and at the foot of the tomb a chest containing a black-and-white banded warhorn and a sword of smoky black glass. A dozen men stood guard, wearing runic armour and black cloaks, all armed with black swords.

But that was then. And now the floor had caved in everywhere save for immediately around the tomb, and the ornaments were gone, the runes had worn away, and the sarcophagus and its guardians had disappeared too. Instead, Euron Greyjoy stood alone in front of the empty tomb, veiled in night. His own champions waited across the ice bridge. When Summer saw that Theon was among them, he bared his teeth. Patience, counseled Bran, though the wolf paid him no mind.

It was very cold. It had been cold before, but he only then became aware of it. Summer’s hairs stood on end. Down below, Euron was whispering, in that strange, snakish tongue as he put his hand over the tomb. And cold dust was falling from the statues, flecks of snow and ice, falling into the abyss like snowflakes. Bran could hear the ice starting to wail and crack, and the walls were rumbling, and the world was opening up to him...

Euron Greyjoy put his hand on the tomb. Then he turned, whip-quick, and stared straight at Summer, into Summer. His eyes were blue as dawn sky, and his voice cut knife-like through the mist. Run, he said, run, little wolf. Because I am coming for you.

Chapter End Notes

I would be lying if I said I was completely satisfied with this chapter, "Gravedigging". Certain conversations went on a lot longer than I was intending them too, resulting in a chapter that was reasonably well-paced but not very interesting. I thought this was better than overstuffed the next Bran chapter, and I hope you'ull agree with this.

While "Gravedigging" is one of my more disappointing recent chapters (imo), I think it has a very clever title. There's literal gravedigging, in the sense of Euron's excavation. Then there's gravedigging in the sense of bringing up old emotions - Bran's affections for Meera - and finding out they aren't entirely as satisfactory as you hope. And then there's gravedigging in the sense of digging your own grave...

"Gravedigging" is very much a setup chapter. But for Bran, it's very much about the awkwardness of his position and the way he is rather unsuited to the responsibilities of the lord of Winterfell.

Also, it had Lady Dustin, who has a tendency to criticise the Starks to their face, which is... interesting.
The Curse of Harrenhal

Chapter Summary

“If men were condemned without the proper evidence, there would be no justice at all.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SANSA

“There’s a chill in the air this morning, my lady,” said Gretchen as she fastened the clasps on Sansa’s gown. “It’s a good thing you’re inside for the trial, else you might freeze to death.”

“Oh, I think not. Starks are used to the cold.” Sansa had dressed with conscious reminders of both her father’s house and her mother’s: a gown of Tully blue slashed with ermine, and the silver wolf’s head necklace. When Gretchen was finished, she went out to the balcony. They were still busy furnishing the Hall of Hundred Hearths ahead of the trial, putting up golden lamps and rolling out new carpets. The Small Hall would have suited just as well, but Littlefinger said holding it in the Hall of Hundred Hearths would make the spectacle seem grandiose, as it needed to be.

Lord Royce’s tents had joined the others in the yard. Bronze Yohn had arrived on a blustery morning three days past when the sun had failed to raise above Harrenhal. Littlefinger and the Vale lords met him in the Small Hall for consultation, an ordeal which lasted five hours. Sansa joined them, though she said very little. It seemed to her that even Lord Royce, who was among the most martial men she had ever known, had grown tired of his fruitless sieges in the Vale. When Littlefinger offered the promise of reconciliation and the honour of judging in Myrcella’s trial, Royce accepted gratefully. “Let no man doubt in the honesty and good faith of your justice,” Littlefinger had said.

Indeed, Sansa thought, now. Let every man hear the honesty of Lord Royce’s words.

Littlefinger had asked her and Rickon to meet him for breakfast. Her brother wore his best clothes today, with his auburn hair newly washed and brushed. Littlefinger, too, had dressed for the spectacle; his doublet was black and silver and cloth-of-gold, and his cape was thick and heavy and dappled with tiny sewn mockingbirds.

In his solar they had porridge with honey, boiled eggs, fried bacon and fried bread. But Littlefinger instead ate a whole pomegranate, cutting and spearing the pieces with his dagger. “I cannot stomach a heavy breakfast today,” he told them. “There is so much ahead. If Myrcella is convicted, then she must die. Believe me, I will take no joy in sentencing her, especially knowing the Lannisters will likely bring fire and sword down upon us and war will tear the Riverlands open once again.”
“And if she is innocent?” Sansa asked.

“Do you think she is?”

“I am not one to condemn her for something she has not yet done. And I hope that Lord Royce thinks the same. If men were condemned without the proper evidence, there would be no justice at all.”

“And what about guilty men who walk free because there is not enough evidence?”

*Why, they sit and lecture me over breakfast.* “You once told me that there is no justice in this world unless we make it.”

Littlefinger frowned. “And I spoke truly. It is up to us to make justice for Robert, don’t you think?”

“Yes.” She dared not look away from him. The grey-green eyes flickered, snakelike for a moment.

“Will you do it yourself?” Rickon asked. “Father always said the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. So if she is guilty, you have to cut off her head.”

“Oh, yes,” said Littlefinger. “That does seem consistent with Lord Stark’s particular code of… honour. But since Lord Royce will be the one passing the sentence, it will fall to him to… well, pass the sentence.”

Sansa had not expected him anything less. If Littlefinger had a change of heart in the future, he might try to slither back into bed with the Lannisters. If he killed Myrcella personally, that option would no longer be open. *He is always ten steps ahead. Or so he thinks.* Wary of tripping up, she decided to turn the conversation away from the trial. “How is Robert faring?”

“Better than he was yesterday. Though Maester Colemon warns me that he may still be susceptible to relapses. He has been treating Robert with sweetmilk. It is good for the lungs, I think, though I am no maester. And I have suggested a remedy with hot wine and herbs to clear the throat. My lady mother had some herblore, though it is not a talent she passed down to me.”

“How do you know? You might make a wonderful maester. Most of us never know what we’re capable of until we’ve tried.”

Littlefinger smiled. “And you have a way with words, my lady. You would make a fine diplomat, or a fine liar, if that is your intent.”

“Well, I learned from the very best.”

“Ha. Indeed. Sometimes a lie is necessary. I wish it were not so, but the balance of power in this world is so wrong… if there were no lies, honest men would rule the Seven Kingdoms… but they would not be the best men for it. A lesson for you both.”

A bell sounded, somewhere up in the Kingspyre Tower. “Not long now,” said Littlefinger, wiping his fingers on a handkerchief. “Though it may be many hours before the trial ends, and many days before we can dispense with the justice.”

Sansa pushed back her chair. “Pray forgive me, my lord, but there is something I need to see to before the trial. As you say, it will be many hours before I am allowed to return to my chambers. Rickon, come.”

Brienne and Podrick were waiting in her solar, looking pensive. “Is everything ready?” Sansa asked.
“Yes.” Brienne sounded hesitant. “Forgive me, my lady, but I must ask… is this really the wisest course of action?”

“If you have a better suggestion, you are welcome to give it.”

Brienne shifted her weight awkwardly. “No, my lady. It’s just that I am hesitant about relying on—”

“I trust Sandor Clegane. You may not understand my reasons, but I am willing to trust him. Is there anything else?”

“No, my lady. I… no.”

Sansa sensed that the lady knight was somewhat disquieted, but she did not pry. Brienne would tell her in her own time. Or not. “Well,” she said. “We had best get to the trial.”

The benches in the Small Hall were quickly filling up, packed with Vale knights and Littlefinger’s sellswords, and hundreds more, maybe thousands. Sansa’s heart was pounding as she took her seat beside Rickon, to the left of Bronze Yohn Royce, who would be the main judge. The hall was a sea of different colours, though blue dominated, a show of solidarity for the Arryn cause. Armoured knights flanked every exit and led the judges up to the dais. Rickon was muttering their names under his breath: “Lady Waynwood. Ser Symond Templeton. Lord Nestor Royce.” And so on. “Ser Lyn Corbray.” He squeezed his hand into a fist. “Lord Littlefinger.”

Brynden Tully took the seat to Rickon’s left. Lord Edmure had headed back to Riverrun shortly before Bronze Yohn’s arrival; Littlefinger had convinced him that he would better serve the people of the Riverlands by returning him, instead of getting snarled up in lengthy court proceedings. Edmure’s departure had been surprisingly minor amidst all the goings-on at Harrenhal. Sansa was certain Littlefinger had convinced Edmure to leave, and it disconcerted her. Lord Petyr still had many sellswords in the castle, and with Edmure’s departure, the Long Lances and the Mirror Shields and all the rest were getting dangerously close to outnumbering everyone else.

The lords and ladies talked amongst themselves in the gallery, as refreshments were passed round. Sansa took a cup of iced wine, to calm her nerves. Then the great doors at the far end of the hall were opened and Princess Myrcella was marched inside.

She did not look in a good way, but Littlefinger had permitted her to wash and dress as befit a noble lady. Her gown was of a plain and functional cut, grey silk that covered her arms and legs entirely. The lioness has been tamed, thought Sansa. For now, at least. The crowd hissed as she was marched through, and a couple of men even spat, hissing “Abomination!” and “spawn of sin!” and “Bitch!” and other such vulgarities.

“They’re not wrong,” Rickon said. “She is a bitch.”

Sansa hushed him. They should be impartial unless called upon to give testimony. The guards locked Myrcella into the witness box, her hands chained in front of her.

First the lords of the Vale would be allowed to make their case against the princess. It was a strange and unfair notion, but in truth, it might suit them better in the end. Let Littlefinger throw everything he has at us. Let him reveal his plan.

Ser Lyn Corbray was the first witness to come forward. “The Lord Protector and I had been harbouring our suspicions over Princess Myrcella’s intentions for quite some time,” he told the hall, “alas, we were too late to save him from his unfortunate poisoning, and therein lies our fault, but—”

“Do not blame yourself, Ser Lyn,” said Nestor Royce. “Likely none of us would have done aught
“Still, the regret will eat away at me… and if Lord Arryn should succumb, why, I shall feel a terrible responsibility as if I had killed him myself.”

“The fault is not yours, ser,” Lady Waynwood said. Sansa sensed a slight brittle iciness in her voice. *She suspects that Littlefinger may have had a hand in this, even if she does not voice those concerns aloud.* “Why, if we all looked at the world like that, none of us would ever be absolved as sin.”

Ser Lyn continued his performance. “I thank you, my lady. Well. I suppose I should get to the heart of it. When I heard the terrible news… my suspicions rose yet higher. I admit that I used trickery to enter Princess Myrcella’s chambers, but surely you can excuse that; I did what I thought was right.”

“Who could blame you?” asked Lord Nestor. The rest of the Lords Declarant nodded some sort of mutual assent.

“It was luck that I found it, you might say. In one of the drawers in her dresser—”

At this the Knight of Ninestars leaned forward. “Forgive me, Ser Lyn, but I would have thought that Princess Myrcella would have hidden the poison somewhere less… well, obvious.”

Ser Lyn shrugged. “All I know is what I saw. The poison was… sweetsleep, I believe. Yes, sweetsleep. The maester will know for certain.”

Maester Colemon stood up in the pews. He was a thin, nervous man with a reedy voice; the apple of his throat bobbed frantically as he mustered himself to speak. “The symptoms Lord Arryn has exhibited were consistent with poisoning by sweetsleep. A few grains, a pinch in a cup of milk will…” He cleared his throat. “…sooth the nerves, and so I have used it to calm Lord Arryn’s shaking fits in the past. I fear that is how Princess Myrcella found her poison so readily available. I am sorry.”

“You did naught but your duty, maester,” said Nestor Royce.

Maester Colemon shuddered. “The… poison… has a sweet taste. Mayhaps if Lord Arryn took any sweetmeats that night, honeyed cakes, mulled wine…”

“A maid in Lord Arryn’s service has testified that his lordship asked for a cup of hot milk before bed,” said Littlefinger. “She insists that she only put a drop of honey in it, as his lordship was fond of such a drink, but she also insists that Princess Myrcella came to fetch the milk herself. From that evidence, it seems likely that the poisoning most likely occurred around then.”

Maester Colemon wrung his hands. “If one knows how… it is possible to work out when such poisoning took place. My estimate is consistent with the evidence of Lord Robert being poisoned that night… though it is impossible to say *exactly* when.”

A stillness fell over the hall. “Is there any more evidence against the accused?” asked Bronze Yohn.

Littlefinger cleared his throat. “I should add that my stepson was making a swift recovery from the shaking fits that had plagued him in the past,” he said. “The boy was, for the most part, healthy and strong. Now he may never recover. I… I want justice to be done. And if, as Princess Myrcella has claimed, King Aegon was in some way responsible for this tragedy, I will not hesitate to ride to war against him. I… that is all.”

He played the part of a bereaved uncle rather well, Sansa thought. But then, Littlefinger had always been a good actor. *Let us hope that the truth wins out.* She could feel her heart beating ever faster.
Since there was no more evidence to be given, it was now the accused’s turn to speak. “Myrcella Lannister,” said Bronze Yohn, “daughter of Cersei Lannister and—” Here he frowned. “—King Robert Baratheon. You are accused of conspiracy and the attempted murder of your husband and liege lord, Robert Arryn, through hateful means of poison. Should you be found guilty, you will likely be sentenced to death. Should you plead guilty at the first opportunity, your sentence may be kinder. How do you plead?”

A pause. Myrcella raised her proud head. “Not guilty,” she said.

Whispers filled the hall briefly, and subsided just as quickly. Bronze Yohn slowly raised a hand for silence. “Very well,” he said. “You may make a statement to contest your innocence. Do you swear in the light of the Seven to tell the truth, the whole truth, and only the truth?”

A septon brought out *The Seven-Pointed Star* for Myrcella to rest her hand upon as she made her promise. “I do so swear.”

Bronze Yohn nodded. “Good. If you do not tell the truth now, you may be charged for perjury too, my lady.” Another pause.

Myrcella stood with the impeccable dignity that suited a princess. She had been allowed to wash and rest properly prior to her trial before the court, as if that would save her. “Previously,” she began, “I made a statement at my inquest, stating that I had been manipulated into playing a part in Robert’s poisoning by King Aegon Targaryen. I would now like to recant that statement and confess it as a lie.”

Bronze Yohn interrupted. “Are you admitting to Lord Arryn’s murder?”

“Not at all. But I would like to tell the truth.” And as her eyes scanned the hall, they met Sansa’s, and for the first time that day, they filled with hope. “I was manipulated into lying. I know who attempted to murder Lord Robert Arryn, and now I know why. And I know that if he goes unpunished, Robert will not survive. It was Lord Petyr Baelish.”

The Great Hall erupted so suddenly that Bronze Yohn was unable to calm it. A thousand eyes fixed upon Littlefinger, and shouts of “Murderess!” and “Liar!” came from the pews. Lord Petyr himself looked mildly shocked, but only for a moment, before his jaw set in angry composure.

Bronze Yohn banged his gavel. “Be silent!” Even then it was a good half a minute before the hall quietened enough for the trial to continue. “My lady, you have just made a very serious accusation, and one that is entirely unsubstantiated. So for your sake, allow me to ensure that I heard you correctly: you have just proposed that Lord Baelish tried to murder his own stepson.”

Lord Belmore shook his head. “That is quite ludicrous, my lady. And a rather disgraceful lie. Lord Baelish loves that boy like a son, as much as Lady Lysa ever did.”

“Not as easily as they come to Petyr Baelish!” called Myrcella. “And I think you all know this. You all know you have been duped.”

Sansa spoke up. “I think we should give Lord Petyr a chance to maintain his innocence. I do not believe the validity of the princess’s claim, but for the sake of argument…” She thought it was better to put him on the spot now, rather than give him the chance to formulate an argument.

Littlefinger shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I entirely deny the princess’s theory… frankly, I do not understand her logic at all. Let us suppose for one moment that I was the ruthless pragmatist you
desire to portray me as. Why would I ever want to kill my own stepson? Forgive the callousness of these words, my lords and ladies, but I am only Lord Protector of the Vale so long as Robert lives. If he dies, Seven forbid… well… I would be reduced to nothing."

“You should not have to say this, my lord,” said Nestor Royce. “I will spare you the pain of thinking of such a terrible thing and ask the question myself: Princess Myrcella, what would Lord Baelish possibly hope to gain from Lord Arryn’s death?”

*It is now. It must happen now.*

“Lord Baelish has already mentioned that he would ride to war against King Aegon if he thought that he was responsible for Lord Robert’s poisoning. And I don’t doubt that Lord Edmure would join him. And if I were to be executed, I very much doubt my family would remain silent. There would be war on all sides. The Riverlands would burn all over again, and the Vale too, this time. The last war left him as Lord of Harrenhal and the Riverlands, and Lord Protector of the Vale. This war will leave him as King on the Iron Throne, if he has his way.”

“My lady,” Sansa heard herself say. “That is preposterous. Why would Lord Baelish want a war? Why, he has only ever protected me from harm, kept me safe and—”

“You would not say that, my lady, if you knew that it was he who betrayed your father to begin with.”

Sansa willed herself to go very pale. “What do you mean?” Bronze Yohn asked.

Myrcella hesitated. “When… when Lord Stark was arrested in King’s Landing, it was that man – it was Petyr Baelish – who held the knife to his throat.”

Sansa forced herself to look into Baelish’s eyes. He did not prepare for this, she thought. “Is this true?” she gasped.

“No, my lady. Never… how… why would I ever do such a thing? You have to believe me.” He would not meet her eyes, and that was how Sansa knew it was all true. *It was him. It was always him.* Littlefinger was staring at Myrcella now. “Preposterous lies… the words of a mad girl… you have—”

“No witnesses?” said Myrcella. “Oh, but I do. Sandor Clegane. He was there in the hall that day. He saw it all.”

“Sandor Clegane is in the castle dungeons,” Littlefinger replied. “And now I see what this is. A conspiracy between Joffrey’s dog and Joffrey’s sister, designed to discredit—”

“Sandor Clegane is here,” said Sansa.

Now all the eyes in the hall turned to her. “I took him… took him out of prison myself… he saved me from the Tyrells. I…” She made a show of struggling to get the last words out. “I trust him. And I… and I…”

As she’d hoped, Bronze Yohn banged his gavel again. “The court calls Sandor Clegane to speak.”

“Sandor Clegane is not here,” repeated Littlefinger.

“Sandor Clegane is the one with the burned face, is he not?” That was Ser Harrold Hardyng, standing up in the crowd. “Why, I saw him just before I came in. I thought it might have been him… I shall go and fetch him, if you would like.”
The next minutes were the most tense of Sansa’s life. She willed herself to be completely cold, horrified, looking like a girl who had just discovered the terrible truth. Rickon squeezed her hand. “Is it true?” he asked in a quiet voice. “Did he kill Father?”

“Ilyn Payne killed Father,” said Sansa. “And Joffrey. But… maybe Petyr had a hand in it.”

“I’ll kill him, then,” Rickon promised. “I will.”

Then the doors opened, and for once, Harrold Hardyng was her knight in shining armour, leading Sandor Clegane, dressed in dirty mail and matted wool, into the hall and up to the witness’s box. He lowered the hood and showed his burned face to all of the hall. Unlike so many others, Sansa did not look away.

“You are Sandor Clegane?” asked Bronze Yohn. “Known as the Hound? Brother to Ser Gregor the Mountain that Rides, and formerly a knight of King Joffrey’s Kingsguard—”

“I’m not a knight,” the witness growled. “But I am Sandor Clegane.”

“Do you know this woman?” Bronze Yohn pointed at Myrcella.

Clegane’s mouth curled in distaste. “Aye. Cersei’s girl. More like her mother than she thinks.”

“She stands accused of attempting to murder Lord Robert Arryn.”

“I know.”

“Lady Myrcella has accused Lord Petyr Baelish of orchestrating the murder of Lord Robert.”

“I can well believe it. If anyone in this hall’s a bigger liar than a Lannister, it’s that one.” He pointed at Baelish, who was growing paler by the second.

Bronze Yohn frowned. “Perchance you were present during the arrest of Eddard Stark, in the two-hundred-and-ninety-eighth year—”

“Aye. I was there, all right. I was there when that one got out his dagger and forced it right up under Stark’s neck.”

For one instant there was absolute, perfect silence. Now. Sansa threw herself to her feet, banging her knee against the pew, and shouted “WAIT!” before the madness could commence. “WAIT, wait, listen, you have to listen!”

Somehow it worked. The hush fell all over again. Bronze Yohn turned to her. “Listen to what, my lady?”

“To me. I… I thought Lord Baelish was protecting me. When I escaped from Joffrey’s wedding, he was there to save me.” She forced herself to look at Littlefinger. “My saviour. But hearing this… is it true, Clegane?”

“Aye, little bird,” he said softly. “It is.”

“Well,” said Sansa. “Then there is nothing left to tell but the truth. Tyrion Lannister did not kill Joffrey Baratheon. Nor did Oberyn Martell. It was Petyr Baelish, and I know this because he told me when I escaped from King’s Landing.

“Likewise, it was not the Lannisters who killed Jon Arryn. It was Lady Lysa Arryn, who did so out of love for Lord Petyr, and she who sent a letter to my lady mother blaming the Lannisters for Lord
Jon’s death, and convinced my lord father to come to the capital. You may wonder how I came to know this. Well, Lady Lysa herself said as much.” She steadied her hands against the wood. “Right before Lord Baelish pushed her out of the Moon Door.”

And the Great Hall went mad.

There were swords drawn, men scrambling over benches; Bronze Yohn’s gavelling and shouting were drowned in the midst of it all. Everywhere, roaring and screaming, blades drawn and pointed towards Littlefinger, and the Lord Protector himself fleeing from the dais and down towards Ser Lyn and Ser Lothor Brune at one end of the hall. It was all over now. Somehow Nestor Royce made himself heard above the rest. “ARREST HIM!” he shouted, gesturing towards Littlefinger. “In the name of Lord Robert, ARREST HIM!”

Through the chaos Sansa somehow managed to find her way to Brynden Tully and Brienne. “We have to catch Littlefinger before he gets away,” she hissed.

But Littlefinger had already left the hall. The Blackfish looked forlorn, and stunned, too. He had not been ignorant to Littlefinger’s intentions… but Sansa’s revelation had caught him by surprise. Aunt Lysa was his niece, she remembered, too late. “We have to catch him,” she said again.

The Blackfish blinked wearily. “Yes. But the sellswords… Sansa, there are many of them…”

Sansa’s heart plummeted. The sellswords. She had forgotten about the sellswords. How could she have forgotten about the sellswords? She had planned everything else, but somehow the idea that Littlefinger might escape among his thousands of allies had never come to her. What did you think would happen? said a tiny mocking voice in her head. Did you think some gleaming white knight would appear and drag him off to prison? Life is not a song.

“My lady?” said Brienne.

Sansa had been drifting. “What?”

“We will have to hope Lord Royce’s men get to him first,” the lady knight said, “Ser Brynden and I will go out there if it is your wish, but I will need someone to keep you and your brother safe, too.”

“My?” Rickon snorted. He pointed to the doors, where the men were streaming out. Already there were faint battle cries and crashing swords from the courtyard. “I’m coming with you.”

The Blackfish shook his head. “This is a battle, Rickon. A real battle, and nothing to joke about. You are too young.”

Rickon stood up straight. “I’m three-and-ten. People younger than me have fought in wars.”

“He’s right,” Sansa heard herself say. “They have. And they’ve died too. But… I don’t think we should take that choice away from him. Anyway, he’ll have to learn sometime…” Because winter is coming. “Brienne, go with him.” And keep him safe, went unsaid.

“I’ll stay with the little bird,” said Sandor Clegane, coming up behind them. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, wench.”

Brienne looked over at her. Sansa nodded. And she watched as everyone save for Sandor disappeared down the hall towards the courtyard exit.

Clegane saw her looking. “They’ll be all right, little bird. The wench is about as comely as a goat, but she’s no fool.”
“Thank you,” she replied earnestly, “for doing what you had to do.”

“It was nothing, little bird,” he said gently. “Though I think I had best be away soon. There’s a cell down there with my name on it, and it’s only a matter of time before one of the Vale lords decide I should go back there. What with me being an outlaw, and all that.”

“You could come back to Winterfell with us,” Sansa said. “You could be… a household guard. We’d… I don’t know what you’d want, but we could give it to you.”

“A household guard?” Clegane snorted. “You want me to be your dog as I was the Lannisters?” He twisted his lips into something vaguely resembling a smile. “Mind you, I’ve got nothing better to do… might be I’ll think about it.”

Sansa could not say why she felt this sort of responsibility towards Clegane. Maybe it just showed how much she had learned over the years. *He was never evil, not like the queen and Joffrey. Maybe the Hound was evil… but Sandor Clegane is more than just his helmet.*

“Back to Winterfell?” he asked.

“What?”

“You said ‘back to Winterfell’. Not staying for the festivities, then?” He gave a coarse laugh. “Waiting to see what happens with Littlefinger, I mean.”

“Once we’ve sorted Robert’s affairs, I mean to set out at once,” said Sansa. “It might even be tomorrow, if the Vale lords are helpful.” A thought came to her. “I’m going to see Robert. You can come too, if you’d like. Or you can stay here.”

Clegane nodded, and followed her out through the back entrance, away from the fighting in the courtyard. The castle was eerily quiet. He waited at the foot of the steps as Sansa climbed to Robert’s home in the maester’s turret.

Her cousin was asleep, as he often was nowadays, looking very pale and small, his eyes slightly sunken. Maester Colemon was at the window, chewing his nails. Sansa coughed quietly. “Maester…”

Colemon pointed outside. “Did you see…? They took Lord Baelish.”

“And with good reason,” Sansa said. “You should sit down, maester. This will come as a shock.” She did not think Colemon was guilty of anything save for mild incompetence. Certainly he was no major player in Littlefinger’s scheme.

Maester Colemon took a seat. “What is it, my lady?”

“It has come to our attention that Lord Robert was not poisoned by Princess Myrcella, but by Lord Baelish.”

The maester’s eyes went like eggs. “But… my lady, Ser Lyn found the poison in Lady Arryn’s chambers.”

“Ser Lyn was complicit in Littlefinger’s scheme,” she said, “but I think you have had your doubts about this all along, maester. Tell me: how far are Robert’s symptoms actually consistent with sweetsleep poisoning?”

Maester Colemon looked ready to have a shaking fit of his own. “W-well,” he said, “there are
similarities, to be sure. But if it were sweetsleep, we would be expecting more seizures… and Lord Arryn’s condition would be far worse than it is now. Even the smallest overdose can be catastrophic —"

“Which makes me think that our poisoner had no intentions of killing Robert,” she said.

“But, my lady,” said the maester. “If the poison was not sweetsleep, then what—?”

“The wine,” she said. “He always served us his special golden wine at supper. It tastes awful, but Robert didn’t mind it. If there was poison, it might have been in the wine. And Littlefinger poisoned Robert not to kill him, but to make him incapable, so he could use the confusion to further his own agenda. It would not be the first time he has done such thing. Lord Jon Arryn was poisoned, maester. By tears of Lys, administered by his wife Lady Lysa at Littlefinger’s behest.”

Maester Colemon seemed to shrink even more. “I failed the late Lord Arryn,” he said miserably. “If I had known—”

“You could not have known, so do not blame yourself. And even if you had, there was nothing you could have done to save him, maester. Tears of Lys are among the most deadly poisons. But you can continue to tend to Robert, and nurse him back to health, and both I and the lords of the Vale will be eternally grateful for that.”

Maester Colemon smiled nervously at her. “A few more days of bed rest will do it, I think, my lady. And while I doubt that Robert will be as well as he was before the… poisoning… he will be as healthy as he can be, I am certain.”

She nodded. “Will you permit me to ask a couple more questions?”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Why did you start giving Robert sweetsleep to treat his illness? Was that remedy of your own making, or did Lady Lysa or Lord Jon put you up to it?”

“It—it was Lady Lysa, my lady.” His hands shook some more. “It was… after his first attack, Lady Lysa came to me with her advice. One of her maids had advised her, she said… I warned her of the ill effects that sweetsleep could have… indeed, when Lord Baelish told me to stop giving it to the boy, I—” His eyes widened in sudden realisation.

“Lady Lysa was always impressionable,” Sansa said sadly. “And from what I knew of my aunt, I do not think she would have followed the advice of her maid.” She had to wonder whether Aunt Lysa would have gone through with her actions had she known what Littlefinger intended. Did she love him enough to follow him unquestionably?

She looked over Robert in the bed, one last time. Littlefinger took his childhood away. Everything that he had. He killed his father and his mother, and made sure that he would never be young like I was. She smoothed down her cousin’s hair, parting it to put a kiss on his forehead. Robert shifted a little in his sleep, and was quiet again. Sansa stood up and straightened her skirts. “Thank you,” she said to Maester Colemon, and closed the door behind her as she went down.

Sandor was waiting for her downstairs. “They’re still fighting, little bird,” he said, craning his head to look over the battlements. “Best get you back to your cage. You’ll be safe and sound there.”

“Safe and sound?” said Sansa. Down below came the whistling of scorpion bolts. “There’s no such thing as safe and sound.”
Clegane gave her a crooked smile. “The little bird is learning.”

It was starting to get dark. Over the balcony, Sansa watched the flight of flaming arrows and rocks hurled from catapults. The sellswords surrendered inside half an hour, but by then it was almost full dark. Brienne appeared in the stairway below her, with Podrick at her side. Both seemed mostly unscathed by the battle, though Brienne had rents in her plate. “Rickon?” asked Sansa at once.

“He’s fine. He went off celebrating with some of your guardsmen, my lady.”

She nodded through her relief. “And Littlefinger?”

Brienne’s ashamed look told Sansa all she needed to know. She felt her heart sink. “We captured the sellswords,” she said, “but Lord Baelish got away.”

Of course he did.

“Lord Royce has men after him even now, though,” Brienne went on. “And with all the lords of the Vale looking for him, he will not get far. We will find him, my lady.”

“Yes,” said Sansa. I wish I could believe that.

“Speaking of Lord Royce,” said Brienne. “He spoke to me outside. He requests a meeting with you at your earliest convenience, my lady.”

“At my earliest convenience.” Sansa nodded. “Well, I see no reason to delay.” She turned sharply in the direction of the Kingspyre Tower and let the others follow. Out in the yard, the reminders of battle were all around them, and carrion crows were already feeding at the corpses. Sansa saw the head of Ser Lyn Corbray, being ferried across the yard on a long pike. Harry the Heir was there too, in his mail surcoat spotted with blood. He was telling her something about a glorious rout, but Sansa ignored him. Not glorious enough. Littlefinger got away. She could almost see him, worming through the night, escaping…

Half a victory was better than nothing, though.

Bronze Yohn Royce was not alone in his solar; accompanying him were little Lady Waynwood and Ser Symond Templeton, the Knight of Ninestars. They rose to receive her. “Lady Sansa,” said Royce. “I hope I am not imposing too much. Today must have been a difficult day for you, I understand.”

Sansa nodded. “It has. Forgive me, my lord. It is only… I thought Lord Petyr wanted Robert to be safe. That is why I never told…”

“I fear your knowledge will be called into question when Littlefinger is brought to trial,” replied Royce. “But none of us doubt it, I assure you.”

“When Littlefinger is brought to trial,” she said. “You will have to capture him first.”

“Baelish will not evade us for long,” said Lady Waynwood. “My son Donnel and half a hundred mounted knights are after him. Baelish cannot more than an hour’s lead.”

“An hour is enough. If anyone can disappear without a trace, it is him.” The Vale lords might be assured of Littlefinger’s guilt, but that meant nothing unless they had him in their custody. “You should send letters to Saltpans and Maidenpool and Gulltown,” Sansa said. “If he is planning to leave Westeros, those are the nearest ports. And to King’s Landing. He has many allies there.”
“Fear not, my lady. Arrangements are being made as we speak. Baelish will be captured, I promise you.” Royce’s pride would be his downfall someday, Sansa was certain. That, and his uncanny ability to overlook things right under his nose. “Of course,” his lordship said. “After Baelish’s trial, the headsman’s justice will be meted out swiftly. Let it send a message to the Vale.”

“Let us hang him instead,” she said. “That is the proper punishment for traitors, is it not?”

Lady Waynwood agreed. “Lady Sansa has the right of it. And hanging Littlefinger would send a message to the men out there who would still profess their loyalty to him. Men fear a noose more than they do an axe.” Sansa had never seen the old woman so certain of anything.

Bronze Yohn looked surprised, but he nodded. “As you say, my lady. Now: Lord Baelish’s death leaves another void in the heart of the Vale. Lord Arryn still needs a Regent to rule until he comes of age.”

“It will not be you, Royce,” said the Knight of Ninestars. “A man who conspired against Lord Robert for so long is plainly unfit to be his Regent.”

“Lord Robert needs a competent Regent, though,” said Lord Royce. “Which would discount you, Templeton.”

Sansa raised her voice. “If you continue to squabble like this, none of you should be Regent of the Vale. But perhaps there is another solution. Perhaps all of you should be Regent of the Vale. There are seven Lords Declarant. Robert will need a regency till his eighteenth nameday, which is three-and-a-half years from now. If you set up a council of Regents, with each of you holding power for half a year—”

Bronze Yohn pursed his lips in thought. “A good idea, my lady,” he said at last. “Though seven different Regents may have very different ideas—”

“Then make it so the Lords Declarant have to meet at least twice every year, or something like that, to discuss the stewardship of the Vale. That way, none of you can wield absolute power as Littlefinger did. And perhaps… whoever leads the Lords Declarant should take Robert as their ward. Then he would learn more about his people and his lands, and… well, it would not be perfect, to be sure, but the Vale would have stability, at least.”

And unexpectedly, all three seemed to agree.

The agenda changed. “Princess Myrcella has fled,” Bronze Yohn said. “She disappeared in the chaos, but like Baelish she cannot have gotten far. Our men are ready to ride out down the river road and capture her. She has not yet been absolved of her crimes.”

“She will not have taken the river road,” lied Sansa. “Such a route would be far too obvious. Tell your men to ride south, to the goldroad. Or east, even. She will seek to trick us by doubling back.” And after some brief argument, the three lords acquiesced to that as well.

“One last matter, my lady,” said Bronze Yohn. “With Lord Baelish’s desertion, Harrenhal reverts to the Crown… or to Lord Arryn, or to Lord Tully. Likely there will be some sort of squabble over the castle’s inheritance, but there is another solution which all parties might find amenable.”

“Which is?”

“You,” said Lord Royce. “Harrenhal was previously owned by House Whent. Your mother’s mother was a Whent, my lady. By rights, the castle passes into the Tully line. And since Lord Edmure and Lady Lysa’s lines are both likely to squabble over the castle… perhaps we should follow the line of
Lady Catelyn instead. Which leaves us with you and your brother. Rickon is too young to rule, but no one doubts your competency, and some might say you won it from Baelish with your testimony against him. I doubt anyone would object if you were named the lady of Harrenhal.”

That was something Sansa had not been expecting. “Lady of Harrenhal? But… Harrenhal is cursed.” That was a stupid thing to say, but it was all she could think of. The biggest castle in Westeros, for me? Sansa could not understand it.

“I do not believe you are as superstitious as all that, Lady Sansa,” said Lady Waynwood. “In fact, I think the so-called curse of Harrenhal has delivered the castle into your hands.”

“I-I cannot accept,” Sansa said. “Leave it with Lord Robert. Maybe the castle is fated to be my inheritance, but I do not intend to stay in the Riverlands. On the morrow, I mean to head home to Winterfell.” She had made up her mind. There was no point in waiting for Littlefinger. Bran needed her in the north, and she and Rickon both wanted to go home.

“Ah,” said Lord Royce. “Well, then. We cannot deny you that.” He smiled a little. “I suppose we shall have to come up with some other solution.” And that was that. They did not try to force it on her, though it was plain that they would not mind if she did take it. They talked a while longer, and then it was moonrise, and they parted ways, promising to meet a final time in the morning. Sansa went and found Ser Brynden and Brienne, telling them to make preparations for their impending departure.

Finally she went in search of Rickon. He was in the Small Hall, sitting at one of the trestle tables, laughing and talking with several older men: Tully guardsmen, by the look of them. Sansa stood and watched him for a moment. There was mud and dust in his hair and on his leather jerkin, but in the glare of the red firelight, he looked quite like Robb, a few years ago. The thought made her sad. We can never go back to those times, she thought. Only forwards, into the new world, and whatever may come with it…

Sansa caught his eye and ushered him aside. “I hate to disturb you from your new friends,” she said, suppressing a smile. “But I have some good news.”

“Is it Littlefinger? Did they catch him?”

“No. Not yet. But it’s better news.”

And Rickon’s stern frown went away and he was grinning like a little boy, all over again. “Home?” he asked, quieter than she’d been expecting.

“Home,” she promised. “Back to the North, to Bran, to Winterfell.” She wanted to hug him, to kiss him, but instead she let him clasp her hands tight. “We’re going home.” And they smiled and laughed and they supped together and the Blackfish told many stories and japes, and the Hound and Podrick got horrendously drunk together, and even Brienne cracked a queasy smile. There was no news of Littlefinger that night, but eventually her concerns faded, if only for a time.

But later that night, when the revelries had died away, Sansa stood alone at her window in the Kingspyre Tower. The sellswords had been driven off or dragged into prison, the mockingbird banners were going down, and Tully, Arryn and Stark flags flew in their place, as they must have so many years ago, when three men had united against the dragonlords. Rain started to fall, and in the teardrops on her window, Sansa could see Harren the Black and all his sons burning, and the bloody demises of the Houses Harroway and Strong, and Mad Danelle Lothston, the fall of Lady Whent, and of Tywin Lannister and Roose Bolton, who had held the castle during the War of the Five Kings, and lastly Littlefinger, reflected right back at her in the rain, clear as day. I am a part of you
now, Sansa.

Afterwards, men would say Harrenhal’s curse had brought an end to all of them… but where did that leave her? Because she had done all of this, hadn’t she? Sansa went to her drawers, and opened the secret compartment in the back, and brought out the vial of sweetsleep. *A pinch to end Robert’s shaking, two pinches to make it start again.* She opened the window and tipped the contents of the vial away from her, out into the night rain.

Chapter End Notes

This one went through a fair number of rewrites, but I'm mostly happy with how it all turned out. I suppose I could have shown more of the battle with the sellswords, but this chapter is about Sansa, first and foremost. It's not quite the culmination of her character development - Sansa is arguably the main character of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, after all, so she has one chapter left to reflect on that which also helps set up the sequel... but it's a lot gentler than this, and you might view it as a slightly disassociated storyline. Without giving too much away, it's tonally similar to the lone Jaime chapter in ADWD.

That being said, this is a chapter that encourages you to ask questions about how far Sansa has come. Of course, the big event of the chapter is the trial, but the big reveal comes right at the very end. It completely makes you re-evaluate Sansa as a character when you consider how much of her plans were pre-meditated. Is she becoming another Littlefinger?

On Littlefinger: so, it seems that everyone's favourite evil-doer has survived THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. Littlefinger will be crossing paths with some rather unexpected fan favourites in the third part of this story, but you'll have to wait and see who. Also, we're going to be seeing LF on the back foot rather than in control, which should make a nice difference - and may make him even more dangerous.

***

Thanks to everyone who has read, favourited and followed, and especially to those who have reviewed. Not long to go until part two is over, now...
JAIME

It was close to dusk, and Jaime was starting to tire. “Your feet are wrong again,” he pointed out. “Too close together. You risk overbalancing.” He went and stood beside Tommen. “Here. Like this. How are your arms?”

Tommen dropped his hands to his sides. “Tired. And can I take my helmet off, please? It’s getting stuffy.”

“No,” said Jaime. “You wanted to be taught real fighting. Well, there is no respite in battle. Keep your helm on, else you’re like to get a sword to the face. And get your guard up!” He pushed Tommen across the square and raised his own sword, awkward in his left hand.

The sparring sessions benefitted Jaime as much as they did his son. He did not want anyone to know how out-of-practise he really was, and that was impossible in the main courtyard. Here on the king’s terrace they were secluded, away from prying eyes. And there was a certain something about this that made Jaime smile – a father should teach his son, after all.

Tommen suddenly advanced. Jaime made a sideways parry, then brought his blade up, forcing the boy to retreat. They prowled in a wary circle. Jaime had been surprised by how competent Tommen actually was. He was nowhere near as good as Jaime had been, and not as fast, but he was unexpectedly strong and understood most of the basics.

Jaime moved back, putting some distance between them. Then he feinted, and lunged left, while
shouting “Right!” Tommen was a little late on the parry. Jaime’s next cut sent him staggering across the yard. He managed to right himself just in time to knock aside the third thrust. The parry was wild, though, and gave Jaime enough time to dart in and grab the boy’s sword hand. “You would be dead against a man with two hands,” he said. “He’d just punch you or hit you with his shield until you couldn’t defend any more. You need to work on that.”

Tommen pulled off his helm. Underneath his hair was plastered down and his face was red. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

“With tricks a knight can’t teach you.” Jaime said. “Oh, swords are fine when you’ve got the distance, but sometimes you have to fight like a tavern drunk. You should be fairly good at it; you’ve got the strength. And another thing: take your time. Take a moment to breathe and think about things, and you might find your opponent’s weaknesses. If you rush through it, you just get exhausted for no real reason.” He smirked. “Does Lady Eleyna tell you the same thing?”

“No.” Tommen put his helm back on, though he kept the visor open. “Ready.” He didn’t need all the armour and padding, since they were fighting with blunted swords, but Jaime hoped the boy would rise to the challenge.

This time Tommen did not trouble himself with attacking. Instead, he hung back, waiting for Jaime to make a move. As you wish. He moved forwards, taking control of the space, and kept advancing. Steady now… he will have his back to the—

He saw Tommen’s attack coming, but he was caught in unfortunate mid-step, so he had to take it head-on. Jaime brought his sword up, locking their blades, and kept moving forwards… till the boy stepped aside neatly and managed to get his sword at Jaime’s throat.

“There you go,” said Tommen, smiling. “I did it—” He moved the blade away… and Jaime swung his golden hand, cracking his son solidly in the wrist. Tommen dropped the sword, cursing. Jaime grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him back against the wall.

“That’s cheating.” Tommen pulled his helm off again. “I had you there. I got in close, like you said, and disarmed you.”

“Yes. And you assumed you’d beaten me. I’ve done the same thing. Oh, honour is all very well and good, but sometimes it has no place in a fight.” Jaime glanced at the sky. It was the colour of blackberry wine. “That’s enough for today, I reckon.” He collected the practise swords. “Do you need anything else, Your Grace?”

“Don’t call me ‘Your Grace’. I’m not going to be the king for much longer, you know that.” Tommen started to undo the straps of his breastplate and the heavy padded jacket. He hoisted himself up onto the rampart, and nestled between two crenels, looking pensive. “Don’t go yet. I need someone to talk to. Someone I trust. It’s hard to know who to trust nowadays.”

Jaime sat on the rampart beside him. “You have your friends. You have your wife.”

“She’s not my wife.”

“If you say so.” Jaime knew about the ceremony, even if Tommen wanted him to pretend otherwise. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“Everyone says that.”

“They’re right. You’re honest, dutiful, good-hearted… true… and not bad to look at – obviously you take after your handsome uncle.”
Tommen laughed. “Obviously.” There was a pause. “True? What do you mean?”

“You keep your word. You’re not afraid to face up to hard truths. Yes, there are hard choices to make, yes, but you don’t hide from them. It’s a rare quality to have, and… the hard choices will haunt you sometimes, but…” I am proud of you. He dared not say it aloud, but it was definitely true. Over the last few weeks, he’d realised what a father’s pride really was. It was becoming harder and harder not to tell Tommen the truth; that would be a cruel thing to do, but he wanted the boy to know he had a father. He wanted to be able to say that he was proud of his son.

Instead, he said, “Six-and-ten. Do you know what I did when I turned six-and-ten?”

“Drank copiously?”

“Right first time. You wouldn’t believe it, but it was my own Sworn Brothers who put me up to it. Even the White Bull played along.” Jaime snorted. “I hear you had a rather more amusing night – night and day, that is.”

“I worry that I might end up like Father,” said Tommen. “Maybe he started this way too… and never stopped. He just kept drinking and hunting and whoring, and… I’ll never sleep with a whore. Never.”

I think Cersei’s iciness had something to do with it, too. “You’re not like Robert,” said Jaime. “But you should be wary… with Myrcella, and with you giving up the crown, people might not look on you favourably. I learned the same when I killed King Aerys.”

“You killed Aerys for the same reason I didn’t save Myrcella, though,” said Tommen. They had discussed Jaime’s reasons for killing the Mad King a few days ago. Tyrion. Cersei. Brienne. Ned Dayne. Aegon. Tommen. To Jaime’s knowledge, they were the only people who knew.

“Myrcella is not dead,” he said. “We should not give up on her.”

“No,” said Tommen.

They sat in silence for a while.

“Sixteen years.” Jaime whistled through his teeth. “It’s strange to think I didn’t really know you until a couple of years ago.” He jumped down from the wall. “But this is enough philosophy for one evening. I have work to attend to. And I wouldn’t want to keep you from yours.”

“I don’t have any work. I mean, I’m having supper with Eleyna, but that’s all…”

“And isn’t that work in itself?”

“We could stay a while longer—”

“Not now. I need to talk with your mother, for one.” Jaime watched his son’s face fall. Hesitantly, he continued: “You know, Tommen, you ought—”

“To talk?” The boy frowned. “Did you come all the way here just to try and convince me to talk with her? You don’t have to do everything she says, you know. You’re the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, not of the Queensguard.”

“The Kingsguard is sworn to protect the royal family, Your Grace. Say what you will about your mother, but she is a part of that.”
“And nothing more.”

“Her Grace is the Queen Regent—”

“I’m nearly a man grown,” the king said crossly. “I don’t need a Regent. I don’t want one.”

“As you say, Your Grace. Though I must ask: why are you telling me?”

Tommen furrowed his brows. “What does she want?”

He cleared his throat. “Her Grace was wondering if you would sup with her sometime soon. In her chambers.”

“Why?”

“I… I believe she wants to apologise.” Jaime had trouble believing that himself. “For her rude dismissal of you and your concerns.”

“I’ve already signed the agreements,” Tommen said. “She won’t make me change my mind. Tomorrow, I’m giving Margaery the papers, and I’m sending Shireen away. Mother can’t stop me.”

“I know. But she never intended to say everything that she did. It was… hasty, she says. She just wants to make amends. And so do you, I think.”

The last was a risky addition, but it paid off. “I don’t hate her,” Tommen admitted. “And I don’t really want her to go away. I… I’ll see what she has to say.”

Jaime knew he would not get any more than that, so he took his leave. But his doubts still troubled him as he climbed the stairs to his sister’s chambers. They are both as stubborn as each other, he thought. Getting them to reconcile will not be easy.

Cersei was in the bath when he arrived. Joy Hill said she would be out soon, but Jaime knew his sister would bathe for days if she wanted to, so he barged in uninvited. The air was heady with the smell of honey and apricots. “She wanted me to have rosewater, Jaime! Rosewater, would you believe it?” Her eyes were bright.

She is drunk, Jaime knew at once. “You are in a sprightly mood,” he said.

“Indeed. I hope you have good news for me.”

The sun behind her window bathed Cersei in light, pale upon her naked white skin and hot in her golden hair. She stretched a hand towards him through the bathwater. Jaime met it with his golden appendage. I remember taking you like this, he almost said, I climbed into the bathwater on top of you and we slid together so perfectly, as though our parts were made only to fit one another’s.

“Have you conveyed my message to Tommen?” she asked.

“Aye. But—”

“Will you help me out?” she said, raising her hand from the bath. Pearls of water trickled down.

She was wet, but her skin was light and warm and supple, flushed from the heat of the bathwater, and even when she robed herself he could see and feel the fire in each pale breast, in her sun-drenched golden tresses. This is Cersei as I want to see her, he thought. So why does it feel so fake?

“Will you do me a favour, sweet Jaime? There is a decanter of Dornish swill on my table. Bring it to
me. I think I will benefit from it.”

Nothing would benefit her less, but so far drunken Cersei was proving mostly amenable, and he did not want to disturb her precarious state. When he returned with the flagon, she had robed and had taken a seat in front of her mirror. “So,” she said vaguely, “did you convince him?”

“Yes. He will consider—”

“Not that, you fool. About turning away from the Tyrells.”

Jaime sighed. “No.” He told her what Tommen had said.

“Did you try?”

“Of course I did,” he lied. “But he is stubborn and set in his ways. He is a man now, Cersei, not your little boy. He does what he wants.”

“I don’t believe that.” She turned away from him. “He is still my son somewhere. He can be convinced. And if not… if it comes to that, I trust you are ready?”

“It will not come to that,” Jaime said, uncertainly.

“But if it does…”

He did not answer. She did not question him any further. “Well,” she said, “given your failure, Lord Commander, I should by rights dismiss you. Instead, I am willing to offer you a second chance.”

Jaime knew what it was before she said a word. “Castamere.”

“Castamere,” she confirmed. “There has been nothing from your Ser Lyle, and nothing from uncle Kevan either. I would take that as a blessing, but Qyburn counsels me that the lack of news is disturbing, not encouraging.”

“And why do you think I will succeed? Why not send Lord Tarly? You said yourself that he is starting to aggravate you—”

“I will need Tarly in the days and weeks ahead.”

“You will need me, too.”

“Will I?” Her eyes suddenly brightened. “Oh, Jaime. I thought we did not lie to each other.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Cersei.”

“Look at you. Standing proud and tall in your golden armour. With that beard covering half your face and one limp golden fist instead of a sword hand. The Jaime I knew would sooner have fallen on his own sword than live as a cripple.”

“Cersei, what are you talking about?”

“I am saying what I have been meaning to say ever since your return. You left me, Jaime. You, Father, Uncle Kevan, Tyrion, all of you, you abandoned me and went off on your own. Oh, Father sent you to Riverrun, but you have gone against him before. What was he going to do? Disown you?” She scoffed. “And before that… a year in Catelyn Stark’s dungeons… I’m not sure I know you anymore. We came into this world together; we were supposed to live together, love together, die together, yet now we are slipping apart, and I cannot hold us like this on my own, Jaime.
“Perhaps it was inevitable,” she went on. “You were meant to be Father’s heir. I was only ever meant to be Father’s bargaining chip. And even now that I’ve proved him wrong, now that I’ve proved that I can be queen, you want to take it away from me. Would you like to be Regent, Jaime? Would you like to sit in a big chair and play with a big stamp like a big boy?” She laughed bitterly. “I think you would. You say Tommen might treat with me, but you barely believe it yourself. The Jaime I knew would not have settled for half. The Jaime I knew was not some whipped cur, or Margaery Tyrell’s errand boy. He loved me, only me.”

Jaime knew that these were her drunken ministrations, but he wondered how far he should believe them. *In wine there is truth.* “Cersei, you aren’t making any sense.”

“I am. We were supposed to rule together, not apart.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to see you. Go, ser. Go back to your tower and your silly white swords. Go. Go!” If he had stayed much longer, she would surely have thrown the cup at his head. As it was, Jaime backed out, resolving to return when her temper had calmed. *If her temper calmed.*

His solar in the Kingsguard Tower was freezing, and there was snow on all the window-boxes. He told Garrett Paege to light a fire in the grate and donned a thick wool cloak over his Kingsguard whites. Paege also brought a letter from Lyle Crakehall. *At Kayce,* the letter said, *unable to progress through the snow. Ironborn raiders on our coastlines, but not attacking. Some saying that there are dead men walking in the woods.*

“Dead men walking in the woods?” Jaime said to himself. The Night’s Watch had made a similar claim, in a letter courtesy of Ned Stark’s bastard. *Jon Snow,* he recalled. Tyrion had mentioned the boy, long ago.

He thought of Tyrion only infrequently now. Aegon Targaryen had said his brother was still alive, but months had gone by since then, and your life was always in peril in a Targaryen dungeon. *Tyrion could be dead and buried, like Father. And where does that leave me? Alone with Cersei and Tommen, the last Lannisters marooned at the end of the world.* Jaime put down his wine-cup. “I never should have joined the Kingsguard,” he said aloud. Lord Tywin had only been able to secure Cersei’s marriage to Robert on account of Jaime killing the Mad King. *If I had not been there, none of this would have happened... and there would be only ashes where King’s Landing once stood.*

His days were so often concerned with hard choices like these. But hadn’t he already made his choices, long ago?

Garrett Paege poked his head through the door. “Visitor for you, Lord Commander.” He stood aside to let Ser Loras Tyrell enter.

Jaime was not too surprised by the knight’s appearance. “I thought you might be busy elsewhere,” he said, “given your impending departure.”

“I wanted to talk.”

Jaime led Loras to the table and filled his cup. “About what?”

“About us.”

Loras smiled thinly. “I hope you are not propositioning me. Women are more to my liking.”

Loras nodded. “That too. I suppose… that is another one of our similarities. We both loved the wrong person.”

“A Kingsguard loves no one.”
“A Kingsguard does not kill his king.” Loras said, with half a smile. “Do you think a Kingsguard should love his king? Or his queen? Surely we must. If we did not love our kings, would we be so willing to die for them?”

“That is a question I cannot answer.”

Loras sipped his wine. “This cannot go on, you know. One day soon, you will have to choose between your sister and your king. And I pity you in that. The last time you chose between king and family…”

“Did your father ever tell you about the pyromancers?” Jaime blurted. “The Alchemists’ Guild?”

Ser Loras shook his head.

“Aerys confided in three of them. Rossart, Garigus and Belis. I killed Rossart on the day of the Sack. Shoved a sword through his bowels, and then went back for Aerys. And I tracked down Garigus and Belis in the days afterwards. Found them hiding in the ruins, and put an end to them too.” He took a deep breath. “Aerys had them create caches of wildfire, you see. Beneath King’s Landing: under the Sept of Baelor, under the Dragonpit, even under the Red Keep. He wanted to wait till my father and Robert Baratheon reached the city, before blowing us all to bits. *Burn them all*, he said. *Burn them all*. So you see now, Ser Loras. It was not king or family. It was king or kingdom.”

Ser Loras looked at him quite strangely, as though he had already known the story, and Jaime was only confirming it. But instead of replying, he started on his own tales of woe. “I slew Robar Royce and Emmon Cuy in a mad rage at Bitterbridge, when I thought they had murdered Renly. I meant to cut down Brienne of Tarth too, though she had done nothing wrong, I know now. Such…” He swallowed. “Such a man cannot serve in the Kingsguard. Or in any sort of guard. When I go back to Highgarden… well, I don’t know where I’ll go from there. East, maybe. To the Free Cities and beyond.”

“Travelling?” Jaime nodded. “Maybe so. You’ve already made a name for yourself, so there will be plenty who want your service, I think.”

There was another long pause. Ser Loras stood up. Jaime did the same, matching him like a shadow. The Knight of the Flowers held out his hand. “Thank you, Ser Jaime,” he said.

Jaime took it. “And thank you, Ser Loras. I think I learned something as well.”

Loras half-reached the door, then looked back. His lips parted, ready with another question. For the longest time, he hesitated, but finally, he spoke. “Tommen is your son, isn’t he?”

Son. What did that word mean, really? “He is my king.” Jaime said. *My king with my eyes, my hair, and… something of my heart, I think. I hope. But better than me, too.* “And… yes, he is my son.”

Tyrell let out his breath. “You should tell him. He’s an honest lad. If he knows the truth… he might not feel so hesitant about giving up his crown.”

The young knight went through the door. Jaime stared in his direction for a long time after he had gone. *Let us pray that you take my words to heart, ser.*

It was nearly full dark by now. Jaime sent for Garrett Paege, and the boy brought him saltfish and some hard cheese. When the food arrived he frowned at it. “Have we got nothing better in the larders?”

“Sorry, my lord. The king’s orders. He says we have to save our supplies for the winter. That means
small suppers, save for the household garrison.”

“And what am I, if not a member of the household garrison? Do you see my white cloak, Paege? My father liked to say it was all I was worth.” And my sister.

“Sorry, ser. I’ll go fetch something—”

Jaime waved a hand. “Don’t bother. I’m not hungry.” Right now he felt like sleep might be the best thing to soothe him. “Take the food for yourself, Paege. You look hungry.”

The boy took the plate away and left Jaime alone. He went to the window overlooking the courtyard. Even at this late hour, he could still see snowballs flying through the screen of white flakes. What happened to us? To me, to Cersei… and to our children. This cruel world has chewed us up and spat us out.

Jaime hung his Kingsguard cloak up at the foot of his bed, and lay down. It did not take long for him to drift off.

He dreamed an old, familiar dream. He was alone in a seven-sided vault, with seven looking down on him: his Kingsguard brothers Hightower, Dayne, Whent, Martell, Darry and Selmy made six, and his lord father occupied the Stranger’s place. Usually they pronounced judgement on him and damned him to eternal punishment. But tonight they said nothing. It was some time before Jaime realised the other thing that was different: he was no longer alone.

At first, he was sure the stranger was Cersei. Long golden hair hid her face, but he knew her slender body, and he knew her smell, and the golden shoulders peeking above the gown. But as Jaime advanced he became less and less certain.

“Here you are,” she said, looking away. “I feared you would not visit me, Jaime.”

“I… I am sorry. I meant to.”

“Meaning something is not the same as doing it, Jaime. You should know that, you of all people.”

“It has been a long time,” he said.

“Has it?” The woman turned to face him. In the darkness he could make out the green pools of her eyes, but nothing else. “Or perhaps I have been with you all along. Perhaps you never saw because you never looked.”

“I… I am looking now.”

“And what do you see?”

“I see…” He looked up, beyond her. Lord Tywin’s statue loomed over them both. His was cold. Hers was warm. “I see… me.”

“So do I, child,” she said. “So do I.”

He woke with pins and needles in his feet, and his aunt Genna’s words ringing in his head, the words she’d said when she came to tell him and Cersei that their mother had perished in childbed. I’m sorry, she said, your brother lived, but she died. The baby lived, but your mother died.

There were footsteps on the stairs below. A moment later the door was shoved unceremoniously open. Garrett Paege ran into the room, shrinking back at Jaime’s wide-awake look. “Oh.” The boy
swallowed. “Lord Commander. I didn’t think you’d be…”

“Spit it out.”

“They need you downstairs, my lord.”

“They? Who? Why?”

“Oh. The queen, ser. And the king. Both of them. Not at the same time. I was coming from the king when Lord Qyburn told me to find you.”

Seven hells. “What is it this time?”

“Margaery Tyrell has been poisoned,” Paege pronounced impeccably.

“Poisoned?” Oh, Cersei, what have you done?

“I only just woke.”

“You have heard the unfortunate news?”

“Aye.” Jaime narrowed his eyes. “Most unfortunate.”

“Indeed. And a shock. A most terrible shock. Of course… an investigation will be necessary… and an explanation.”

Qyburn interjected. “Poisoned wine, we think. My little birds have their suspicions regarding Lord Tarly,” he said. “Which is why we have not summoned his lordship tonight.”

Jaime scowled. “You think Lord Tarly poisoned Margaery Tyrell?” What in seven hells is this?

“He has a motive,” Cersei said. “The Tyrells were responsible for the destruction of his army and the death of his son. Perhaps… Tommen’s intentions of reconciling with them were too much for him to bear. Which is terrible.” She smiled. “We were so close to a peace. Though it suppose Tarly might not have acted alone. Tommen should have sent Shireen Baratheon away long ago, but—”

“Enough of this,” Jaime growled. “Qyburn, get out.” The grey maester bowed, said, “as my lord commands,” and left. Jaime looked his sister in the eye. “Did you do this?” he asked, already knowing that she had.

“This is a terrible tragedy,” Cersei replied evasively. “One that has shocked us all. I fear the Knight
of the Flowers and Prince Quentyn Martell have gotten their ideas into your head, Jaime. I worry for them, too… and I worry for my own safety if they suspect my role in this plot. And Tommen can be so impressionable… I would hate to see him dragged into some foul plot, too. Indeed, likely he is down there even now, surrounded by false friends.” She took Jaime’s hand in hers. “In which case, all I have left is my beloved brother, the brave Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. My last friend in the world.”

He drew away from her. “Cersei… I… I cannot…”

“Will you leave me as well, Jaime? Your own sweet sister?” She smiled at him. He had never been able to resist that smile. “It is time, beloved brother,” she said, “to decide whose side you are on.”

Chapter End Notes

I apologise to everyone for the ludicrously long wait for this chapter.

I wanted to get this up within 3 days of the last one, but then some real-life things came up, and I decided to rewrite this, and the next chapter (which is really part 2 for this chapter). And then there were more real-life interruptions, and rewrites and stuff and things.

Obviously, I won't make my July 16th deadline now, and I'm deeply sorry about that. But that might not necessarily be a bad thing; I may pick up some new readers if the GoT fic community sees a surge in readership following the season premiere.  Hopefully, this will all be done by the end of July, though. There's really only one chapter left that will be hard work to write. The rest is already complete, or plain sailing.

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On this chapter, I love the duplicity and hypocrisy of the Lannister siblings' relationship, especially when juxtaposed with Jaime's realisations about everyone else. For example, Cersei decides that the best way to win Jaime to her side is to basically insult him. On the other hand, we have evidence that Jaime has been receiving private communications from Lyle Crakehall, and has chosen not to share them with Cersei. This betrays the underlying distrust in their relationship.
Goldenheart

Chapter Summary

Are you cold? Or just afraid?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TOMMEN

Their voices were cold smoke and snow, rising towards the rafters. “You are well within your rights,” said Josmyn Peckledon. “If the Queen Regent is behind this, then you cannot allow her to succeed in undermining you, Your Grace.”

“Don’t call me Your Grace,” Tommen said, tersely. “I’m a lord now, and only that.”

“The Lord of Casterly Rock and the Warden of the West,” Rollam Westerling pointed out. “An office which commands respect. If people think your mother is in charge of everything, they will doubt you.” Tommen’s new brother-by-law was timid on the battlefield, but more outspoken when it came to matters of state. And he understood politics better than almost anyone.

The King’s Companions had gathered in their lord’s solar after the meeting in the Small Hall, over boiled eggs, fruit, and lots of spiced wine. Most of them still wore their nightclothes under their cloaks and tabards.

“Of course,” Rollam went on. “We will respect you regardless, my lord. But others—”

“If I go through with this, others may think ill of me for betraying my own mother,” said Tommen.

“It was she who betrayed you,” Eleyna said from his right. His wife had been indispensable all night. Tommen was with her when Ser Loras Tyrell came to his door muttering about Margaery and poisoning, and she had been his support through the initial feelings of guilt and rage.

“True,” he said. “But what am I to do with my mother after we’ve arrested her?”

“Send her to Pinkmaiden,” said Lew Piper. “Father will bore her to tears with his talk of forestry.”

Tommen smiled. “I had a kinder punishment in mind… but you may have a point, Lew. Faircastle or Banefort would suit, once we’ve dealt with the ironborn.”

Strongboar took that in his stride. “I’ve assembled four hundred to follow my cousin Lyle, at your command. It’s three days marching to Kayce.”
That may help with the other matter, too. “Very good. But this comes first. I need your men in the barracks by tomorrow, if we’re going through with this. Yes. Put them in the barracks. If I change my mind…” He could not very well change his mind, not after his solemn promise to Loras Tyrell. *Justice for your sister, ser. Justice for her child.*

“I will speak with Ser Loras on the morrow,” he said. “It is *his* sister, and his nephew. We won’t be alone, regardless.”

The rest was easy. They talked about provisions for the Kayce march and Peck updated him on the construction of his three biggest warships: *Lord Tywin, Princess Myrcella* and *Nymeria*. Another three weeks and they would be done, and the Lannister army could sail to meet the ironborn near Castamere.

*But only after I have finished with Mother…*

Everyone was in oddly good spirits when the meeting concluded, perhaps because it meant they could go back to bed. Tommen retreated to his solar with Eleyna and Rollam. It would not be long before Willem Frey arrived with his visitors, so he wrote the letters as they talked. He was putting his seal to them both when Ser Pounce darted out from behind his bookshelf with a dead mouse.

Tommen frowned. Ser Pounce had never caught anything before. “Well,” he surmised, “at least there’s *some* use to you.”

“I had a dog once,” said Rollam. “When I was small. He was called Winkle.”

“Winkle?”

“Yes. Like periwinkle. It’s a mollusc. He wasn’t a big dog.”

“Ser Pounce was a small cat once,” Tommen said. “And then he wasn’t. I think I probably overfed him. I think I overfed myself, too. I used to be quite plump, you know.”

Willem knocked on the door. “Your Grace,” he said. “Princess Shireen and Ser Davos are below.”

Tommen ushered Ser Pounce away, and Rollam left with him. Then he sent his squire to fetch another flagon of wine while Shireen and Davos entered his solar. They both wore heavy woollen mantles over their nightclothes. “We heard there was a commotion among the Tyrells,” Shireen said, taking her seat.

There was no point in lying. “Lady Margaery has been poisoned. And I think my mother is to blame. Which means… it is best for you to leave at once.” He showed her the letter, and told her about the escort of King’s Companions which she could find from Smallboar. “I can give you is horses and gold and my writ of passage, too. If you see Addam Marbrand or Lyle Crakehall on the road, they’ll be honour-bound to help you.”

“Thank you, cousin,” replied Princess Shireen. “I must admit, after our last supper, I wasn’t sure if you’d go through with it.”

Tommen passed the papers across. “I grew tired of indecision. I hope this will be the start of reconciliation between Houses Baratheon and Lannister.”


Shireen rose. “When the day comes and I inherit my father’s titles, I will not forget this, Lord Lannister. I owe you a debt.”
A Lannister always pays his debts. That reminded Tommen of something else. “There is one more thing,” he said, stopping them at the door. “To you, Ser Davos. I think you’re an honest man, so it’s only fair that I’m honest with you. It’s…it’s about your son, Devan.”

Ser Davos’s eyes brightened. “Is…is he alive? Did he—?”

Seeing the spark in those eyes, Tommen wished he had not spoken. But he could not go back now. “No,” he muttered. “I’m sorry. He’s dead. I…I killed him. He was the first person I ever… killed. It was at Sarsfield. We met each other, and…he fought bravely, very bravely, and with honour…he had an arrow in him, but he kept fighting…”

Ser Davos Seaworth said nothing. There was no anger in his face, no sadness, no fury, no murderous intent, just pure blank shock. “I don’t know if it means anything,” Tommen said. “I doubt it does. But I’m telling you this because you seem like a good man, and you don’t deserve to go through life always wondering whose name you should curse. And I’m telling you for myself, because…I want to know their names. I want to know the people who died for me and the people I’ve killed.”

“Aye,” Ser Davos said, sounding far older, “He was my son, and you killed him. If the fight had gone differently, Devan might have been a hero. But instead…” He moved his hand to his throat, as if searching for something that was no longer there. “I can’t forgive you,” he said. “Not yet. Not now. Probably not ever. But I can’t hate you, either. Because you have a heart. And…so did he.”

Their eyes met again, brown and green. Ser Davos held out his hand. Tommen took it. The onion knight nodded, moved back, and was gone.

Then it was Shireen’s turn. “He was my friend too,” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

“You wouldn’t have mentioned it if you weren’t. It’s alright to be upset about it, you know. It takes a good fighter to win a war. But it takes a good man to end one. And…” She hesitated briefly. “I hope I’m not overstepping myself, but I once heard a curious rumour on Dragonstone. Supposedly, Father burned my uncle Lord Alester for trying to make a peace between our Houses after the Battle of the Blackwater. He… he wanted to marry you and me. To each other.”

“Oh.” Tommen wasn’t sure what else to say. “I…I think that would have worked. I mean, the peace wouldn’t have, but…”

“We work well together,” Shireen said.

“Yes, I suppose we do.”

“After that, I was contracted to marry Rickon Stark,” she said. “I think that was a bad idea. Rickon… he was a child. He saw war as some sort of game. There are people like that. People so hell bent on seeking vengeance and justice that their battles never end. They never see the war from the other person’s perspective. I’m glad you were different.”

He put his arms around her, and she hugged him back. “You know, Tommen,” she said eventually. “You never mentioned my greyscale.” She pointed to her cheek.

Tommen shrugged. “It makes you look… brave. Real. You don’t tell lies.”

“Real?” Shireen contemplated that. “I suppose there are worse things to be.” She moved towards the door. “Goodbye, cousin.” For a moment it seemed she might not leave, but then she did, and Tommen sat and listened until her footsteps had faded.
“I hope she comes back,” said Eleyna. “I liked her, actually. Do you think we’ll see her again?”

“Probably. She has to come back this way, whether she finds Lord Stannis or not. It would be foolish for her not to take our offer of hospitality.”

Eleyna nodded. “You know, the way she was talking about your betrothal…”

Tommen leaned in to kiss her cheek. “I have you. Why would I want anyone else?”

Smiling, she laid her hands on his shoulders and squeezed, the way he liked it. “Come on,” she said. “To bed with you. Tomorrow isn’t going to be an easy day.”

“It sounds easy,” Tommen said. “Let’s overthrow a queen. But what do I after that? How do I rule? Ser Kevan is stranded at Castamere, and there is no one else…”

“You have me. I am quite clever, you know.” That was true; Eleyna was far better with numbers than Tommen was, and invaluable when it came to totalling ledgers and auditing the household revenues.

“Yes,” he replied. “But that won’t be enough. And… she’s my mother too, Eleyna. No matter how well it goes, I won’t be able to shake off the guilt. The way she’ll look at me for the rest of my life… she betrayed me, but I’m betraying her, too.”

“Sometimes people have to make hard choices—”

That meant nothing. “I’m not people. I’m the king. Or the lord of Casterly Rock. Or whatever I’m calling myself now.”

There was a long pause where neither of them spoke. Tommen picked up a letter from his desk and cracked the grey wax seal. “This one’s from Bran,” he said.

Eleyna took it from him and read: “Thank you for your offer. We need your support as soon as you can offer it. Men, weapons, food, whatever you can offer. Lord Mallister can receive it at Seagard. It may be difficult getting supplies further north than that. We have ironborn invaders as well—”

“Ironborn?” Tommen frowned. “But they’re attacking us because they want Casterly Rock and Lannisport… there’s nothing in Winterfell but stones and snow. Why would they want that?”

“I don’t know,” said Eleyna. “Maybe there’s more in Winterfell than you think.”

“Maybe.”

“I have to help him.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

Tommen took the letter back. “I could ride to Winterfell myself. I could go to Bran, and I could travel through Harrenhal on the way… and see if we can come to a settlement with Littlefinger. And if they have Myrcella…” Or what is left of her. He tried not to think about that. “You could come with me. I could call Ser Kevan back, and get him to be Regent again. Then we could go. I’d arrive in Winterfell and say ‘this is my lady wife. Look how far I’ve come since I last saw you’. And Bran will have stories to tell, too.” He imagined them sitting together in the lord of Winterfell’s solar, in furs and their respective house colours, with a fire burning between them and cups of hot spiced wine. Soon.
I have hundreds of prisoners from our war with Stannis, Tommen wrote in reply. Since they are only filling up our dungeons, I will send you some to join the Night’s Watch. And we have more than enough provisions to spare in your time of need. He would speak to Lord Farman about voyaging north by sea. And I will endeavour to come north myself at some point. Our fathers created a friendship between Baratheon and Stark that conquered the Seven Kingdoms. I only hope to rekindle that alliance in the wake of the war.

It was starting to snow properly now. Outside the window the world was more white than black. “You’ll want your fur cloak tomorrow,” Eleyna said.

And my armour, too, Tommen thought. “I’ve not seen hail like this since I left the North.”

“You don’t talk about the North very much,” she murmured.

“I wasn’t there for long… he… Lord Stark said some things — hard truths, but good truths — and… I think he saved me, too… Myrcella said something like that, once. I think I know what she meant, now.” He pushed Bran’s letter across the table. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You need to.”

“I don’t need to do anything.”

“But you should tell me. I’m here to help you, Tommen.”

“I’m not your pet, you know,” he said angrily. “I’m not here so you can kiss my forehead and patch up my cuts and bruises. I’m not a child.”

Eleyna chewed her lip. “You’re stressed.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“I can tell. I don’t like you as much when you’re stressed.”

Tommen gave a bitter little laugh. “I don’t need you to like me. My father never liked my mother—”

“Yes. And you see how that ended.”

“She killed him too, you know.” He said the words emptily, without any feeling. And why should he feel anything? What had Robert Baratheon ever felt for him? “I don’t know how she killed him, but she did. You… you loved your father, didn’t you, Eleyna? And he loved you?”

“Yes. But, Tommen—”

“Mine didn’t.” He swallowed. “Sometimes… sometimes I wish he was still here, but—”

A long pause. “You’re scared.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

There was a cold wind through the window. Tommen shivered. “It’s nothing.”

“Talk to me.” Eleyna put her hand against his cheek. It was almost feverishly warm. “You have to be strong,” she reminded him. “Strong of heart—”
“I know.” Tommen pulled away from her. She could use soothing words as much as she liked. Words were wind, and none of that mattered. What matters is that I sold the only person who ever truly loved me to buy a peace, and I am about to do the same again.

“We’ll sleep on it.” She rubbed the nape of his neck and tousled his hair. “Come along, husband—”

“You should go.” Tommen wanted to be alone. “Go on,” he told Eleyna. “I’ll be there soon. I promise.” He watched her until she left the solar, then turned back to his desk. He picked up the first letter from the pile. Taxes from Hornvale. He filled in the squares and totalled the numbers in his head. But his thoughts were elsewhere, and he made a mess of it.

From his desk he could see out of the window to the armory, on a lower level of the castle. Were Ser Loras and Prince Quentyn preparing their swords there, even now? Was Margaery still clinging to life, in spite of the poison coursing through her veins? Did she know about her murdered child, or would that horror be waiting for her when she woke?

Shadows flickered through his solar, dancing in candlelight. One of them looked a little bit like Joffrey, he thought. “Joffrey would not have abandoned Myrcella to die,” Tommen said aloud, “even if it meant another war.”

Whereas you have. The voice came from behind him. He did not have to look to know who it was.

“It… it makes me a better king.”

Is that what you tell yourself? the voice teased. I saw her in her cell, Tommen. She was begging for her life and crying out for you to save her. But you never did.

“You can’t know that. You’re dead.”

Nothing is hidden from the dead. His breath was cold on Tommen’s neck. Your desires, your fears, your secrets. I know them all. You’re afraid that you’ll look into the mirror and see me staring back at you. Go on. Take a look. Green eyes and golden hair. I’d say there’s a certain resemblance. Do you ever wonder if your subjects look up at you and see me?

Tommen gritted his teeth. “We’re nothing like each other.”

A laugh. Oh, you think? Two sides of a coin, to be sure, but it’s the same coin. You could be me, if you cared to. And don’t pretend you haven’t considered it. Heads. Spikes. Walls. And again. And again.

“I haven’t—”

You’re shivering. Are you cold? Or just afraid?

There was a thunderous knock at his door; in the stillness of the room, it sounded like the sky was breaking. Tommen jumped up, pulling his dagger from its sheath. It was likely an unnecessary precaution, but he had to wonder who would come visiting at this time of the night.

He opened the door. Through his tiredness, it was a moment before he recognised Ser Jaime Lannister, snow on his cloak, snow on his armour, snow in his hair. “I thought you might be asleep,” his uncle said. “Given the lateness of the hour.”

“I can’t sleep,” Tommen replied. “Not tonight.”
Ser Jaime grimaced. “Well, that makes two of us. May I come inside?”

“Be my guest. But be quiet. Eleyna is sleeping…”

His uncle sat at the table in front of the window and filled his cup with wine. “Forgive my bluntness, Your Grace, but I thought you would be with her. On difficult nights like this, many men find comfort in the women they love.”

“And how would you know that? The Kingsguard swear a vow of chastity, don’t they?”

“The Kingsguard also vow not to kill their king,” said Ser Jaime. “We’re hardly infallible.”

“Ser Arys Oakheart had women,” Tommen considered, “or a woman. I know he did.”

“Our vows often conflict our desires. Do you know the Tully words, Tommen?”

“Family, duty, honour.”

His uncle nodded. “I can’t say I’ve ever understood them. Are you supposed to keep all three, or put one before the others? Catelyn Stark viewed it one way, the Blackfish another.” He picked up his wine cup. “A toast to Catelyn Stark,” he said. “Mother, Warrior and Stranger. A toast to the Tullys of Riverrun.”

Tommen raised his own cup. “And to the Starks of Winterfell.”

“To the Targaryens.”

“To the Tyrells.”

“To the Martells.”

“To the Baratheons of Storm’s End and Dragonstone.”

“To every bloody person in the Seven Kingdoms, Seven save their little souls.” Ser Jaime snorted. “My father would soil his breeches if he could hear us now.”

“Mother would do the same.”

At this, his uncle’s face fell, and so did Tommen’s heart. “You’re here about her,” he realised.

“I have no choice, Tommen. She is my sister—”

“And I am your lord.” He knew it was feeble; Ser Jaime had chosen family over duty before, after all. “Your lord and your nephew.”

“I don’t want any conflict. I just want you to… sit down and talk.”

“I can’t do that. I would, but… she poisoned Margaery. She murdered a baby in the womb, ser.”

From the shock on his face, Ser Jaime had not known that. “And that’s not something she can take back. Not something that can be forgiven. Believe me, uncle, it’s the last thing I want, but—”

The knight sighed. “Hundreds will die, Tommen. Hundreds, maybe even thousands. Even if you win, it will come at a great cost.”

Tommen saw what he was trying to do. “I can’t abandon my duty. I know now that some… sacrifice—” It was hard to say the word. “—is needed. Better that hundreds die now than thousands die
later.” He could almost see the battlefields on the Tumblestone and at Sarsfield and Lannisport, with the corpses piled high in the black mud. *Sons of someone else. Arys Oakheart and Tymond Vance and Devan Seaworth, and so many more.* But he ignored it. He had to.

Ser Jaime looked to be grappling with his own dilemma. “Tommen,” he said at last, “I speak to you now not as your counselor, but as your uncle. Your… friend. You do not want this. Aye, your mother has made some mistakes, but—”

“I don’t *want* to do this, you know. It would be better if she just… stopped. I want… I want my mother back.” He sounded so pathetic and small. “I’d rather have my mother than a crown.”

“She still loves you,” said Ser Jaime. “Just… I lost my mother when I was young, Tommen. And I don’t want you to lose yours. Please…”

“I can’t go back,” he had to say. “A lord’s duty is not to himself but to his people. Like I said, sacrifice is necessary. Only this time, I have to sacrifice myself.” He tried to smile. “It’ll be all right. I’ve… I’ve still got Eleyna.” But his voice was thin, and he knew it was not enough. *A king must be strong,* he told himself, *but this was being strong,* and yet he wanted to cry all the same. *It is not nearly enough.* “I gave up my mother,” he said, “I gave up Myrcella, and Myrcella’s happiness, and Margaery, and Margaery’s child, and uncle Tyrion and Lord Tywin and everyone else. And I gave up my soul.”

Ser Jaime looked tortured. “Tommen,” he said, “you don’t have to do this—”

Tommen shook his head. “I *do* have to. Because no one else can. I… I wish I was a prince again. If I could go back to when Joffrey was still alive… I’d try and save him at his wedding. I’d drink his wine myself. Before the wedding, I had thirteen good years, and I could have ended it there, and I would have been happier than… I’ve had three years of hell, but they feel like thirty. And no one ever cared, no one ever looked… I used to be… good. But look at me now, uncle, and tell me what you see.”

Ser Jaime gave him a very strange look. “I see…” he said, and his eyes widened. “I see… me.”

That was not the answer Tommen had been expecting. “What do you mean?” he said.

“You have to do this, yes,” said Ser Jaime. The light from the fire played across his breastplate, turning it gold again. “But you don’t have to do it alone.” The knight swallowed deeply. “I love your mother… my sister… but you’re right. I need you more.”

Ser Jaime did not linger long after that. He claimed to have urgent business in the Kingsguard Tower, but plainly that was not true. *This cannot be easy for him,* Tommen thought as he left the solar. *How many years did they have? How many pillars did they build between them?*

*Three,* he knew.

As he walked back through his chamber, he caught sight of Lawbringer, sheathed in its crimson scabbard. *I will have to clean that tomorrow,* he thought, *and I should get some practice with it.* He would have to talk to Loras and Quentyn too, tomorrow, and maybe see Margaery if she regained consciousness.

But that was for tomorrow, and tomorrow was another day.

Eleyna was waiting for him in bed. Entering the solar, Tommen unfastened his cloak and doublet, and climbed into bed. When he put his arms around her, warmth flooded through him. She turned to face him. “If you want—”
“No,” he said. Not tonight. I just want to... I love you, Eleyna. You know that, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“Good. I… I should say that more often.” And there was something else he should tell her. She’d told him to talk to her, so he would. “When I was small, I used to think there was a monster under my bed,” he murmured. “Sometimes I still think there is. I don’t know what the monster looks like, because I never see it. Other people can see it, I think, but not me. I know it’s there, though. But it doesn’t matter. The monsters don’t matter, so long as we don’t give in to them.”

Eleyna’s reply was curt. “You’d make a good poet, you know.”

“Maybe I’ll write something for you when this is over.” Tommen settled back against her. “A good poet?”

“Because you understand people. You understand their feelings, and their fears, and what they want. You understand that better than anyone I’ve ever known. You understand battles… the battles people have within themselves.”

*There are battles and there are battles*, Tommen thought. *There are the monsters in the real world, and then there are the monsters in our heads. They’re always there, under our beds, and in our hearts. But the monsters don’t matter, so long as we don’t give in to them. So long as we find things to believe in. Like friendship, and hope, and love.*

*And ourselves. And me.*

**Chapter End Notes**

Thank you to everyone who was patient with me on the last chapter. And special thanks to those of you who have reviewed. I hope we’ll get a few more reviews on the next set of chapters, as they are some of my favourites - and some of the most important, in my mind.

Time for some blackmail:*If we get 10 comment threads on this chapter in the first 24 hours, I'll try my very best to get Chapter 108 up TOMORROW (though I can’t promise it).*

***

I appreciate that this is a very odd chapter. It's the most abstract chapter I've uploaded for THE SUNSET KINGDOMS in quite a while, but I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I did. It probably requires a second reading to get everything out of it, but (and I hope I'm not being overly snobbish here) it has quite a bit of hidden depth.

This chapter starts in medias res. I deliberately omitted Tommen's reaction to Margaery's poisoning, as it's honestly quite boring, and I didn't want that (and to be honest, this chapter tells you exactly how he reacted, just not explicitly). Instead, the dilemma of this chapter is about whether he can go through with his plan against Cersei. From the start we know he has to do this, but I think the journey from uncertainty to something-less-certain is very interesting.
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Coming soon:

108. "The Woman Who Lived"
109. "Garden of Bones"
110. next Casterly Rock chapter
The Woman Who Lived

Chapter Summary

The girl who died and the woman who lived.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THE WOMAN WHO LIVED

There was an emptiness inside Arya when she woke. It was a hunger, a lack of fullness, the feeling of needing something to occupy a space that should not be there, though she could not say what that something was.

Anguy the Archer shot a brace of rabbits before dawn, so they broke their fast on charred meat with chunks of bread and veined yellow cheese. Arya ate beside Gendry. Occasionally she would notice him watching her out the corner of her eye, but they did not talk. She wished he would stop staring, but to tell him that she would have to talk to him.

Arya preferred to keep herself to herself. The others thought that strange. “She never used to be like that,” Harwin said. “Used to be that she wouldn’t never stop talking; you had to put your hand over her mouth to shut her up.” But that had been in a different time, in a life that had belonged to another girl. Sometimes she did remember it, and she knew that it had been her life once, but the divide was too great; her life was in two halves – before the Faceless Men, and after – and those halves were surely irreparable. The girl who died and the woman who lived.

Yes, there were things that brought the halves together – Gendry, for one, and Needle, and the vaguely remembered time she had spent with the Brotherhood before. But at the same time, she could not remember how she felt about Gendry – had she been his friend, or more than that, or less? – or what role Harwin had played in her childhood. As for Needle, she knew it Needle had something to do with her bastard brother, Jon Snow – stick ’em with the pointy end, he said – but beyond a sword and a name, she knew nothing.

She ought to have felt sad, or even angry. But she didn’t. Most days, she didn’t really feel anything. Harwin had told her that Sansa and Rickon were at Harrenhal. Perhaps she should have pleaded that they hasten to Harrenhal as fast as they could, so they could reunite again, but Arya was perfectly content to sit back and let the road take them where it would. Not happy, not sad, just content.

It would have been a waste of time to head to Harrenhal, anyhow, for they learned that her siblings had departed for the north, by way of Raventree Hall.
They were still some way from Raventree, down near the confluence of the three forks of the great Trident river. Wolves prowled along the Trident by night, Arya knew. When she walked among them, she could make her way to the nearest stream and instantly know which fork of the river it fed: the Green Fork smelled sour, like piss or lemons; the Blue Fork was clear and honest, as water should be; the Red Fork was blood, her blood, wolf blood, the blood of dying men. She couldn’t have said who ruled this region, but she knew the history of is lands, of the soft river soil dampened by piss and water and blood.

Arya ate her breakfast and was still hungry. She drank from her wineskin and was still thirsty. As she relieved herself in the river, her thoughts wandered back to Septon Meribald and Dog. The hunger is something deep-rooted and carnal, she remembered the septon saying, and it forces men into sin. But if you never felt real hunger, could you ever sin? Was it worse to kill a man in passion than it was to kill him for no reason at all?

*It is all the same to the Many-Faced God,* Arya thought. “Valar morghulis,” she said, staring across the river. The opposite bank was reedy, and a pair of otters were swimming there, untroubled by everything around them. “Valar dohaeris.”

She went back and mounted her horse. The sun was high as they set out. The snow glittered. Arya thought of almost-remembered days back in Winterfell; snowball fights, sledging, a ghost covered in flour down in the crypts, that sort of thing. Had she been happy then? Could she ever be happy again? What did ‘happy’ mean?

The others left her alone as they rode. Gendry and Harwin had tried talking to her, but Arya gave them stony looks in reply, and after a few days they mostly stopped. Thoros of Myr was talking to Gendry; she knew without listening that he was talking about her. Of anyone in the Brotherhood, perhaps Thoros understood best what had happened to Arya.

But that was only sort-of-understanding, not-really-understanding. Thoros did not know what it was like to be on your guard all the time, paranoid that Jaqen H’ghar or the Nightingale or the kindly man or the waif might suddenly unmask themselves. Arya watched all of the Brotherhood intently at all times, constantly wary that one of them might well be a Faceless Man.

She wondered if she counted as a Faceless Man herself. She had never said the vows, but she knew how to change her face, and she kept the guises she had stolen from the House of Black and White with her. In an instant, she could become Lyanna of House Tarellys again, or Enna the orphan girl.

The only person she had difficulty becoming was Arya Stark.

When Gendry spoke of the past with her, she would nod and smile and say “I remember,” as he talked to her of Yoren and Hot Pie and Lommy Greenhands and Rorge and Biter. Arya remembered their names, and she knew some of their faces too, but she did not know the people behind the masks, as it were. They were names, just words, and, as Harwin was wont to say, words were wind. She knew them, but she did not know them.

It started snowing around midday. They pressed on, though it took them two hours to cover ground that should have taken them only one. Eventually they left the muddy goat-tracks through the forest and joined a proper stone road. In a place where four great roads met, they stopped at an inn, a massive wood-and-stone building three stories high, with dozens of orange lights glinting behind the windows. *The Inn at the Crossroads,* a sign read.

Arya’s understanding of the geography of the Seven Kingdoms was limited, but she remembered coming this way before. *This is not just a Crossroads, but the Crossroads.* One of these roads led north, towards Winterfell… did one of them go to Raventree Hall, too?
The inn was most empty, but there were more than enough of the Brotherhood to fill it. Everyone seemed to know the proprietors. The inn’s owner was a girl barely older than twenty. “She’s called Jeyne,” Gendry told Arya. “Jeyne Heddle. And her sister is Willow. The Lannisters hanged their aunt during the war.”

*The war again.* You could see the scars of the war everywhere. The Brotherhood had been forged out of war, from broken men and turncoats and those who lost their way, and later from those who had been driven from their lands, and their families. Every one of its fighting men bore scars on their bodies as well as in their hearts.

And now Arya was one of them, or good as.

Roughly half of the party went to the bathhouse out back while the other half lingered in the inn’s common room. Arya sat at a table by herself and listened in on Thoros’s conversation with Jeyne Heddle: “Tonight?” the red priest said. “You’re sure?”

“Aye,” replied Jeyne. “Hours, not days.”

“Then we had better start getting ready.”

“I’ve found a few more spears for you. Swords, too. And we’ve got the forge out back, so if Gendry wants to make use of what little good steel we’ve got—”

“And where did you find this good steel?” asked Thoros.

“Same place we found the neeps you’ll be having with your supper. Stole them off some Tullys. Lord Edmure’s gone back to Riverrun; he’s got more than enough turnips there.”

Anguy the Archer cut in: “It won’t be Lord Edmure who misses out on turnips. It’ll be his smallfolk.” He shook his head. “Stealing from the rich is fine and all, but…”

“Someone’s bound to lose out in any winter, Archer. Better to spare fighting men and those who’ll help others where they can.”

“Oh, I do love a bit of hypocrisy with my supper,” said the singer Tom Sevenstrings.

“What about those travelling north?” Thoros asked Jeyne. “Lady Sansa and her brother, I mean. Have you heard anything about them?”

“The Blackfish’s gone up with them. Word is they’re headed for Raventree, to see this boy the Young Wolf’s widow birthed. After that I imagine it’ll be the Twins, and then White Harbor. We had some sailors in from Gulltown a couple days back. Lord Manderly’s blockaded the harbor; no one’s getting in or out. And he’s got a whole army up there: three thousand White Harbor men, and thrice that again in Northerners. And a good few hundred sellswords.”

Anguy started. “Speaking of sellswords…”

“—Littlefinger managed to hold onto some of them, but most of them have been locked up in prison. If the lords o’ the Vale got any sense, they’ll try and swing them over to their side. The war isn’t over. The dragon queen’s men are still fighting down in King’s Landing.”

Tom o’ Sevens exchanged a look with Thoros. “What would we do without our informer friends, eh? How can I reward you, Lady Jeyne? A kiss and a song?”

“Oh, no payment is necessary. Not from you at least, Tom.” Grinning, she gestured to a girl who
looked to be her sister. “Get the food in here, Willow. We’d best eat early, if we’re to be fighting tonight.”

“We?” said Thoros. “Girl, you had better—”

“Don’t call me girl, Thoros of Myr, you wet pink rag of a man. Aye, you might have a magic fire sword, but you can’t fight alone. I’ve got fifty ready to fight—”

“Fifty children.”

“Try telling that to them.” She smirked. “But enough arguing for now. Supper’s ready.”

The room was suddenly crowded by children, little weaselly things in roughspun and woollen rags, with sooty faces and thin limbs. The older children helped their younger siblings and companions to the benches, whereupon they proceeded to loudly sing nursery rhymes and fling wood shavings at each other. With the new arrivals, Arya’s hopes of having a table to herself quickly vanished. Gendry sat to her right – that was better than some stranger, she supposed – and the innkeep’s sister Willow perched across from them.

The inn’s other patrons contributed to the lively atmosphere: there were two musicians (one singing the song about the dancing bear), a puppeteer for the children, a dwarf septon, a black Summer Islander couple, a troupe of mummers, and several dozen men in a lord’s livery, brown jerkins with little black studs. Arya wondered whose men they were.

The serving-boy brought around a big dish of kidney pie. “Betcha you’ve never tasted nothing like this, m’lady, really nice,” he told Arya. “There’s lots of things you gotta know about making a good kidney pudding, but the first one is that you never give up on the—” He looked up and gave a sudden, indrawn breath. “Um, gravy…” A long pause. “Arry?”

Arya nodded vaguely.

“Long time no see,” said the boy.

Gendry nudged Arya’s elbow. “You remember Hot Pie, don’t you, m’lady?”

“Oh, yes. He… makes really good pies.” She turned to Hot Pie. “You make really good pies.”

He beamed. “Sorry I didn’t see you there. I thought you might be Gendry’s new… friend. After how it went with Willow and all—” Willow Heddle gave him a scathing look and he quietened. “Sorry, Willow.” He set the kidney pie aside and took the seat opposite Arya. “Gendry said you’d been kidnapped by the Dog and everything.”

“The Dog?” Was he talking about Septon Meribald’s Dog? He was a big dog, yes, but surely it hadn’t kidnapped her.

“The Hound,” said Gendry. “You never did tell me that story, m’lady.”

“Nor me,” added Hot Pie.

Arya stared at them, trying to remember. Hot Pie… he made pies… a baker’s boy… a butcher’s boy… A butcher’s boy who wants to be a knight, eh? Low, drawling tones. “Joffrey,” she remembered suddenly.

“What?” said Hot Pie.
“I… you… it had something to do with Joffrey.”

“Well… there was… we were running from his soldiers. Yoren and us. And… you do remember me, don’t you, Arry?”

She nodded. Arya Stark remembered him, so she probably did, too. Unless he is a Faceless Man in disguise. She decided to play for time. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again after we… parted.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, I was at the inn with Sharna down on the river road, but then Stannis came down wanting a place to put his soldiers, and Sharna joined up with his army as a proper cook, but I didn’t really want to, ’cos Stannis’s men weren’t all that nice, so I ran away and met Jeyne and Willow here. They were with the Brotherhood once, too, but they went away after that mad Stoneheart woman started hanging everyone. So now I do some of the cooking here. A lot of the cooking. It’s alright, I s’pose. We get merchants and sailors and septons and journeymen, and a travelling maester sometimes, to teach us letters and show us how to make medicines, and we get our own rooms out back and hot food for breakfast and dinner. It’s alright. Just alright. What about you, Arry? Where’ve you been?”

She had not told Gendry about Braavos, mostly because she didn’t trust him enough. But with all their eyes on her, and no way out, Arya could only tell the truth. “Braavos,” she said. “Across the Narrow Sea.”

“You never told me about Braavos,” Gendry said, after a moment. “M’lady.” He always made sure to call her m’lady, often and loudly. He must have gotten used to speaking with proper courtesy in King’s Landing, and the habit had clearly never left him.

“I didn’t tell you about Braavos because it didn’t matter,” Arya snapped.

“Why did you go to Braavos?”

“I ran away.” That was probably true. She had been running away all her life. “But now I’m back.”

“Are you still looking for your family?” asked Hot Pie. “Up in Winterhell?”

“Yes. I’m going to Winterfell. Soon.”

Wait.

Now, there was something. She remembered him saying “Winterhell,” and she remembered herself shouting “WINTERFELL!” as she ran to join a battle, and Hot Pie was there too, shouting “HOT PIE!” at the top of his lungs, and so were Gendry and Lommy Greenhands, and Yoren, at least until Amory Lorch and Ser Gregor—

“—and they’re still looking for that princess,” said Willow Heddle. “She got away from the trial, but Lord Royce is out looking for her.”

“The mad princess?” asked Gendry. “The Lannister one?”

“You make it sound like you’ve met.”

“We have. On the road to Harrenhal.”

“Did she look mad?” asked Hot Pie.

“She looked like a Lannister, I s’pose. I saw the old queen out riding once or twice; she looked like
her. Like Queen Cersei, only twice as crazy.”


“Aye,” said Gendry.

“Is the Mountain still there?” Arya blurted, before she knew what she was saying.

“The Mountain? No, he went ages ago. First there was Lord Tywin, then Lord Bolton, but you know that. Then Vargo Hoat with the lisp, then the Mountain, so yeah, you were sort-of-right, then Lord Littlefinger, then Lord Tywin was there again, and King Tommen, then they had a big battle with Lord Stannis and Lord Tywin died—”

“Lord Tywin died?”

“Lord Stannis cut off his head in single combat in the middle of the river,” said Hot Pie. “Everyone knows that.”

*Cut off his head. Like my father. There was a man, he took the sword and cut his head right off. His name was… his name was… Payne. Ser Ilyn Payne.*

*King Joffrey. Queen Cersei. Ser Ilyn.*

Later, as she was lying on her pallet in the dormitory and waiting for Thoros’s signal, other names came back to her. “Queen Cersei,” she said, “Ser Meryn, Ser Ilyn, Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling. Queen Cersei, Ser Meryn, Ser Ilyn, Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling. *Valar morghulis, valar morghulis, valar morghulis…*” Eventually she fell asleep to dreams of wolves running in the night, following the course of a long grey road, smelling the faint retreating man-smells, blood and sour sweat and fire and fear…

She woke to Gendry shaking her by the shoulder. “It’s time,” he whispered. For a moment, Arya had no clue where she was, or who he was, or what he meant. Then she remembered everything. *Those men Thoros mentioned must be here. Thoros of Myr, that is, who raised Lord Beric from the dead. And this is Gendry. He was my friend, once. Wasn’t he?*

She still did not really know what Gendry was.

The inn was all abuzz. There wasn’t much noise, but everyone was moving about frantically, checking their shields for dents and their bowstrings for frays. Little groups formed up on the inn’s balconies and porches: scouts, archers, a vanguard. Thoros of Myr murmured blessings; “May the Lord watch over you, may the Lord of Light protect you, may blessed R’hllor keep you safe.”

Arya turned to Gendry. “Where are you going?”

“I’m in the vanguard,” he said, picking up his helm.

“I’m coming with you.”

“As m’lady commands.”

When she did not reply, Gendry looked sad. “Arry… Lady Arya…” He wrung his hands. “When I used to call you m’lady… it’s… it’s nothing.” Suddenly he looked embarrassed. “Come on.”

Arya followed him to the vanguard, which was commanded by the Mad Huntsman and Greenbeard and Thoros of Myr. There was no time for rousing words or long dramatic speeches before the battle.
Instead, they advanced slowly towards the road in silence, keeping low, ducking behind trees and overhanging ferns. It was nearly pitch black out here, and so when the horses and the wagon came hurrying up from the west, they were easy to see. “Steady now,” Thoros whispered. “Steady…”

It only occurred to Arya then that she had no clue who they were attacking.

When everything happened, it all happened at once. As Arya slept, some of the men had prepared a tripwire, stretching the whole width of the road. Upon reaching the wire, the lead horse stumbled suddenly, throwing its rider off; the next horse came down fast behind it, and the ones behind it fell and skittered and ran back the way they’d come.

“NOW!” Thoros shouted, and suddenly his sword was burning, and he pointed it ahead as they charged. Anguy, Notch and the rest of the archers loosed a volley of flaming arrows, high over their heads. They landed as the horsemen were still getting up, as men-at-arms were awkwardly bringing their swords out. The Brotherhood were upon them before they could react. Arya found her man, whirled beneath his hurried cut and plunged Needle through his belly. Gendry finished his first man as she started on her second.

“Arya!” he shouted, making her jerk back just in time as a third man charged her – probably they saw that she was a girl, and decided they would make short work of her. Arya thought otherwise. She backed up into the undergrowth; their blood was up and they chased her. She ran round the tree and came out behind one man, and shoved Needle through his back, in, out. Quick as a snake.

Now the second man faced her.

_I know you, _Arya thought suddenly. _You’re on my list._ It was another moment before she knew which one he was. Dunsen. He’d been one of the Mountain’s men-at-arms. She did not know why he was on her list, only that he was.

“Afraid, little girl?” asked Dunsen.

Arya did not answer. _Fear cuts deeper than swords._ Dunsen was big, but he had seen her kill his companion, and he was more scared than she was. She let him come at her, high, low, low, left, right, right – as though she were back in King’s Landing and it was Syrio Forel shouting at her. _Boy, girl, it does not matter. You are a sword._ She caught him off balance and dived suddenly forwards, spearing him, and let their combined weight carry her on, toppling him into the mud with Needle piercing through his back. Arya did not stay to watch him die.

She ran back out onto the road. Thoros’s flaming sword seemed to be everywhere, and the archers were still firing. She glimpsed a man pointing his crossbow squarely at her, but suddenly he had three arrows in him, and that was that. The enemy rearguard had been held up by the collapse of horses at the tripwire; the riders looked uncertain whether to dismount or flee. More fiery arrows flew above and spilled them from their saddles.

“Knights!” Greenbeard pointed. There were three of them, in heavy steel armour, with swords and shields. All of them had birds on their shields. But in spite of their advance, the Brotherhood did not hesitate, or turn back; instead, they jumped over the barricade the falling horses had made, and their swords bit left and right as they ran down the line. They were winning; that much was plain. The sky was full of their arrowheads and their quarrels, and all at once the enemy were turning back into the trees. As Arya watched them flee, she became suddenly aware of something else. _Wolves. There are wolves nearby._ She could hear them running, feel the wind in their fur, the snow churning beneath their feet, and then she smelled blood, and they leapt on their foes, and she tasted it too.

The battle began to fade around them. When she went back to Gendry, she found him and Thoros
standing over a knight with a bear’s paw on his shield. “It’s over, Brune,” she heard Thoros say. “Why don’t you die with some dignity?”

Instead the man spat on the ground. “Go fuck yourself, Thoros.”

“I did give you a chance.” One swing of the blade was all it took to end it. Thoros sighed. “Right,” he said. “That’s done. Now for your master…”

When Greenbeard and the Mad Huntsman approached, dragging a smaller man between them, Arya felt a stab of recognition. I know him, she thought. But from where? Had he travelled with her in the Riverlands? Had she glimpsed him climbing off a ship in Braavos? Or had it been sometime before that, in Winterfell or King’s Landing?

Thoros dipped his head in mock courtesy. “Lord Littlefinger. A pleasure to see you again.”

Littlefinger. Arya recognised the name; he was definitely from King’s Landing, from when her father had been Hand of the King. “Thoros of Myr,” said Littlefinger, “and his motley companions. I suppose you must be the Brotherhood without Banners.”

“We are,” said Thoros.

“What do you want from me?” Littlefinger asked. “Gold? Gratitude? An army?”

“Only justice,” said a low, throaty voice from behind one of the horsecarts. “Only your life.”

Arya turned in the direction of the speaker. A hooded figure emerged into the moonlight. Hot Pie had mentioned a hooded woman, mere hours ago. Stoneheart.

The Brotherhood moved aside to let her pass. “My lady,” Gendry said to Arya. “My lady, you should not look…”

She ignored him.

“You must be this Lady Stoneheart whom I have heard nothing good about,” said Littlefinger. “An honour to finally meet you.” He made a mocking little bow. “I have heard one thing consistently, my lady. They say you always give men a trial.” He was putting on his bravado, Arya could tell; she saw fear in those eyes.

“You have had a trial,” said Thoros of Myr, while Lady Stoneheart stared Littlefinger down. “And a verdict has been pronounced.”

“Guilty,” Lady Stoneheart said.

Thoros continued, “Guilty of the attempted murder of Lord Robert Arryn, and the attempted usurpation of the Vale. Guilty of the murder of Lady Lysa Arryn, who you pushed through the Moon Door. Guilty of manipulating Lady Arryn to murder her husband, Lord Jon Arryn. Guilty of conspiracy against Lord Eddard Stark, and against the Iron Throne and the people of the Riverlands and the Vale. Petyr Baelish, we find you guilty of all these crimes.”


The next minutes passed in a blur. Inexplicably, the inn at the crossroads had its very own gallows. They forced Littlefinger to stand up on wooden stump with a hemp rope around his neck. He was curiously until they stood him up there, but at death’s door, he began to speak erratically. “Cut me down. I will give you want you want. Cut me down. Any of you, gold, an army… I have friends…”
powerful friends… Cut me down!"

Lady Stoneheart stepped close to him, so close he could see under her hood. Littlefinger let out a choking noise, though the noose was not yet strangling him. “Cat…?” The word blew away in the wind. “But how… you’re dead… oh, Cat… I only meant… it was for you… for Sansa and for—”

Arya was not close to them, but she heard the reply anyway. “For Ned,” Lady Stoneheart said. “For Robb. For Lysa. And… for me.” And the woman who had been Catelyn Stark – Arya’s mother, yes, this was her mother – gave the wooden block a solid kick. Petyr Baelish dangled in the air for a long moment, then dropped, kicking at nothing, as the noose choked his breath away, his legs convulsing, on and on and on.

Arya did not look away. Neither did Lady Stoneheart. When Baelish’s legs stopped kicking and the crowd dispersed with a murmuring hiss, they were among the few who remained. Them, Thoros of Myr and Littlefinger’s corpse, straining against the limb of his tree. “My lady,” said Thoros, addressing Arya. “You may be wondering…”

“I know.” Arya said. “I remember now. You brought Lord Beric back. Later the wolves pulled her out of the river.” I was there. And I was at the Twins too, when they cut her throat to the bone and threw her body out into the Green Fork. “And you brought her back too.”

Lady Stoneheart turned to face her. The woman who died. The woman who lived. “Arya,” she said, with a noise that might have been a sob. “Oh, Arya…”

They stepped closer together and embraced. Arya felt as cold inside as Lady Stoneheart was on the outside. “I remember,” the hooded woman said, “I still remember the last time I saw you. I remember…”

She remembers everything, thought Arya. And I remember next to nothing. It was as though the gods had brought them together as part of some cruel joke. The girl who died would have been elated to see her mother again, even like this. She would have laughed and hugged her and even cried, would have apologised for every time she had wronged her, would have sworn to never let them be parted again. The woman who lived stood there, knowing nothing. What do we say to the Death? asked a voice in her head.

Not today, she answered.

“Ned is avenged,” said Lady Stoneheart. “Your father… avenged. And I… it is time.”

Arya understood at once, and knew how this was going to end, so soon after it had started. She knew what it was to lead two lives. Perhaps that was why she did not beg her mother to stay against her will, as she might have done. Instead she let Lady Stoneheart rest her grey scarred hand on her cheek. “You go now, child,” her mother rasped. “You go… find Sansa. Rickon. Bran. And…” Her fingers tightened a little, and she hesitated before saying, “Jon Snow. Him too.”

“I will,” Arya said.

“Good,” said Lady Stoneheart. Suddenly the moonlight flooded her face. For a moment the grey and broken veins were gone, and the eyes were Catelyn Tully’s eyes, as blue as the waters of the Trident. The first eyes Arya had ever known, and the first eyes that had ever loved her. Her mouth formed the words almost accidentally. “I love you.”

“Oh, Arya,” said Mother. “I love you… my child.” And then she turned away, and the grey silks flapped around her, and she was gone, and Arya knew where she was going. What comes from the
river, must return to the river.

Theros put a hand on Arya’s shoulder. “It will be painless for her, child,” he said softly.

“And what about me?” Arya said. Theros had no answer to that.

She stepped back into the shadow of the inn. When she glanced up again, looking for her mother against her better judgement, she found only fog and rain, and a single, solitary tear, trickling down her cheek. Arya could not remember the last time she had cried. She made to rub it away, but stopped herself.

“My lady,” said Theros. “We are… sworn to follow you now. You are Lady Catelyn’s heir, in this. Wherever you go, we will follow. Perhaps it is best to head for Raventree, and Lady Sansa…”

Arya did not wait for him to finish. Wordlessly, she turned away and went inside. Jeyne and Willow had opened new casks of ale in the common hall, while the east wing of the inn was being used as an infirmary. Arya had a couple of scratches and bruises, but nothing that needed tending to. Instead she went and stood beside the hearth, and wondered who cared enough to come looking for her. Would it be Gendry, or Hot Pie, or someone else entirely?

In the end, it was Tom Sevenstrings, with his harp and his strange little smile. “Would you care for a song, m’lady?” he asked.

“Something happy,” Arya said. “I know too many sad songs.”

Tom plucked a string. “You know,” he said, “sometimes sad and happy are the same thing, m’lady.”

Arya frowned. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” the singer replied, “but when you’ve lived long enough, you realise it doesn’t have to.”

Chapter End Notes

I love this chapter. It’s a funhouse mirror reflection of Jaime’s earlier chapter, ”The Broken Man”, only this time the perspective is switched up a bit and Arya - a broken woman herself - is our hero. There’s a lot of nostalgia and goodwill in here, and I hope you liked the ending, but there is a sense of things ringing hollow. Arya’s ‘redemption' arc is far from complete... but this is a start, I suppose.

Some humorous tidbits:

“Oh, yes. He… makes really good pies.” She turned to Hot Pie. “You make really good pies.”

“Gendry said you’d been kidnapped by the Dog and everything.”

“The Dog?” Was he talking about Septon Meribald’s Dog? He was a big dog, yes, but surely it hadn’t kidnapped her.

*snickers* I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to get Hot Pie back, but I moved the scene of the final confrontation from some random forest to the inn at the crossroads, and that let us get the Heddles into the story, as well as giving us a fun insight into the life of the smallfolk in the wake of the War of the Five Kings.
Next chapter: "Garden of Bones" (Arianne IV)
In his bed, the king stirred feebly, his senses drowning beneath waves upon waves of milk of the poppy. “Arianne…” His fingers clenched and unclenched, open and then closed once more. A thin whistling noise emerged in the back of his throat. “I…” Then he drifted back into unconsciousness.

“He needs rest,” the healer said, as if it were not obvious. “He needs space to recover.”

Arianne lowered her voice. “Is it looking likely that he will…?”

“The burns were severe, in places. The broken bones will mend – most of them – but he should survive.” The healer spoke in such an unconvincing voice that it was clear he believed none of it. “He… he needs… rest, that is all.”

He is lucky to have lived this long. If the falling dragon’s corpse had not somehow cushioned Aegon’s fall, he would have died there and then in the forest. And wouldn’t that be so much easier. As it was, he was still clinging to life when they found him, though it took a long time to prise the king out of his shattered, crushed armour. Then they forced him into the back of a wagon, and they rode for the roseroad, for Bitterbridge and Highgarden beyond that. When they were at Highgarden, Lord Connington said, they could evaluate what friends still remained to them, and make their stand against Daenerys. Highgarden, he said, had tall towers and stout bastions and thick curtain walls from which they could mount their defence. As if any of that will matter against dragonfire.

Arianne wanted nothing more than to run back to Dorne, to hide behind her father, but in his few lucid moments Aegon agreed with Lord Connington that yes, they had to stand strong and steadfast against the advance of his crazed aunt. Maybe it was pride and maybe it was honour, but she would not abandon him in his time of need, however mad his intentions might seem. If I do that, I am no better than my father.

Arianne did not believe in the promise of Highgarden’s safety, but it did not matter anyway. They were barely halfway to Bitterbridge. If the day was clear, she could look behind her and still glimpse the fringes of the kingswood. And the scouts claimed that with a far-eye, you could see King’s Landing still burning in the faraway distance.
“None of that matters, though,” she said, to both herself and the healer. “If he dies, none of it matters. You will keep him alive, won’t you?”

The healer nodded. “I will do my best.”

“Good. I should go and rejoin the council.” She gave Aegon one last look. She had grown to love him more in these days than ever before. *What does that say about me, that I can only love a man who is entirely dependent on me?* Sometimes, when Aegon was full of poppy, he thought Arianne was his mother, Princess Elia.

She turned and left the tent. It was a cold night, but there was no wind. Arianne was shivering as she made her way through the snow to the army’s command tent. She walked close to the camp perimeter, a ring of spikes and mantlets, ornamented here and there with massive ballistae that could supposedly put a bolt through a dragon’s eye.

The command tent was hot and cramped. Ser Garlan Tyrell gave up his chair so Arianne could sit. She would sooner have stayed standing. As it was, she had Jon Connington’s eyes staring icily into hers throughout the entire meeting.

“We need to set a faster pace,” he said, “the stragglers will not keep up. That is inevitable. So we must leave them behind.” He glanced around the table, but no one else had anything to say. That was the way of things. Only Lord Connington had an idea of what they were doing nowadays.

“They wouldn’t be the first to fall behind,” said Willas Tyrell. “We’ve been losing men for days now.”

“It does not matter. Once we make it to Highgarden, we can regroup with the rest of our soldiers.”

*If we make it to Highgarden.* “Don’t you think… maybe some of them don’t intend to regroup,” said Willas, “maybe they’ve just gone back to their homes. Or…”

No one else would say the word, so Arianne said it. “Deserted. They’ve deserted us. We’ve lost the Fowlers, the Yronwoods, the Daynes—” Lady Ashara and Edric Dayne had been in the command tent on the night of the battle, but they must have slipped away. Arianne was surprised by that – she had seen young Lord Dayne’s devotion to the king firsthand, and could not see him siding with Daenerys.

“We still have allies in the Stormlands,” Jon Connington assured them. “Rolland Caron and Donnel Swann are leading an army back to Storm’s End, and Selwyn Tarth defends… he defends Tarth.”

“Well, it is good that the might of Tarth is still holding out for us,” muttered Tyene Sand. She was the last of the Sand Snakes to remain with Arianne. No one had seen Nym or Elia since the night of the battle. “If we are to make it back to Highgarden, we need to pick up the pace, yes… but even then… it has been two weeks. I imagine Daenerys and her dragon have finished with their business elsewhere by now. She will be upon us very soon. I do not see how we can make Highgarden in time.”

“Then we fight,” said Lord Connington. “There are sixty thousand men in these hills.”

“Sixty thousand men fought on the Field of Fire,” Tyene replied. “Sixty thousand men lost on the Field of Fire.”

Connington refused to hear her. “Aegon the Conqueror had three full-grown dragons. The bitch has two at most, more likely one. All it will take is one well-placed bolt, one lucky shot. Sixty thousand men, against one dragon.” He was almost pleading with her.
“We do not have sixty thousand men,” said Willas. “We might have left King’s Landing with that
tab, but they have fallen away into the forests and left the road as we have marched south. Look
around you, my lord. There are barely fifteen thousand in this camp. How many of those will be
willing to fight dragons?”

Once again, Connington continued with his wilful ignorance. “Fine. We will not make Highgarden.
But we can still make Bitterbridge, and fight from there. That is what we will do. On the morrow, we
will make a hard course for Bitterbridge, and not stop marching until nightfall. This council is
dismissed.”

There were sighs and shakes of the head all around. Arianne started to stand, but then Lord
Connington took her arm. “Your Grace, if I might have a word?”

It was a moment before Arianne remembered that she _was_ the queen, which was hardly surprising. A
queen was supposed to rule from a castle, not some vile, muddy campsite. “What is it?” she asked
wearily.

“They are right,” said Connington without explanation.

“Right about what?”

“I have come to realise we will not make Highgarden, most likely. It pains me to admit it, but… this
fight may take place on a battlefield we cannot choose. And sooner than I had hoped. Aegon will…
we will need him.”

Arianne did not follow. “What do you mean?”

“There is armour for him somewhere. And Blackfyre… the sword survived the battle. We need him
to stand at the front of our army, Your Grace. The men will be inspired by his courage.”

Arianne could barely believe what she was hearing. “My lord,” she said, breathless, “Aegon… he…
he is lying in his sickbed at this very moment, half-burned to death and broken in body. He may
never wield a sword again, never mind _tomorrow._”

“Well, come up with a better idea, then!” Connington spat. “Give me a plan, you stupid girl! If she
captures us, what do you think will happen to _you_? To me? To Aegon… I love that boy like a son,
more than anything on this earth, and… please… it _has_ to be like this.” He buried his head in his
hands. When he looked up again, his eyes were red-rimmed. “Yes. When the battle comes, Aegon
will stand at the front of our army. But not now. At Bitterbridge. When we reach Bitterbridge.”

_He is lost to madness_, Arianne thought. She did not feel anger, or repulsion, or anything except the
most awful pity.

Connington looked up again. “You’ll tell him, won’t you? He… he believes you… he says… you’ll
tell him that he has to do this, that he has to be brave and… strong… because we’re not. He’ll have
until Bitterbridge to recover his strength, of course. But then… Aegon will stand at the front of our
army.” Arianne did not think he was talking to her at all anymore. When she stood up and walked
out of the tent, Connington kept on talking.

Her own tent was not far, and returning there would have been best for all of them, but instead she
went to see Willas. He was talking with Ser Garlan when Arianne arrived. She could hear raised
voices. “No, I won’t just abandon you like this—”

“It is not abandonment. It is… think of it as a request, Garlan. The last thing you can do for your
brother.”
“Don’t talk like that. Don’t you dare talk like that!”

Willas turned to his squire. “Go with him, Erron. Keep him sane. No, I won’t hear any complaints from you either. You’re to leave now. And when you get back to Highgarden, try… don’t let him drink too much. He’s better company when he’s sober.”

Ser Garlan grabbed his arm. “No,” he said. “I won’t. Damn you, Willas, I won’t. This request… it is…”

“It is no longer a request, then. It is an order. Do as I say, or I’ll have you strapped to your saddle and dragged back to Highgarden.”

Garlan opened his mouth to continue, then fell into his brother’s arms. Arianne felt more than a little awkward standing there in the mouth of the tent, watching them embrace. She averted her eyes until she heard Ser Garlan’s footsteps coming. He did not acknowledge her. Far away in the night, she heard shouting, from somewhere far-off.

“What did you say to him?” she asked Willas.

“I think you already know.”

Arianne gave a small, tight nod. “I do.”

“And do you know why I did it?”

She nodded sadly. “Willas… aren’t you afraid of dying?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s wonderful. Life’s next great adventure. Do you think I’ll make a good head on a spike? If they let me grow my beard out a bit, I’ll look like any old thief.” He laughed unconvincingly. “Do you want some wine?”

“Please.”

Willas set out two cups and a decanter of wine. “The finest I have,” he explained. As he poured, he accidentally spilled some of the wine on the hem of Arianne’s gown, leaving a crimson blot. “Oh. Sorry. Usually I have my squire to do that, but… well, I just dismissed him.” He drank. “Erron. He’s a good lad. I won’t have him staying for this—”

“Your hands are shaking,” Arianne said.

Willas looked down. “Oh. So they are.” He attempted to smile. “But my spirit remains unshakeable. Which is good. I may need a lot of… spirit.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

“Less chance of… well… again, you already know.”

“You could run. You could hide.”

He sighed. “After I was crippled… well, let’s just say I’ve learned you can’t run forever.”

“You wouldn’t need forever.”

“No. I only need until the death of dragons.” Again he laughed bitterly. “It will be tomorrow. They say when you’re about to die, you get these… premonitions of things.”
“Then where are mine? She’ll kill me as well.” It was strangely easy to accept the flat reality of that statement. I have nothing to lose. “Aegon is dying,” she confided, “even if by some miracle we manage to defeat Daenerys, it will be for nothing.”

“I know,” Willas said heavily. “So, then. I am to die for a dying man. I might laugh about it, if I weren’t so bitter.”

“What is the point of it all?” asked Arianne, hoping he would give the answer she wanted.

He did not. Instead, he said, “I still think about Sansa, you know. I shouldn’t let it bother me anymore, but…the only woman I thought might have loved me ran from me. Oh, she had her personal reasons, I am sure of it…but if I had been better, she might have stayed. I suppose…that is what makes this parting so easy. What have I got left to lose?”

Before she knew it, her hand was on his cheek. “Willas, I…” A void of silence stretched between them, and then looking into his eyes was like looking into the vast expanse of some honey-coloured sea. Where have those eyes been? she had time to wonder before his lips met hers. Then she was with those eyes, and in those eyes, and Willas’s hand was tracing up her skirts, pulling her into him. His manhood was hard as rock by the time she got it out of his breeches, and then she pulled down his smallclothes and climbed on top of him. “Arianne, I—” he said.

By then it was her in charge. “Don’t talk,” she said. She wanted this as much as he did, if not more, though she could not say why. Willas leaned up into her, his beard bristly against her neck, his hands squeezing at her nipples, circling over them, gentle yet determined in what they wanted.

She did not gasp as he entered her, did not scream. It was a quiet sort of lovemaking, both of them too wearied by the road and by their fate to bother with empty sounds of pleasures. Willas’s head pressed up against her chest, bobbing, his fingers and lips moving over her nipples, all the while pulling her down onto him, one steady thrust after another, his legs squeezing tight around hers, until he let it all out in one shuddering movement and fell back onto the bed.

Goosepimples formed on Arianne’s skin. “It is cold,” she said quietly, “I had not noticed.” The enormity of what they had just done had not yet occurred to her.

“Do you remember the first time we met?”

“What?”

“The first time,” he repeated, “because I do. My father sent me to greet you. Back then, I was arrogant and I still thought all Dornishmen were stupid, suspicious and smelly.”

“I cannot blame you,” said Arianne. “I thought the same of Reachmen. It’s what our people brought us up to believe. I have always been suspicious. Of Reachmen…then of my own father, when I learned that he intended to have Quentyn inherit…and lastly of myself. What does that make me? Am I so deceitful that I see deceit in every shadow?”

Willas turned onto his side to better look into her eyes. “It makes you human, Arianne. That’s what it does.” There was a long pause, and all they did was stare at each other. “When we first met,” said Willas, “I was rather uptight about the whole thing. I didn’t give you the respect you deserved. But you taught me a lesson for that. You trod on my toes while we were dancing, and nearly broke one of them. I had to smile and nod all the way through it. The swelling was purple in places.”

Arianne smiled ruefully. “I don’t really remember that.” But he does. And he has remembered it all these years. How long has he loved me? His hand crept slowly up to her breast, nervous and boyish
when he flitted over it. Their legs twined more tightly.

If her admission disappointed him, he did not react. “I could never forget. I never have. Yes, you faded from my mind… after… when my leg was crushed, Uncle Garth brought me a girl, as if that would cheer me up somehow. She climbed onto me while I was in my sickbed and took me in her mouth. But I was never thinking of her.” He laid his head down on her chest. Arianne twirled her fingers into his hair as he began to kiss her, brushing out the dust of the road and flakes of melting snow. “Then there came long years of pent-up frustrations and longing… I was little more than a man-whore, Arianne, a slave to my own desires. I knew a dozen Oldtown brothels and twice as many Oldtown girls. The loss of my leg did not really pain me anymore. It was lust.

“When I was one-and-twenty, I stopped, and turned myself away from that path, and sought comfort in knowledge.” He moved his head down towards her wetness. “Yet here I am, with you.”

*This is wrong*, Arianne thought suddenly. *I am a married woman.* “Willas,” she said. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

He looked up at her. “We should.” *Please,* his eyes said. *Help me.*

*This is wrong.* And though she knew it was true, she *wanted* to do this.

So they did.

Later, when the night was fully dark, Willas turned to her again. “Garlan is probably gone by now,” he said, his breath hot, his voice miserable. “Which means I am alone.”

“You’re not alone. You have me.”

“And tomorrow, when Daenerys gets here, I will have nothing.” He sat up abruptly among the bedcovers. His skin was pink, his hair and beard tangled with her scent. Arianne laid her hand on his back and rubbed his shoulders.

“It won’t be just me. Aye, I sent Garlan away… but if we are openly defiant, she will not stop with burning us. Highgarden and Sunspear, our siblings and our friends… all of them will burn.”

Arianne thought of Quentyn, whom she had never really loved until recently, and of her father… what *did* she feel for her father, who had sold her to Aegon and this fate in the first place? And then there were those she had already lost. *Quentyn, Oberyn, Obara… Nym and Elia and Sylva, maybe…*

“It’s late,” she said to Willas, “you should rest. And I should go.”

“I wish you could stay.”

That was a plea, but she could not accept it. “As do I.” Again, it was the truth, but not one she could explain. Arianne struggled back into her gown, wrapped her cloak tight around herself, and scurried through the rear exit of the tent, out of sight. She stuck to the shadows as she crossed the camp, but she needn’t have bothered. Only those on guard duty were out tonight, torches pointing to the stars. The moon was fat and white. She imagined the shadow of a dragon flying across it, blotting out the light. *It will not be long now. She is coming.*

She ducked through the tent flap, checked behind her, turned… and came face-to-face with Tyene. Arianne nearly choked in surprise.

“You look guilty,” Tyene surmised.
“Of what?”

“I don’t know yet. But you’d better tell me, before I have to start asking questions.”

“I was… with Lord Connington.”

“Come now. It’s been hours, and you wouldn’t have subjected yourself to that. Tell me the truth.”

Arianne decided to change tack. She did not want to talk about it. “Is it too late to ask for a hot bath?”

“Yes. You can have one tomorrow morning. So long as we haven’t all been burned in our beds.”

Tyene’s voice was unusually scornful. “Damn Connington. Damn Aegon. Damn them all.”

_I will lose her too, when Daenerys comes…_

**When Daenerys comes…**

Later, Arianne would tell herself that she made her mind up in that moment. But in truth, that moment had come long ago. “I’m going to visit Aegon,” she said, very quietly. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Visiting? At this hour? They might think you’re—” The abrupt ending to Tyene’s sentence showed her understanding. “Yes. Of course. I… give me a moment.”

It was raining when she left her tent and set out for Aegon’s. There were no Kingsguard on duty outside; all of them had been lost in the battle. The healer was surprised to see her. “I was just about to wake the king for his dosage, my lady,” he said in a soft voice, nodding to where Aegon lay asleep.

That was surely a sign from the gods. _You must do this._ “Leave me with him,” she said to the healer, “you should get some rest. And… I want to talk to my husband. Please.” It was the last addition that made the healer budge. After a few cursory instructions, he left Arianne and Aegon alone together.

For a long time she sat and watched him. He looked younger like this, his eyes sunken into hollows, his cheeks round and boyish, his breathing low and brittle. If she lifted the sheets, Arianne knew that she would find a mess of broken bones and scar tissue and skin that was blistered and cracked beyond repair, weeping pus. They had spared his face, though. She ran a finger along his cheekbone, brushing down over his chin. _If Rhaegar truly looked like this, I know why all the women in the Seven Kingdoms loved him…_

The bright purple eyes flickered open beneath pale lashes. Aegon stared up at her. She could hear his voice struggling to be heard. “I… you look like my mother… but I know you’re not. You’re my wife.”

“Yes,” she said, very quietly. “I am.”

“Arianne.” He tasted the name. “Have they sent you to give me… poppy?”

“Yes.”

Aegon grabbed her hand. His palms were blistered, his grip weak. The skin was sweaty and so hot she nearly recoiled from it. “Don’t,” he said, “don’t… give me… poppy…” He squeezed his eyes shut, and opened them blinking tears. “It hurts… it hurts so much… but I want to see you… to look at you.” His hand opened and closed spasmodically. Arianne wrapped her fingers around it, tenderly,
nervously. In her other hand, she held the flask of milk of the poppy. *How do I do this? How can I do this?*

“I never did right by you,” Aegon managed to say, “or by anyone. By Jon… he gave up so much for me…”

“Lord Connington?”

“Yes.” His fingers beat against hers. *He is trying to comfort me.* “Jon. And then… Daenerys… she…”

“She is coming,” said Arianne. “Coming for all of us. Lord Connington… he says… he says you will have to fight on the front line. The men will be… inspired by your courage.”

A moment’s stillness. Then Aegon made a gurgling noise. At first, Arianne thought he might be choking. Then she realised he was trying to laugh. “Inspired? By *this*? But maybe… he is right. In a way. This must end.” He began to strain against the bed, and Arianne had to help him to sit upright. She trailed one hand up his back, feeling the curve of his spine, meeting his purple eyes. *I could love him… maybe… in another world.*

“This must end,” Aegon said again. “And I cannot fight them, so…” He unfolded his fingers from her arm, pointing across the tent. “Please. You have to… when I’m asleep… give me more…”

When she understood, part of her wanted to laugh. *What are the chances?* “You want me to…?”

Aegon nodded his head. There was one word left on his lips. “Mercy.”

The rest went by as if in a dream. Arianne raised the cup of milk of the poppy and brought it to Aegon’s lips. All the while his eyes watched her over the rim of the cup, closing slowly, fading away. She put a kiss on his forehead. When she looked down again, he was asleep.

Arianne never did feed him any more milk of the poppy, as he’d asked. Tyene’s poison would do the trick.

She was bathing in her tent the next morning when Tyene came to tell her the news. “He’s gone,” her cousin said, “he’s gone.” A pause. “Was it… in the end, was it…?”

“Hard?” asked Arianne. “It was for me.”

When Tyene was gone, she lay back in the bathwater and sobbed until no more tears would come. Not only for Aegon, but for herself too, and for everything that had led up to this, the years and years of plotting and planning, all her father’s hard work, the deaths of all those she had loved. *It is over. It is done.*

Her skin was rougher than a crone’s by the time she climbed from the bath. They took her to Aegon’s tent, to sit by his body. He looked peaceful in rest, dressed not in armour, but in fine blood-red silk and black samite. They laid his sword Blackfyre down beside him. Arianne sent for Tyene again. “I want you to take the sword,” she said, “it was his, and it should stay his. I want you to hide it, somewhere Daenerys will never find it.” That was a sort of victory, even if it was hollow.

Tyene bowed her head. “There’s something else you should know. Lord Connington is dead. He went off into the forest alone. When his guards went looking for him a few minutes later, he’d taken his sword and… well, the camp’s falling apart now. If you look outside, everyone’s packing up and leaving.”
“You should do the same. Take Blackfyre and go. Go back to Dorne. Find Nym and Elia and—”

“And what about you?”

She squeezed Aegon’s cold hand. “I… I have to stay.”

Tyene went, and all the others faded away with her, in their hundreds and thousands, men Arianne had never known, men who would live another day.

Not Willas, though. “I have to face my fate,” he said to her. “Even if I flee, Daenerys will still hunt me down for my role in all this. And… you should not be alone, Arianne.”

She could not argue with that. And so there they sat, each respecting the other’s silence, until sunset came and the word arrived that a dragon had been sighted to the north.

Chapter End Notes

The working title for this chapter was "A Sweet Poison", which I ultimately discarded for being too spoilery, but I think this chapter perfectly sums up the idea of a bittersweet ending. Aegon dies, but it's a mercy, and it brings an end to the war. At the same time, though, it doesn't bode well for either Willas or Arianne.

We'll see how things end in the next Dany chapter, but admittedly this chapter will be more of a plot resolution than a character resolution.

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For once, I've got some questions for you. You're welcome to completely ignore them, but if anyone wants to give a longer review, here are a few of book-club style questions to think about, on the topic of the King's Landing plot and the storylines of Aegon, Arianne and Willas in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS.

1. “I still wonder about Sansa, you know. I shouldn’t let it bother me anymore, but… the only woman who I thought might have loved me ran from me.”

   Does Willas manipulate Arianne through guilt? Is their sex entirely consensual?

2. “I suppose… that is what makes this parting so easy. What have I got left to lose?”

   What has Willas lost throughout The Sunset Kingdoms? And what remains to him?

3. Considering his previous POV chapters, does Willas speak truly when he claims to have loved Arianne all his life, or are these just his ramblings in the heat of the moment?

4. Watch the romance scene with Robb and Talisa from Game of Thrones, 2x08 The Prince of Winterfell. Is it possible to compare their passions to those of Willas and Arianne in this chapter?

5. What is your opinion of Jon Connington following the events of this chapter? Is his story tragic? Did he deserve his fate?

6. Arianne claims to love Aegon at points in this chapter, and cries over his death
(among other things). Considering her other POV chapters, do you think she really
loves him, or merely tries to convince herself that she does?

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NEXT CHAPTERS:

110. "Mother's Mercy", July 15th
111. "The End of the World", July 17th (or 18th)
JAIME

A golden rose pinned Ser Loras Tyrell’s cloak at his shoulder, with leaves of jade and silver. He is not dressed for combat, Jaime observed. He thinks this will be easy, and he is right. “We are ready to ride at Your Grace’s command,” Tyrell said.

“I’m not a king,” replied Tommen. “Call me a lord, but not a king.” He fidgeted with a strap of his breastplate, obviously playing for time. But he can hardly turn back now, Jaime knew. And neither can I.

“As you say, my lord.” Tyrell lowered his head respectfully, as if he would actually have deferred to Tommen’s command. Behind him, Prince Quentyn shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. The Knight of the Flowers has the sole command here. Jaime had seen as much earlier, when their commanders met in the armory. By rights, Jaime himself ought to have led the discussion, having seniority among them, but he had given the command of the Lannister men to Captain Vylarr, his cousin Ser Damion, and Ser Robert Brax. This was one battle he could not face.

Tommen sighed. “I suppose there is no time to lose. Do as you will, Ser Loras.”

“I am told that Lord Tarly’s men are already on the battlements around the ringfort,” said Loras. “If we should capture Lord Randyll himself, would you prefer to have him brought to you alive or—?”

“Alive,” Tommen said.

“And the same with the Queen Regent,” added Jaime. “She is to be brought back here unharmed.” If they returned with Cersei’s head as a trophy, no one and nothing in the realms of gods or men would stop him from killing Loras Tyrell. It had been his one precondition for going through with this uprising.

“Unharmed,” Ser Loras repeated. “Unharmed so that she may stand trial for her crimes.”

“Justice will be delivered as the king sees fit,” Jaime said.

“Justice will be delivered as is necessary,” replied Loras.
There will be justice for your sister.” Tommen shifted in his chair. “And for your wife, Prince Quentyn. But that will come later. For now, do what you have to do.”

There was a moment of brief understanding between the four in the room; the tension rose, and then relaxed. “As you command, my lord,” said Ser Loras. “The ringfort will be yours, come the hour of ghosts. And the Queen Regent.” When he and Prince Quentyn marched out of the room, Jaime caught a glimpse of Tyrell and Martell soldiers waiting behind them, with spears and swords glittering in their mailed fingers.

Then the door swung shut, and he was alone with his son. Behind his desk, Tommen fidgeted with a clasp of his armour; his gloved and mailed hands were ungainly. “Let me help,” Jaime said. It was no easier with only one hand, but between the pair of them they managed to tighten the leather strap.

Tommenswallowed. “A bit looser, maybe.”

“You don’t want it loose. You want it to keep you safe. As do I.” He rested a hand on his son’s shoulder.

Tommens walked away from him, over to the window. Through the snow-flecked panes they could see Ser Loras and his men climbing the hill to the ringfort, looming far above them at the top of Casterly Rock. Are you watching too, Cersei? Jaime wondered. Are you standing on your balcony and watching an army of steel climb towards you? Are you wondering where I am? Are you wondering if I have betrayed you?

Are you alright, ser?” Tommen asked, beside him.

“Yes,” Jaime lied. “I’m fine.”

The boy shifted. “It always makes me nervous, ser. All this waiting before the battle.”

Believe me, that never changes,” Jaime said. “You shouldn’t overly trouble yourself with it, Tommen. We’re safe from the worst of it here. If you’d gone with Ser Loras, you’d have cause to worry.” If Tarly did have the ramparts, as Tyrell had said, hundreds of those who had set out would not return. The ringfort had high walls, hundreds of guardsmen and archers, and thick iron gates which they would need a ram to break through.

Yes, ser.” Tommen nodded. “But it still makes me nervous.”

Jaime felt the same, but for different reasons. There was a tenseness in the air tonight. Why has Cersei been so quiet? He had not spoken to his sister since the night before. Why did she never send for me? Did she think I would side with Tommen? Did she want me to?

He pushed that thought away. “I remember what it was like before my first battle,” he said. “King Aerys sent a retinue of knights and courtiers to track down the Kingswood Brotherhood. Ser Arthur Dayne led them, but I wasn’t part of the Kingsguard then. I was Lord Sumner Crakehall’s squire, alongside Merrett Frey.” He sucked air through his teeth. “Merrett got captured and branded by the White Fawn, and took a blow to the head that ended his dreams of knighthood. I suppose… his fate could have been mine, but…” If fate had smiled upon me differently, I might have taken Merrett’s path instead. “It doesn’t matter. Merrett ended up hanged in the Riverlands, last I heard. All roads through life end in death. The important thing is not to be afraid of it. Make sure you live before you die, Tommen.”

The boy stiffened. His fingers folded around the hilt of Lawbringer, caressing the rubies embedded in the scabbard. ‘I’ve been thinking, uncle. After tonight… I’ve got plans. But I can’t carry them out
alone. I need the help of someone I trust. Someone to help me rule as lord of the Westerlands, to be relagent in my absence—"

"My uncle Kevan will come back if you ask him."

"There has been no word from Ser Kevan in weeks. He’s probably under siege by the ironborn. That, or his birds can’t find us through the snow. But I wasn’t talking about Ser Kevan, anyhow. I need you, uncle."

"Me?"

"Yes, you," Tommen said. "When this is over… I want you to be my Regent, and my chief advisor. Like a Hand of the King, only for a lord."

Jaime shook his head. "I have no experience in ruling, Tommen."

"Neither did Ser Tyland Lannister. And he was one of the best Hands the Seven Kingdoms ever had. Even your father… he was a young man, and inexperienced, but King Aerys named him Hand all the same."

_Things have come full circle_, Jaime thought. Cersei had been a hair’s breadth away from convincing Robert Baratheon to name Jaime as his Hand. Later, in King’s Landing, his sister had suggested that Jaime might serve as Hand someday, once Lord Tywin passed on. And now the time had come.

"It wouldn’t be permanent," Tommen continued. "I’d find someone else, eventually. Someone younger. In time, Rollam Westerling might suit, but obviously we can’t do that now. But you, uncle —"

It was too much for Jaime to take in at once. "This is no small decision," he said to Tommen. "I will need some time to consider it. May I…"

"Of course."

Jaime could not say exactly where he was going, but he wanted to get out of there. _He wants me to replace Cersei. I will have to sit by his side as he judges her. I will have to be judge, jury, and…_

On the stairs, he came across Eleyna and Rollam Westerling, and a few more of the King’s Companions, ascending. "Ser Jaime," Eleyna greeted. She wore a gown of simple crimson silk, with golden leaves decorating the hem, as proud as any Lannister. "I thought you would be with the king."

"I was. But I have taken a moment’s pause. Forgive me, my lady. Tonight is not an easy night…"

Eleyna nodded. "When I find myself needing guidance, I usually seek the sept."

"The sept is up in the castle—"

"There is one at the back of the armory. If you want me to take you there—"

"No. I’m sure I can find my way around my own castle." Jaime decided to change the subject. "How is Lady Margaery?" Eleyna had taken up her old duties of nursing in the castle infirmary, tending to the Tyrell girl among others.

"Same as she was before. Recovering slowly." She moved past him. "Forgive my haste. Tommen has asked for reports."
“Tommen is asking everyone for something nowadays.”

“I know,” she said. “But what can we do, as his loyal servants, other than oblige him? He asked me for his counsel, Ser Jaime, and I urged him to hear yours. I think we can work together well. We both want the same thing.”

“You suggested—?”

“He asked for my counsel,” she repeated. “And I gave it to him.” Then she passed him, in a swirl of silks, the steel of the King’s Companions rattling and ringing in her wake.

_That girl will make a good lady of Casterly Rock_, Jaime thought. _But I will have to be wary of her. She is Sybell Spicer’s daughter, and it was partly Lady Sybell’s handiwork that brought down Robb Stark._

He made his way through the castle alone. At one point he went out onto the battlements, to watch Loras’s army attacking the ringfort. He could see a few fires burning erratically up on the hill, light from torches and shields and swords. On the wind, from somewhere far away, came the whispers of battle. _It has begun._

The ramparts bustled with men: King’s Companions with crossbows and longbows, guardsmen from the Lannisport barracks in their round helms, the levies of Crakehall and Sarsfield and Silverhill, among others. These men, under his and Tommen’s command, were to defend Casterly Rock’s central armoury, and the nearby hall where the women and children sheltered. The armoury was well prepared for an attack. They had set up infantry spikes and caltrops around the entrances, and barricaded all the doors. Now the only way in or out was through the main entrance, across a bridge wide enough for four horses to ride abreast. That was guarded by two gatehouse towers, a curtain wall, and dozens of bowmen.

He might have stopped there, among battle preparations and marching songs, but his feet led him to the sept. And once he was there, standing beneath the seven stone gods on their seven stone pedestals, Jaime knew he was in the right place.

He went to the Warrior first. The Warrior had always been his god, and were it not for his stump of a right hand, Jaime might even have called his patron infallible. But his stump proved the need for the others: _may the Smith make our steel true_, he prayed. He did not speak the words aloud, but he tried to _mean_ them, as he had long years ago, standing vigil the night before he was to be knighted. _May the Crone light the true path ahead, and may the Maiden keep our women unspoiled and true._ Lastly he turned to the Mother and Father, flanking the entrance doors. _May the Father’s judgement be delivered swiftly and fairly. And may the Mother have mercy on us all._

Suddenly he knew she was there, in the sept with him. He glimpsed her out the corner of his eye, but he knew if he turned to look she would disappear. “How long have you been here?” he asked. The last word echoed; _hereherehere._

“I have always been here, Jaime,” she replied.

“Then why can I never see you?”

“You know the answer to that.”

She was right. He did. “Because I was never looking.”

“Mother… if you’re the Mother, then do you know _everything_?” Although he tried to hide it, his voice sounded fearful.
"You don’t really mean ‘everything.’"

No. He didn’t. “I mean… about Cersei and me. Did… did you always know?”

She moved closer to him, and faintly he could smell her perfume. She smelled like poppy and roses, lavender and honey, snowflakes and starlight. She smelled like life. But how could she, when she was long dead?

“You know the answer to that, too.”

He did. She knew. That was why she moved my bedchamber to the other side of the Rock, to keep us apart. He had been six the first time Cersei had crawled into his bed, and suggested that they might fit together. Of course, there had been no lust whatsoever, only curiosity. But they did fit, and there was a certain rightness in that.

He had been thirteen when they fucked for the first time. Jaime had been home for a month, away from Lord Crakehall’s tutelage, and on the second-to-last night of his stay at the Rock, Cersei had taken him into her bed. He’d known that it was wrong at the time, but she was sweet back then, and so beautiful, and once they started he could not stop. Now, though, shame flooded his face at the memory. If I had stopped, this would never have happened. Cersei might have married Rhaegar, and I might have been father’s heir instead of a Kingsguard. What dreams might he have pursued if she had not taken over his heart and soul?

“I went wrong a long time ago,” Jaime said to himself. I have wronged Cersei… Tyrion… Father… my children.

“It is time to put things right,” his mother said. Jaime turned to face her, but, of course, she was no longer there.

Somewhere far above him, a bell started to ring. It surely could not be the hour of ghosts already, which meant…

Footsteps echoed through the sept doors, coming to a halt just behind him. Jaime turned to face Garrett Paege. The boy was breathless, red-cheeked, and looked uncomfortable in his heavy mail. “An attack, my lord,” he said. “At the gate. The king needs you.”

Jaime followed his squire back up to the battlements. Tommen was at the top of one of the bastion towers, encircled by his Companions. A nearby musician was singing “Nine Stars”, a solemn marching song. Jaime pushed between two archers to look over the rampart.

Below, on the bridge, a small army of about five hundred men was waiting. They flew the lion of Lannister, gold on a field of crimson. These are Cersei’s soldiers. He became sure of it when he saw Ser Robert Strong among their number, towering above the rest in his snow-pale armour. At his belt hung a massive greatsword.

“Why are they here?” Jaime asked.

Tommen shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe they’ve turned on Mother. But…”

“I doubt it. Ser Robert Strong is loyal to the last breath.” And past that, I think.

“I thought they’d be up at the ringfort. Why have they—?”

Jaime held up a hand, cutting him off. “Cersei.” She rode through the crowd, to the front of the lines. She was gowned in a crimson so dark it was nearly black, with metalwork on her shoulders and
across her chest, burnished to a golden colour.

“Why is she here?” Tommen asked.

In answer, the men behind the queen lowered their Lannister banners, and raised white flags above their head. Jaime let out his breath.

“Parley,” said Rollam Westerling.

“Or surrender,” said Tommen.

Jaime laid his golden hand on the stone rampart. “It doesn’t matter which. She doesn’t want a fight, that’s all.” To the archers around him, he said, “Lower your bows.”

“No,” said Tommen, signalling for them to keep their bowstrings taught. “I don’t like this. It looks like a trick.”

“She wants to talk with you.”

“If she wants to talk with us, why didn’t she do it before the battle? She knows we have more men, up at the ringfort. We’d beat her soundly there, with Loras and Quentyn’s help, but down here… we’re evenly matched.” It was true. They had about seven hundred to defend the armory, but a goodly number of their troops were half-trained, or mere squires. “I don’t trust her. Keep your bows at the ready,” he told his men.

“Are you going to fire on your own mother?” Jaime asked.

Tommens steeled his jaw. His hand hovered over Lawbringer, sheathed in his belt. “If I have to.”

“I don’t believe that. And you don’t believe that.”

“I’ll wait for Loras to get back. Then we’ll open the gates.”

“Tommens, this has to end. Your mother wants to talk with you, but if we start bringing the Tyrells into this… sparks might fly. And then…”

“Sacrifices have to be made.” Tommen turned away from the rampart, but as he did so, Cersei dismounted from her horse, out on the bridge, moved to Ser Robert Strong’s side, and together they walked ten carefully measured paces towards the walls. She was unarmed, Jaime could see at once. The bows were still trained on her. “Stop!” he found himself shouting. “All of you, stop, and lower your fucking bows! I’ll not have needless bloodshed.” He made up his mind. “I’m going to talk with her.” He grabbed Tommen by the shoulder and spun the boy around. He spoke father to son, not Kingsguard to king. “You can come with me if you like. Or you can stay back on your walls, and I’ll do it alone. And if this is a trick, and your mother should attack, then you have my permission to fire on me as well.”

He stormed angrily past, downstairs into the courtyard and over to the portcullis. Through the iron bars of the gate and the snow, he caught a glimpse of Cersei and Ser Robert, vulnerable. “Open the gate!” Jaime shouted.

The man on the gate frowned. “The king has commanded us—”

“Open the gate,” said a second voice, resignedly. Tommen stepped into line beside him. He did not come alone; two score of the King’s Companions followed in his wake. Jaime turned to his son. “Thank you,” he murmured. He donned his helm, waited for the others to put theirs on, and took the
first step out through the portcullis.

The narrow neck of land that led up to the armoury was dotted with spike traps, barrels of explosive pitch, and deep trench pits that were slowly filling with water. Jaime navigated a path through their defenses, until eventually he and Tommen were face-to-face with Cersei and Ser Robert, about twenty yards apart. The King’s Companions fell back another twenty yards. Around forty of Cersei’s soldiers walked up, and stood twenty yards behind the Queen Regent and her giant white knight.

Jaime could almost feel the archers on the walls behind him, their bows prickling. Tommen had one hand on Lawbringer, and he seemed to be shaking, just a little. For a long time, no one spoke. The rain and the snow kept falling. Jaime glanced over to his left, and up. The ringfort still glittered above him, a few lights in the darkness. He wondered if they ought to have sent a messenger to Ser Loras, telling him to come back down. The main passages would be blocked by Cersei’s soldiers, but he knew of a few passages within the city walls that they could have used.

But that did not matter now.

Cersei did not speak. Plainly they were supposed to make the first move. Tommen swallowed, his throat bobbing. The strange moonlight made his hair look almost white. Jaime caught his son’s eye, just briefly, and gave him a reassuring nod. “Go on,” he said quietly, “be brave.”

Tommen stepped out. “Mother,” he said, very quietly, then cleared his throat. “Cersei Lannister. I, King Tommen of the Houses Lannister and Baratheon, hereby place you under arrest for the attempted murder—”

“Murder?” The queen’s voice cut above his. “Oh, we are both murderers tonight, Tommen. Your men are dying alongside mine, when they did not need to die at all.”

“That is true,” said Tommen. “But… better that a few die here, than thousands in your failed war. I… I had to do this. Else the Tyrells and the Martells have cause to go to war with us, and House Lannister would not survive that.”

“House Lannister fell a long time ago.” Cersei moved down one step. “Though I do not know exactly when. Perhaps it fell with my father. Perhaps it fell before him, with Lord Tytos, the Toothless Lion. Perhaps it fell when King Loren of the Rock perished at the Field of Fire, against Aegon the Conqueror and his dragons.”

“Is that what you want, Mother? Another Field of Fire?”

“If I must. I will gladly burn alongside my men, but I will not throw down my crown and trample it into the dirt, as you have done with yours.”

*Her crown?* Jaime thought. *What is she talking about?* He must have made some involuntary sound, for Cersei’s eyes went to him next. “Perhaps I was wrong about the fall of House Lannister. Perhaps it fell only recently, when one of its proudest sons lost his sword hand and his courage and his heart and became nothing more than a shell. Is that right, Jaime?”

Jaime’s mouth was dry. “Cersei,” he managed to say. “This is madness.”

“Your madness, Jaime. And its costs will be your fault, too. You could have ended this. You made a choice, and you chose wrong.”

“Cersei, it’s over,” he said. “The Tyrells will break Lord Randyll’s line before the hour is up. We have you outnumbered and surrounded. Let it be. Let it end.” Stepping forwards, he held out his hand. “Please.” And took a step towards her. And another. Tommen followed, uncertain, and Cersei
echoed him. Their fellows shuffled forwards around them, King’s Companions and Cersei’s soldiers alike. Eventually they were close enough that Jaime could see the light of her eyes. Green as emeralds, green as summer grass, green as—

And then he knew. Knew why she had gathered them here, away from the fighting, with their men matched to hers at this parley ground, yet with seemingly no intention to surrender. And he knew why she had sent Lord Randyll into battle – a man who had questioned her every step of the way. And he knew why Qyburn was missing.

And she knew he knew.

Jaime drew back, suddenly, sharply. “No…” The word turned to dust in his mouth. “No, Cersei, you didn’t… why?...”

“I did what I had to,” she said. “For the good of the realm.”

_For the good of the realm._ Those words, mocking him. Haunting him. _Burn them all, he said._

_Burn them all._

_The ringfort. Loras. Quentyn. Our army._

Jaime turned to look.

The flash was so bright and the thunder so loud it knocked him off his feet. His elbow smashed against the soil, his white cloak tangled round his legs, his eyes stung and his head filled with starlight. When he found his feet again, the first thing he saw was Cersei, a black silhouette against the eruption of yellows and reds and golds behind her. The rising flames did not burn green as wildfire did, but they were fiercer and angrier than anything Jaime had ever seen. _Seven hells. Seven gods, Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy…_

Somehow he found his way back to Tommen. His eyes were bright and fearful, a boy’s once more. “Ser?” he asked quietly, staring off and up into the night. Where the ringfort had once been, there was now only smoke, rising higher and higher. “I… what was that?”

Jaime stood and watched in silence. Even the stars were burning. “Fire and blood,” he whispered. And he saw the Mad King again, crouched among the blades of his throne, and the words on his lips were: _burn them all, burn them all, burn them all…_

The sky was turning dark again. Jaime laid a heavy hand on his son’s shoulder. “It’s over,” he said. Tommen stared at him, glassy, uncomprehending. “It’s over? I… what do you mean… how can it be?”

“Ser Loras is dead,” Jaime said. There was no other way to put it. “And Lord Tarly. And all their men. They can’t have survived that.”

“She killed them all,” he heard Tommen say. “She killed them _all._”

Yes, thought Jaime. _She did. And I knew she would._

Tommens’s fingers clenched, unclenched, clenched again. And Jaime nearly saw it coming, so _nearly_ saw it, reached out with his right hand to pull him back – the stump which had no hand, his fingers flailing, grasping at nothing—
There was a second thunderclap, and then the world erupted, as if every man had come to their senses at once. The Companions rushed forwards on all sides, Cersei’s soldiers moved in, Ser Robert Strong unsheathed his sword, and Jaime unsheathed his, and then he was beside Tommen, warding them away, slashing left and right. “Retreat!” he shouted. “Retreat, back to the gate!” But Cersei’s men were swarming over them, and they were tripping backwards into their own defenses, impaled by spikes, falling into the trenches and drowning. There was a massive explosion as one of the pitch barrels went up; white-hot splinters grazed Jaime’s armour as he tried to move backwards.

Where’s Tommen? he wondered as he fell backwards. He screamed his son’s name, and then he was pushing forwards through the mess and saw him, back to back with Josmyn Peckeldon, fighting like a man possessed by fire. Jaime shoved his way towards him, plunging his sword through the chest of any man who came at him, not knowing if they were friend or foe. Cersei’s horsemen were riding around them through the lake of mud and blood, while bright tongues of fire feasted on the night sky.

Jaime came upon Tommen fighting two men off. He barged one out of the way, shouldering him so hard that the man tripped backwards and impaled himself through the chest on one of the cavalry spikes. An arrow whistled towards him and bounced off his left vambrace. Jaime watched as Tommen dispensed with the second man, cutting off his arm. Jaime followed him through the rain, not knowing where they were going. He screamed that they should head back to the walls, but his pleas went unheard. And then a third man stepped in front of them, a white giant, with a sword that glowed in the night. Dawn, Jaime thought.

Tommen took a step back, a faltering, nervous step. He fell into Jaime’s arms, shaking. Lawbringer dropped slack from his hand into the mud. In front of him him, Ser Robert Strong stood, his sword upraised as men rushed into the fight around them. Cersei had disappeared.

Jaime looked down at Tommen. What happened? “Sorry,” the boy was muttering, as though fevered, “I’m sorry, Mother… I… uncle, Ser Jaime, Father, I’m…”

“You’re alright, Tommen, you’re alright.” There was no blood. He must be having some sort of panic attack. That could happen when you nearly got hit. Somehow, he managed to drag Tommen back towards the walls through the fires of battle, away, away, away. Once they were inside the portcullis, Jaime set him down in a heap. “You’ll be fine. There’s no blood.”

Jaime almost believed it. But then Tommen began to fumble with his helmet straps, “He cut… Father, I’m scared, I’m…”

Father. He called me Father. Why would he say that? And that was when the fresh wave of horror rolled over him, and when he helped Tommen to pull the helmet off, he could not breathe. “Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods preserve…”

He heard Cersei scream. She appeared from nowhere and fell to her knees beside him, and the battle was forgotten, everything was forgotten, because the helmet had been cleft nearly in two and red stuff was leaking out all over the floor and their hands were sticky and wet and their son was dying. The cut had opened Tommen’s face, slashing off an ear entirely, his blood running down in torrents, and Cersei was trying in vain to hold the pieces together like some grotesque wooden puzzle, only this was flesh and blood and their son was dying. “Please, please, please…”

Red, red, so much red, too much red. “Father…” their son said, with a strained, choking gasp. “You’re my father. I know that.” Jaime gripped his hand, squeezing it harder. “I’m glad you are… Mother… I’m sorry… I never meant for you… I’m so sorry…”

Jaime broke. Broke as Catelyn Stark must have broke when Roose Bolton stabbed her son through the heart. Father. Father. Father. “I’ll be your father,” he was muttering. “I’ll… we’ll leave all this
behind, go off together, I’ll keep you safe, I… please…” He cradled Tommen’s head and hugged him tightly, trying to keep him in there, wondering if miracles did happen. But your mother died. The baby lived, but your mother died. He remembered Aunt Genna crouched down by his side, as tears ran down his cheek, as he hugged Cersei beside him. I’m so sorry. “So, so… sorry…” They tried, really, they did. But your mother still died.

In the end Cersei had to pry loose his fingers, so the body of King Tommen Lannister could slide limp and lifeless to the floor. With a shaking hand, Jaime closed those bright green eyes. He realised he was crying. “Father,” he said, so quietly only she could hear him over the sound of the rain. “He called me Father.”

Chapter End Notes

Twice the height, double the fall, etc., etc.

So… this was one chapter I never wanted to write.

"Mother’s Mercy” is, without doubt, the hardest chapter I’ve ever written for THE CHANGING OF SEASONS. I don't think it'll ever get harder than this. I'll start by talking about Loras and Quentyn (and Lord Randyll Tarly), whose stories end up being tragically cut short. All of Quentyn's personal development, and Loras's newfound dreams are shattered, torn to pieces. And then there's the impact this will have on Margaery, and the other Tyrells... for them, this is arguably a fate worse than death.

As for the other thing... I've always known since starting THE SUNSET KINGDOMS that Tommen or Myrcella would die before the end of part two. At first I thought it would be Myrcella, but... well, here we are, and she's still alive.

This is the hardest character death I've ever written, for certain, partly because of how utterly merciless it is (the chapter title is ironic, by the way, if you haven't already gathered that). They came so, so close, and Jaime's regrets over this will be the basis of many of his actions going forward. Tommen has to die for the story to progress, and I think you can see why. But the reason why it was so hard to kill him off is because I think Tommen's journey is very relatable. Take away the crown and the Lannister name, and I think we all see something of ourselves in there. His story is the starting point for this entire fic - even more apparent if you read v.1 of ACOG - and essentially a microcosm of everything I wanted to tell in A COAT OF GOLD and THE SUNSET KINGDOMS.

But everything ends. And this is no exception.

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Once again, I call upon all the lurkers to review this chapter; I'd really appreciate it. Thank you all for your support.

Some questions for you, since the seemed to go down rather well on the last chapter:

1. Jaime thinks that he sees something of Lord Tywin Lannister in Tommen. With this in mind, is it for the best that Tommen died here in the story? If his tale had continued, would he have become like Lord Tywin?
2. Who is more responsible for Tommen’s demise? Jaime, Cersei, or Tommen himself?

3. “The purpose of Tommen, Loras and Quentyn’s ending – sudden, off-screen, and merciless – is to show the cruel reality of the world of ASOIAF, and the relative unimportance of the characters against the advance of fate.” Do you agree?

4. “Jaime Lannister is a good father.” Do you agree?

5. “Cersei Lannister is a competent military commander.” Do you agree?

6. Tommen’s death scene uses elements from A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS, with Jaime’s line: “Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods preserve,” being a direct reference to the demise of Baelor Brightsmile, who dies from a similar blow. Had Baelor lived, he would likely have been a great ruler. Can we say the same for Tommen?
His dreams were full of black water and blacker thoughts, memories swirling in a hostile sea, all just beyond his reach. *The night is dark and full of terrors*, Sam thought. *And the coming night will be the darkest of them all.*

He opened his eyes, and drew breath sharply. The first thing he noticed was that he was cold. It had been many months since he had last felt the cold. There were coverlets and furs around his feet. With a weary hand, Sam reached out and drew them up to his chin.

"Black. Like the Night’s Watch. He shook his head groggily. *I will send you back. Send you back…*"

There were voices somewhere nearby, down the hall, perhaps. They sounded female, but they did not sound like Quaithe or Kinvara. *Sarella?* he thought, for one mad moment, but it could not be her. *I saw the ship breaking apart, not just once, but a hundred times.*

Suddenly he was dragged back into the memory. Seawater rushed through the innards of the ship, making the *Melevol* scream and howl like a dying beast. Sam clung to the finger of black wood for dear life, watching as everything else within was dragged away into the darkness. The ship was on fire too, and the smoke filled his eyes. And then the Stone Men were climbing the rigging with him, climbing up, growling in that inhuman way of theirs. Sam fumbled in his belt, and somehow managed to find his dagger, grasping it tightly to stop it slipping between his wet fingers. Thunder and lightning split the sky, and the face of the Stone Man crawling towards him was etched on his memory in black and white.

"Sam!” he heard a voice screaming, but when he looked back Sarella was already spinning away from the mast, falling backwards into the black whirlpool of fire and water. And then she was gone. Just like that. He could not save her. He never could.

Sam returned to his bed once more. *The Stone Men*, he thought, recalling another fragment. *I remember the Stone Men. But what came after that?* He willed himself to drift back into the memory, as if putting his face into a pool of water to gaze at the patterns beneath the surface. It was easy, as if he had been taught to do as much…
The Stone Man climbed the rigging, his fingers tearing holes in the mast. Sam had a dagger in his hand, ornamented with onyx jewels. He watched as the undead thing came closer and closer, counting out his own heartbeats; *ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum*, readying himself.

Down on the deck he could see Kinvara and Quaithe conjuring up a wall of fire between them and the Stone Men, and about half a mile away he glimpsed more fires, the signal of an approaching ship. *The ship that rescued us.* But he had no more time to consider that, for then the Stone Man was upon him, and he struck with the dagger, in and out, in and out. Sam lost his handhold and down they fell, towards the black swirling sea, down and down and down…

*The rescue ship,* he thought, *with fires burning on its decks. More shadowbinders.* The ship had a name. He could not remember its Asshai’i name, but Quaithe had told him it meant *Nightingale.* It was a vast ship, with five decks or maybe more, and a hundred shadowbinders onboard. Perhaps that was where he was, Sam thought, sitting up. *I am aboard the Nightingale.* But then he realised that the window of his room was not a round porthole, but a square one, with wooden shutters and heavy bolts to keep the outside hidden away. And if he was on the ship, then surely they would be swaying…

*Nightingale.* That brought something else back. *Knights of the nightingale. Quaithe and Qareth told me what that meant, I know they did.* He remembered Qareth saying as much, as Sam approached the archway. “When you arrive, you will remember.”

*When I arrive where? Here?*

The archway. He remembered the archway, sited in the middle of a stone garden where nothing grew. Purple light radiated from the mysterious place within. Quaithe had been down on her knees by the end, trying to coax its flame back into life, while Qareth fought off the foes trying to mount the battlements with spells of purple fire. “You must go, quickly,” she said, her words echoing through Sam’s mind. That was the last thing she had ever said to him, before he stepped through and everything disappeared around him.

Quaithe and Qareth were surely dead now, he knew. The Stone Men, led by their Grey King, had broken through the barricades on Kestrel Island and the fleet had been sunk with hundreds of shadowbinders aboard. And Asshai was on the brink of collapse. Sam remembered seeing its tall black towers burning; by the time of the last battle, the warlocks’ temples had been the only remaining sanctuaries in the city.

*Perhaps I am in one of those temples, in the city proper,* Sam thought. But it was too quiet here. If he was in Asshai, he should be able to hear the sounds of fighting in the distance, and the thunder that reigned over everything. “I should go and look,” he muttered to himself. “I should just go and look.” Yet when he tried to swing his legs over the edge of the bed, a violent stab of pain went through him, and the next thing he knew he was drifting away into the world of sleep once more…

He dreamed he was back on the *Melevol,* before the Stone Men had attacked. This was a time when Sarella and Kinvara were still alive, when all was not entirely lost.

The sea beyond the Jade Gates was entirely black, and the sky had nary a star in sight. Every ship they passed seemed to be heading in the opposite direction. Of course, they were fleeing from the Stone Men and the Grey King, but the crewmen of the *Melevol* did not know that.

Sometimes those fleeing would hail the *Melevol* as they passed. The greeting was always the same. “Stay away from Asshai,” they would say. “The Shadow is angry, and there are far worse things than death in these waters. If you have any sense, turn back.”
How right they were.

The memory shifted and changed; suddenly he was back at the Five Forts with Quaithe. This was a memory of a dream, Sam knew. He had never travelled to the Five Forts for real. Even so, he could not forget what he had seen in his visions. The five towers belching out flames of red and blue and purple, shadowbinders throwing down wards and spells in every direction as the Others swarmed across the arid landscape.

Others. Sam coughed and spluttered. I have to warn them about the Others. A song of ice and fire, Quaithe said. Others of fire and ice. Others from the north, others from the east.

I have to warn them. I have to tell them what I know.

Warn who? And what do I know?

“It is not just Westeros at stake,” he remembered Quaithe saying. “It is the whole of the Known World, Samwell. The seasons are changing for the last time. The Long Night will soon be upon us.”

Sam drifted back to his waking self. The room was starting to brighten. A faint glimmer of white light drifted in through the shutters. Definitely not Asshai, then, he thought. Under the Shadow, the whole world was dark. Kinvara claimed it was because of volcanoes spewing ash into the sea from undersea ridges around the city. Quaithe and Qareth had suggested a more fantastical reason.

There were pins and needles in his feet and hands, but he could move. Sam threw the covers off and stumbled from his bed. He was barefoot; he felt bare wooden boards beneath his feet, sprinkled with sawdust. Carefully, he stumbled to the window. His fingers were a little stiff, but after a bit of fumbling with the catch he was able to open the shutters. Bright sunlight flooded his vision, and then…

…Sam staggered back from the window, feeling sick. The memories returned to him in a swirling rush. You need to go back, Samwell. You need to tell them what is coming. And there was Quaithe, on her knees, sacrificing himself to lend her lifeforce to the archway, and there he was floating through the void between one side of the archway and the other, and here he was on the far side, staring through the window.

Staring at the Wall.

A door opened to his left, startling him. A moment more, and Dolorous Edd came through. Edd Tollett, flesh and blood, cloaked head-to-toe in the black garb of a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch. For the longest time, they stared at each other, saying nothing. Sam felt horribly groggy. “Well, I’m back,” he said.

For once Edd was lost for words. A thin reedy sound emerged in the back of his throat, and eventually became a cough. “Yes, you are. Sorry for staring. I promise you, you’re not that handsome. It’s just…”

“Strange,” Sam said.

“Do you remember what happened?”

“There was… an archway. There were flames… it was like a big fireplace. And I travelled.”

“Aye. And you came flying out of the fireplace down in the common hall. You damn near gave me a heart attack, Slayer. It’s a good thing you didn’t, else we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You’d be too guilt-ridden to speak. Oh, and I’d be dead. That too, I suppose.”
Sam snorted. “I don’t really remember what came before that, though.”

“The red woman said you wouldn’t.”

“Melisandre. You have to tell her what you know. Kinvara had called her Melony. Tell Melony. “I thought she would have gone south by now.”

“She did. But she came back.”

Sam felt another lance of pain. He steadied himself against the wall. “Are you all right?” asked Edd.

“I’m fine. Just a little dizzy, that’s all.”

“The red woman said the travelling would be hard on you, too.”

“Where is Melisandre?”

“You’ll might see her downstairs with Lord Snow,” Edd said. “But I make no promises. He doesn’t really talk to anyone nowadays, unless he has to. He’s got too much on his mind.”

Sam stood up straight. “Then we’d better not keep him waiting.”

Before they headed down, Edd had one of the stewards bring up a pile of his blacks. Sam dressed quickly, buttoning his black shirt up to his chin and tucking the legs of his breeches into his boots. He knew that after so long under the Eastern sun, the cold would be even more pronounced than normal.

He half-expected the black brothers to be lined up outside his door, waiting to see if he was really there, or if it was just a rumour, but clearly they had better work to do. Even at this early hour, he could see a few dozen men at the top of the Wall, tending to the fortifications like a colony of ants.

There was a blizzard outside. They had to wade through thigh-high snowdrifts to reach Jon’s quarters. Snow! Sam had not seen snow in years, except in the visions Qareth sometimes showed him—

Hold on. There was something on the edge of his memory, trying to be recalled. “A child’s rhyme, but also a prophecy,” Quaithe had said. “Sung a long time ago in the western lands.” Dragonglass. Dragonstone. Dragonsteel. Dragonhome. But what did that mean? He knew there was obsidian under the volcanic rocks of Dragonstone, but he had never heard of ‘Dragonhome’.

Hopefully the realisation would come to him later. For now, he followed closely behind Dolorous Edd as they entered the wormway beneath the Lord Commander’s Tower. Jon’s quarters had previously been at the back of the armoury, after the Lord Commander’s tower had burned down following a wight attack. Now the tower had been rebuilt and Lord Snow had moved back in, and he was far from alone. As they passed the doors of the Shieldhall, Sam glimpsed more shields on the walls than he could recall ever seeing before. “I saw Mormont,” he said, “and Glover, and Umber.”

“Aye,” Edd replied. “All of them are here. More’s the pity. It’s a nightmare being a steward nowadays.” He stopped outside a door. “Well, we’re here. Best of luck, Sam.”

Jon was standing by the window when Sam entered, but the shutters were closed, so it was impossible to say what he was looking at. “Ah, Sam.” Jon managed to look pleased, at least. Sam half-wanted to embrace him, but then he remembered that this was Lord Commander Snow, who could not afford to seem weak. “Come in,” said Jon. “You look half-frozen.”
“Frozen.” Sam smiled, a little queasily. “Yes, well… colder temperatures than I’m used to, Jon. My lord.”

“Indeed.” Jon smiled back, in a sad way. “So… how are you? I came by yesterday, but you probably don’t remember. You were—”

“—barely lucid. I keep expecting to blink and wake up back in Asshai.”

“It was some journey you made.”

“Some journey,” echoed Sam.

Jon ushered him to a seat by the hearth. “Mulled wine?”

“Please. I’ve forgotten how good it tastes.”

“Not so good when it’s all you’ve been drinking for weeks,” Jon said as he poured. “What did you have in Asshai? Honeyed milk and iced wine?”

Is he mocking me?

“You could have iced wine too, if you wanted,” Sam pointed out. “Just leave it under the Wall for a few minutes.”

“If I only I had someplace warm to drink it.” They sat. “Strange to think, I used to bring mulled wine for the Old Bear, only a couple of years ago. He liked his with nutmeg, but I prefer cloves. Mance said something about mulled wine… we can have whatever we like in it, but really it’s always the same thing.”

“Wise words,” said Sam, not really understanding. “Very… profound.”

“You think so?”

Sam snorted into his wine. That made Jon smile properly. “Oh, Sam. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you…” Sam said truthfully. “Did you get my letter from Volantis?”

“I did. When Clydas told me you were going to Asshai—”

Sam bowed his head. “You must have been angry.”

“I was. Sam, what possessed you to—?”

“It was a prophecy I heard in the Citadel. And before that, Marwyn the Mage had been saying something about glass candles burning in Asshai, and I thought—”

“Who’s Marwyn the Mage?”

“He’s an archmaester of the Citadel. And a bit mad. Well… more than a bit. But he seemed to know what he was thinking, and seeing as he was so sure about things, I thought… but anyway, that doesn’t matter. I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking straight… maybe because of the battle…”

“Lord Tyrell was at this battle, wasn’t he?”

“Ser Willas, yes. Is he Lord Willas now? I haven’t heard much news from the south.”

“Neither have we. With all this snow, we can’t even get messages to and from Winterfell. But we had news from White Harbor a month back, and they mentioned the situation in King’s Landing, and
Lord Tyrell’s army and some battles—"

“My father was going to march against them,” Sam remembered. “The Tyrells wanted to crown King Aegon, but he was staying with the Lannisters and King Tommen… they might all be dead now, though. It probably doesn’t matter.” Unless something happened to Gilly. She was at Horn Hill.

“Nothing does,” said Jon gloomily. “Here we are, the watchers on the Wall, alone and afraid.”

Sam looked out the window. “This blizzard will pass, you know.”

“Yes.” Outside, the twilight was darkening with every second. “But what will remain when it does?”

“Us,” said Sam. “The watchers on the Wall. We are the knights of the nightingale. We are sworn to defend the world at any cost.”

Wait. What had he said? We are the knights of the nightingale. Who had told him that? Quaithe.

“The knights of the nightingale followed Azor Ahai into battle long ago. Now, they, like Azor Ahai have been reborn, to follow a saviour.”

“We’re the knights of the nightingale,” he repeated. “That’s why I went to Asshai, Jon. To defeat the Others, we need the prince of the vulture, the lady of the phoenix, and the knights of the nightingale… the knights are the Night’s Watch. They must be. They followed the Last Hero into battle when he went to sing… and what do nightingales do?”

What do nightingales do, Samwell? Quaithe had asked.

Sing. They sing.

Jon sighed. “Unless they can summon fire with their bare hands, it doesn’t matter to me. They’ll be upon us soon, Sam. You know that. I know that. But… I almost want to believe you.”

“You have to believe me. And we have to believe in that prophecy, and in you. You’re all we’ve got, Jon.”

Jon’s reply sounded so very tired. “I can’t hold the Wall on my own, Sam. I need the support of the wildlings – when they choose their king, the Northern lords – when they learn to put aside their petty feuds, the southerns – when they take their heads out of the sand… and I need my brothers too, Sam. I need you.”

Sam gulped. “My lord, I’m not sure—”

“A simple duty. Castle Black needs a maester. You are the only one who can do that, Sam. You have to play your part.”

He had been expecting this, but it still caught him off-guard. “I’ve only got four links of my chain. Clydas—”

“That’s four more links than anyone else, including Clydas. And you are better suited to be our maester than I am to be our lord commander.” Jon gave a resigned, half-ironic smile. “I suppose I’m returning a favour, Sam. You made me lord commander. Now it is your turn to do your duty. I need you to serve on my councils and give me sound advice, as Maester Aemon would. You can do that. Can’t you?”

Sam swallowed. “Yes,” he said. “I’ll… I’ll do what I can.”
“You have to. None of us can choose anymore.”

There was a knock at the door. Sam knew it would be Lady Melisandre before Jon went to the door. “Lord Snow,” she greeted. “And Master Tarly. It is so good to see you back from Asshai. You and I will have much to talk about, I think.”

“Have a seat, my lady,” Jon said gloomily.

“I’d sooner stand.” She opened the shutters and gazed out. “Snow and snow and snow. I still seek the prince that was promised, and R’hllor shows me only the night and the cold and the snow.”

“Maybe you are seeking in the wrong place,” said Sam. And as he said that, something else came back to him. The prince of the vulture, Quaithe had said, he may be the same as the promised prince, or he may not. But there is a prince somewhere, born out of blood and death and carrion, a gravebirth, a boy born to a corpse.

“He is coming to the Wall,” the red woman said. “He will be here soon. I am sure of it. All we need to do is wait.”

“Yes,” Jon muttered. “But for how long?”

Melisandre closed the shutters with a dull thud. “For as long as it takes.”

“If it takes much longer, we will all be dead.”

“You may be right, Jon Snow.” Her eyes flashed warningly. “But at the very least, we will have held him up for the prince’s arrival.”

“Do you think the prince that was promised is the prince of the vulture?” Sam asked suddenly. “Kinvara said that Azor Ahai reborn would be found at the intersection of vulture and nightingale and phoenix. But she also said there was more to the prophecy—”

“There is more to any prophecy, Master Tarly. If we knew all the answers, they would cease to be prophecies.”

“And wouldn’t everything be so much easier?” said Jon, sourly. Clearly he was aggravated by all Melisandre’s talk of prophecies. “Your prince is not here, my lady. He may never be. We have no princes, no kings, no magic swords, no dragons. Only brave men and the swords in their hands. If you cannot help them in that fight, my lady, then you have no place here.”

“Could the prince be a woman?” asked Sam. “Only… Maester Aemon said the old Valyrian prophecies did not differentiate gender, and Daenerys Targaryen… well, she has royal blood, and she has dragons. They can kill the wights. And Archmaester Marwyn went after her, he must have thought something…”

“Benerro seems to think the same thing,” said Melisandre. “And the Targaryens are linked to that prophecy. It would make sense.”

“All I know is that it would be a fine thing to have dragons on the Wall,” Jon said. “But even if our messages got through, I would not be too hopeful.”

“There were dragons on the Wall once,” said Sam. “A little under two hundred and fifty years ago. King Jaehaerys the Old – though he wasn’t so old then, I suppose – and Queen Alysanne came up to the Wall. They rode Vermithor and Silverwing. When they came up they moved the Night’s Watch from the Nightfort to Deep Lake. Some say there are still ancient treasures buried there, in secret
places: garnets and emeralds as big as your fist, bits of ornate mail and plate, even dragon eggs—"

“None of which will help us, Sam. Unless you mean to exhume them from their tombs—”

“The Targaryens were burned, my lord. They thought the fire would awaken their Valyrian blood, and—”

“Be quiet,” Jon snapped. “Unless it will help us defeat the Others, I don’t care. You can read into prophecies as much as you want, Sam. I’ve seen what’s out there. A promised prince and a mythical sword won’t stop them.”

“Mythical?” Sam sounded aghast. “Jon, Lightbringer isn’t a myth! No more than the Others are. Do you think I went all the way to Asshai for nothing? Good men and women died so I could get here and tell you this.” Sarella, Kinvara, Quaithe, and many more. “There is a prophecy, and it’s the only way we’re going to win!”

Jon ignored her. “I have seen the Others. I know they are coming. As for Lightbringer… Sam, you never should have gone to Asshai. You never should have led a foolish chase for some words you heard in a dream.”

“What else is there to do with dreams?” Melisandre asked. She was in front of the hearth now, staring into the fire. The rubies on her fingers sparkled. “Every prophecy is a story, Lord Snow. A possible future, a certain path.” She turned back to him. “So tell me: why in so many of them do I see you?”

“Me?” Sam could have sworn that Jon Snow shivered, and then, suddenly, he shivered himself. Him. Jon Snow. If the knights of the nightingale follow the Last Hero, and the Night’s Watch are the knights reincarnated, then what is Jon’s role in all of this?

Thud, thud, thud. Sam jumped. Someone was banging on the door. His mouth was dry. What just happened?

“Come in,” Jon called.

The wildling princess Val entered first. Behind her came a young woman with long red hair and a wolfpelt around her shoulders. “Oh,” said the redhead. “If you want us later, my lord, we can come back—”

“There is no need, Lady Alys,” Jon replied. “Lady Melisandre was just leaving.”

Instead, Melisandre drifted towards Jon. “You will need me again tonight, I think, Lord Snow.” Then she turned her gaze to Sam. “As will you, Master Samwell Tarly. I daresay you know where to find me.” She left without another word.

When she was gone, Val turned to Sam. “Master Tarly,” she greeted. “You look well. I have to ask—”

“We named him Aemon Steelsong,” Sam said. “In memory of old Maester Aemon. He died as we were sailing from Braavos. He was a good, wise man.”

Val nodded. “Mance would want that for his son, I think. Aemon is a good name. A wise name, yes. Though I hope he’ll be a warrior, too, in the way Mance was.”

“Have you named Gilly’s boy?” asked Sam. He had almost forgotten about the boy.
“Not yet,” said Val. “We’ve still been calling him ‘monster’, but his second nameday’s fast approaching and that won’t do. But we haven’t got a name yet; we thought his mother should get to name him.”

“I wrote to Horn Hill,” Jon said. “But so far there’s been no reply. Gilly’s fine, though. It’s probably just that the ravens got lost in the snow.”

Sam nodded sagely. “Aye. Probably. … I should write to her. She thinks I’m at the other end of the world. Though… I suppose I am at the other end of the world, if the roads are impassable. Hundreds and hundreds of leagues from her.” He looked up at Jon and the others. “I think I should go to Maester Aemon’s tower, my lord. See if I can find Clydas, and get the proper procedures set up.”

“It’s your tower now, Sam,” said Jon with a faint smile. “Go on, if you must.”

The maester’s tower was across the yard. Sam used the wormways that snaked their way beneath the castle. In some places, outside the main thoroughfares, the wormways were as dark as the catacombs under Asshai. The Grey King is probably close to the tunnels now, thought Sam. Nearing the centre of the city. Asshai and the Five Forts cannot hold him off forever.

Just as the Wall cannot hold the Others back indefinitely.

Inside the tower, he found Clydas already at work, mixing a paste of leaves and rough-skinned black berries. Sam had thought it might be difficult to get the old man to relinquish his responsibilities as Castle Black’s makeshift maester, but Clydas was only too willing. “I am old, Maester Samwell. And a day will soon come when I am as blind as Aemon.”

Sam spent the rest of the morning making more salves and shelving jars of leeches, maggots, beetles, herbs, pennyroyal, poppy milk, and so forth. He tended to a couple of wildling boys who had taken head blows sparring in the yard, and made a potion to soothe old Lord Cerwyn’s sore throat. And then, quite suddenly, it was dark.

Sam checked the sundial clock. “Early,” he muttered, discontent. At this time in Asshai, it would have been high noon. But winter is coming.

He was even more discontented when he heard a knocking at his door and it opened to reveal Melisandre. “Master Samwell,” she said, and crossed the threshold uninvited. “It is good that we have this time to speak alone.”

“Is there something you need from the stores, my lady?” My stores. How times have changed.

Melisandre cleared a corner of the table and squatted there. “Your memories are going to start coming back soon, Samwell. You have already remembered the prophecy about the nightingale and the vulture. But what of the phoenix?”

“The lady of the phoenix,” Sam said.

“Fated to die in flame and be reborn in ash. I have my theory, and I imagine you have yours.”

“Daenerys Targaryen,” he said at once. “But… wait… how can she both the prince of the vulture and the lady of the phoenix?” He was sure he had talked to Kinvara about this, but the memory was not quite there.

“And earlier,” said Melisandre. “You mentioned something about King Jaehaerys and Queen Alysanne. That they might have left buried treasure at the Wall, for one reason or another.”
“They knew,” Sam breathed. “The Targaryens knew, and they have always known… Maester Aemon, he didn’t just come to the Wall because he was told to do so, did he? And before him, Bloodraven… Brynden Rivers, he was here too… they had dragon dreams, didn’t they?” And then he knew that they did, because he remembered the last thing Quaithe had said to him.

“Who are you?” he asked her, as the storm raged beyond the archway, as their last minutes gradually whispered away.

“Now I am Quaithe,” she replied, “cursed for my practise of the shadow arts. But in the days before, I was cursed for a different reason. For my birth, and because of the sea I was born on, and because of a star in my eye.”

A star in her eye.
A sea star.

Bloodraven and Quaithe.

Brynden and Shiera.

West and east.

“They’ve been planning this for a very long time,” said Sam. “And you’ve suspected as much. The Targaryens haven’t been entirely idle… they’ve always been at the Wall, guarding something, waiting for the Long Night. They’ve hidden something away.”

“But Maester Aemon left the castle to go to Oldtown,” said Melisandre. “So what did he do with the thing he wanted to hide?”

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, if you weren't (understandably) a bit pissed off by this chapter, I'd like to shamelessly promote Le Blog, where I have finished a review of S07E01, "Dragonstone".

https://arbitrarianblog.wordpress.com/2017/07/17/review-game-of-thrones-season-7-episode-1-dragonstone/

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Oh, God, where to begin?

So basically, I did what D&D did with Braavos in Season 6, only 10 times worse.

Apologies for any disappointment if you wanted to actually see Asshai. Basically, I got lazy with this chapter - though to be fair to myself, I'd been planning the (presumably) long-awaited Asshai chapter for 2 months and I've never gotten anywhere with it.

In retrospect, I never should have sent Sam to Asshai. Volantis would have been much more reasonable, and he could have met Quaithe there, and the storyline would have been so much better for it. Frankly, Asshai sounded cool to begin, but by the time I got to Samwell III, I just wanted his voyage to end. Unfortunately, he was already in Qarth
by that point.

I'd always intended to send Sam back to Castle Black via some sort of Floo-powder mechanism. If I was making a proper argument, I'd say 'you weren't supposed to see Asshai because it's supposed to be mysterious, duh'. Instead, I'll just admit that I couldn't be bothered to write in new characters with borderline-unpronounceable names like Qareth (who is mentioned in this chapter, actually), and Ypsilon, and the storylines were far too complex, and less interesting than Westeros. Basically, Sam would have to see Sarella die, get on a boat, sail to Asshai, learn about Asshai's impending doom, go through several dream sequences, and then depart to Castle Black. The content of this chapter would end up shoehorned into a later chapter, somehow. It would be really long, really boring, and really shit.

I've got a few scenes in Asshai that I might release as bonus material when I'm done, but honestly, I don't really want to.

On the bright side, I don't have to write Essos ever again. Ever again. Thank f**k this is over with and Sam is actually back where he should be.

Also, I'd been planning that Tolkien reference for ages, and I'm glad I got to finally use it.

Oh, and Sarella, Kinvara and Quaithe are all dead - or about to die. Sorry about that.

Partly in apology for this shitfest, you'll get another chapter tomorrow.

Feel free to figuratively disembowel me in the comments.
Cold Blood

Chapter Summary

“It will not be long before men start throwing themselves from the Wall out of fear.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter directly follows Samwell IV, “The City In The Fireplace”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JON

Come nightfall, mist was rising over the haunted forest. The wind was blowing wild from the north.
“Do you see anything, my lord?” Othell Yarwyck asked.

Jon moved the far-eye about. “No,” he said. “Just trees.” But he did not think it would be ‘just trees’ for much longer. “There’s mist too, though. The Others move in mist.” He turned to Iron Emmett. “I want you to double the guard on the Wall tonight. If there is to be an attack, it will come very soon.”

Then to Othell Yarwyck. “First Builder, you and your men have done well.” Yarwyck deserved credit where credit was due. There were hoardings and murder holes along the parapet of the Wall, so the black brothers could lean out and fire directly downwards onto their climbing enemies. The builders had put up half a dozen more scorpions and catapults, and there were two huge trebuchets that could launch their flaming payloads all the way into the haunted forest, allowing them to quickly spot an approaching enemy. “Even so,” Jon went on. “There is still much to do. The more defenses we have, the better.” They were trying to create new winching mechanisms for the scythe, so it could be drawn up and used again more quickly. “And the same for these warming sheds.” The warming sheds were wooden buildings atop the Wall about the size of a small hall, where men could sleep during a battle without having to descend to Castle Black below. They had cookpots, small fires, and sleeping furs to make them more comfortable.

“More warming sheds,” Yarwyck confirmed. “As you command, my lord.” With the help of many of the wildlings, the builders had been making swifter progress than ever before. More than that, Yarwyck was gradually accepting the presence of the free folk at the Wall.

“Yes,” said Jon. “And what about the second lift?”

“It is unlikely to be completed soon, my lord,” admitted Yarwyck. “But we have the new stair finished, and we’re nearly done on the wall and the two new towers.” The wall had been Greatjon
Umber’s idea; it protected Castle Black from the south, west and east. That meant they wouldn’t be defenceless if the wights got south of the Wall at one of the other castles.

“Keep up the good work, First Builder.” Jon meant it truly; he was pleased with Yarwyck. *It was a good move to keep him on.* He turned his attention back to Iron Emmett and Pyp, representing the rangers. “What are our numbers like?” he asked.

“Not enough,” said Pyp gloomily.

“Pyp has the right of it, my lord,” agreed Emmett. “Though I suppose you’ll be wanting more exact numbers. Well, we have four hundred ninety-six proper black brothers here at Castle Black, and then there’s all the boys and and girls who don’t count in the that number, and then there’s the wildlings and the Northmen, but we don’t know if their women are fighting, or how many of them there are —”

“In short, my lord,” Pyp said. “We have no bloody clue.”

To be fair, their numbers did not matter. Jon would not be forging any grand strategic moves. There were to be no envelopments or pincer movements or flanking attacks. *The only rule is kill or be killed.* Jon told them as much, and then it was time for him to go. Iron Emmett stayed topside while Pyp rode the cage down with him.

Their descent gave Jon a proper look at Castle Black. Despite their best attempts to keep the courtyard clear of snow, the blizzard had been unrelenting, and the flakes did not stop falling when the brothers slept. Castle Black’s yard was a inhospitable white tundra, and its buildings and towers were turning the same colour.

Supposedly the signal beacon at Mole’s Town was still burning, but Jon would never have known it in this whiteout. He could barely see beyond the bars of the cage, clogged as they were with snow and ice. “And it will only get worse,” he murmured.

“What’s that, m’lord?” Pyp said.

“The weather’s only going to get worse.”

“Everything tends to get worse before it gets better, m’lord. Except Three-Finger Hobb’s food. Mostly because Hobb isn’t cooking it anymore.” Alys Karstark’s women had taken over the kitchens, forcing Hobb out. They had also taken many of the stewards’ responsibilities; changing bedsheets, making new blankets, rugs and tapestries, and otherwise fetching and carrying. That had been another good move on Jon’s part… but it would not do anything to stop the Others.

“Lord Snow,” Pyp said, “Jon. I can call you Jon, can’t I?”

“I’m still the same person, Pyp.”

“I was just thinking… this is exactly like that time we rode the cage together, back when Mance attacked the Wall. True, the circumstances are a bit different, but like you said… we’re the same people, aren’t we? And we still have…”

“What?”

Pyp smiled ruefully. “Well, you know. Friendship, and all. Grenn’s gone, but there’s still me and Edd, and Emmett, and now Sam as well, and… we’ve even befriended some wildlings, actually.” He gave a toothy grin. “What I mean, Jon, is that the Others don’t have that. They don’t have friends. That’s… that’s what will keep us strong, just as much as the Wall and its defences.”
The cage clanked to a halt. “That’s a nice thought,” said Jon, stepping out onto the landing. And I wish it were true. For a moment, he thought it might be. Spending a night with my men might do us all some good.

But not tonight. He had duties to finish.

“You have a good night, Pyp,” he said, starting off. “Get some food down you. Get some good ale down you.”

As Jon walked past the Shieldhall, he could hear wildling music booming through the windows. In the snow outside the hall, a dozen boys and guardsmen were having a snowball fight, seemingly ignorant of the foe beyond the Wall. Perhaps Pyp’s words did have some merit.

Dolorous Edd was waiting inside his solar with a very long inventory list. Jon had Dryn mull some wine while Edd explained the state of their stores. “We’re low on carrots, m’lord. Shame, that. I like a nice crunchy bit of carrot. But we’ve got enough yellow turnips and parsnips to get us through the year, and radishes too, if things get really dire.”

“What about meat?” Clydas had both explained the need for good red meat to him.

“Lord Karstark’s been useful for that. Though I hope you’re fond of salt mutton, m’lord, because there’s a hell of a lot of it. Some salt beef too, salt hams, salt pork, even salt venison. Salt everything. And the wildlings have got a good number of dogs. Yum. Who doesn’t love salt dog. If you ever get tired of salt, we’ve got smoked hams and sausages. We’re good for pickling too; pickled onions – tons of those – and pickled cucumbers, pickled herring, pickled cabbage, of course. There’s peas and peanuts and walnuts and figs, and there’s a larder with a hundred wheels of yellow cheese, each as big as Sam Tarly.”

“That doesn’t sound as dire as you made it out to be. You said three moons.”

“And I meant it. We’re feeding thousands now, Lord Snow. Aye, the Karstarks and the Umbers helped us with the meat rations, but even like this… six moons, at best, before we’re down to salt, sawdust and turnips.”

“Well,” said Jon. “I’ve sent ravens to Lord Manderly appealing for help, and to the Lannisters and the Tyrells, and Bran has done the same. King Tommen promised me food and supplies, but I’ve had nothing from him since. I should have expected that of the Lannisters… but it’s more than anyone else has done. Sam’s sending a message to Gilly, to see if she can help get the Tyrells on our side.” He was not hopeful. Gilly might be brave, but she was one lowborn wildling girl, against the lord of Highgarden.

“Well,” said Dolorous Edd. “It looks grim, and that’s coming from me. We’re going to have to cut the rations, aren’t we?”

Jon nodded.

“They won’t like that.”

“And we need stricter penalties to deal with thieves, like Othell Yarwyck said.” He sighed. “Take their hands.”

Just then there was a knock at his door and Alys Karstark and Val entered, with Sam shuffling in behind them. “How are things in the Shieldhall?” Jon asked Val, hoping futilely for good news.

“No better than they were yesterday,” said Val. “Tormund has gained…” She counted the tally. “…
three votes.”

“Three votes in one day,” Jon said humourlessly. “At this rate, we might have a leader by the time the Others damn us all to hell.”

Val was slightly less skeptical. “It’s a three-way race between Tormund, Alfyn and Morna now. The others are… falling behind.”

“If we wanted to hasten things, we could start… cutting some of the others loose, as it were,” suggested Samwell Tarly. “Those with the lowest votes would be cut out. That’s how they do elections in Tyrosh.”

“I wish I was in Tyrosh,” said Edd.

Jon shook his head. “That would be interfering.”

“Not if the person who came up with the idea was of the free folk.” Sam glanced at Val.

She said, “They won’t listen to me—”

“But you have Tormund’s ear,” said Alys Karstark, “and Morna listens to you. Between them they have nearly half the votes. And there will be others – Alfyn Crowkiller may be swayed to support this idea if it means getting rid of some of the lower competitors. Including my husband; Sigorn is fast becoming insufferable as a result of this vote. I should be king this, I should be king that.”

“It’s a compromise,” said Val. “The free folk do not like compromise, or understand it.”

“If you convince them it is in their interest, they may go along with it willingly,” Sam said. “It worked on Ser Denys Mallister and Cotter Pyke. They would both have done anything to stop the other from getting elected. In the end, their indecision would have led to Janos Slynt being named Lord Commander.”

“Aye,” said Edd, “and then we’d be even more doomed than we are already. But you’re forgetting one thing, Slayer. The kettle.”

“What about it?”

“Mormont’s raven was in the kettle. They only started voting properly when it helpfully flew out and started saying “Snow, snow, snow.” He frowned. “Seven knows what we’d have done if it said “Edd, Edd, Edd.””

That must have been some sort of spell, for there was a sudden flapping and knocking sound at the window shutters. When Jon opened them, the raven burst through in a whirlwind of snow and black feathers, and flapped to the plinth above Jon’s door, where it perched with mien of lord or lady.

Quoth the raven: “Dead, dead, dead.”

“Well, that’s bleak,” said Dolorous Edd.

“Dead, dead, dead.” It started quorking and flying in circles.

“Prophetic, almost.”

Jon scowled. “No more prophecies, please.”

“Dead, dead, dead.” The door opened. Clydas came in. He ducked to avoid the feral-sounding bird, covering his liver-spotted forehead with one hand. “Letters for you, Lord Commander!” He had to
shout to be heard over the raven screaming, “Dead, dead, dead!” Once the papers were in Jon’s hand, Clydas fled down the stairs. Meanwhile Alys and Sam were trying to shut the bird up, flapping their hands frantically. Val found a poker from the fire. Dolorous Edd was muttering under his breath. The bird was screaming, “Dead! Dead! Dead!”

Jon tore the first letter open, just the tiniest fraction. The raven suddenly stopped, perched in a high corner of the room, gave him a mildly amused look, then launched back into the night.

“As I was saying,” said Dolorous Edd. “If we can get the bird to play one of its tricks, we might be able to get it to support Tormund or Morna, and no one would know.” He paused and chewed his lip. “Now we just need someone who knows how to train birds.”

“You mentioned the kettle too,” Sam added, “maybe we could get the wildlings to vote with tokens. And then, if things were really close, we could… er… well…”

“So much for honesty and integrity,” Val muttered.

“Be quiet, all of you.” Jon laid the letter down flat on his desk and began to read aloud:

Lord Snow,

At Eastwatch. They are coming up on our seaward side, every morning and night. Swimming through the shallows. Dead things in the water, wights and Others both. Nearly half of our ships sunk. Have sent for food and men from Long Barrow and Greenguard. No luck yet. May be in a similar situation there. Men threatening to mutiny, wanting to make for the south. Cannot hold on much longer.

Cotter Pyke had signed roughly below.

When Jon finished, there was a long silence. “This is not good,” Alys Karstark said eventually. “Not good in the slightest.”

“You can say that again,” Edd said.

“Eastwatch may have already fallen, depending on when this raven was sent,” replied Jon. “If so... it may not be the only castle to have fallen. It has been a while since I last received any news from Ser Denys Mallister.” Or from Ramsay Bolton. Jon had asked Ramsay to send him regular letters, as a way of keeping him in check. The lack of news from the Nightfort was concerning, but for different reasons.

“Sam,” he said, “can we still send ravens along the length of the Wall?”

“We can try,” said Sam.

“Then we must try.” But surely the Shadow Tower must have tried to reach us. And their ravens never arrived. Which could mean Ramsay is not telling us something...

...or we are on our own.

Jon swallowed. “I need you to write back to Cotter Pyke, then. And to Ser Denys, and to as many of
the castles as you possibly can. Edd, we need a council of the Northmen tomorrow. The rest of you, get some rest. We are in for long nights ahead.”

Val lingered by the door. “If your man Pyke speaks truly, Lord Snow, and the dead are coming across at Eastwatch, then it is no longer viable to hold Castle Black. We may end up trapped between the army of the dead and the Wall we built to defend ourselves from them.”

“The Others cannot cross the Wall. There are old magics—”

“No. They cannot cross. But the wights can. And sooner or later, they will try, mark my words. A day will come when the dead flood us in their hundreds and thousands. And what happens when the dead start coming back on our side of the Wall, Lord Snow? Alys has been teaching me my letters, Lord Snow. And I know now that you Northmen keep thousands of your kin buried beneath the earth. If just one of the Others get through…”

“They cannot cross the Wall,” Jon repeated firmly.

“Not too long ago, I thought they could not be real. And so did you. White walkers. Grumpkins and snarks.” She shook her head. “We never found Joramun’s horn. I imagine Tormund told you that. If he has it… if the Night King has it, somehow… one blast of that horn, and he could bring this whole thing crumbling down.”

“Aye. If he has it, we are doomed. If he has it, the world is over.” There was no other way to put it. “But he does not have it. If he did, he would have blown it by now.”

“Or he is playing some game with us.”

“What game?”

Val shifted towards the hearth. “The game of fear,” she said. “It is a waiting game. We sit here, growing colder and more afraid by the day. We are afraid of him, Lord Snow. Including you. Don’t try and deny it.”

“I fear him,” Jon said. “After what I saw at Craster’s Keep, how could we not?”

“I’ve been thinking,” she went on. “Why didn’t he chase us, after Craster’s Keep? We were broken and disparate. He could have hunted us all down in the dark… but he let us live. He wanted us to run. He wanted us to fear him, and all his people. And as the mists drift in, and the days grow colder still, we’ll start going to him willingly. Mark my words, Lord Snow. It will not be long before men start throwing themselves from the Wall out of fear.”

She was right. We can have mountains of dragonglass and thousands of men to wield it, but if those men are too afraid to fight, we might as well throw them from the top of the Wall. But how did you fight the sort of deep, paralysing fear she spoke of? With every passing day, it will get worse and worse.

“Well,” he said. “We’ll have to cross that bridge when the time comes.”

When she left, he closed the shutters, and headed to his bed in the corner of his chambers. He was not cold – Alys Karstark’s women had knitted him a new set of blankets from thick black wool – but he had so much on his mind that sleep was near impossible. Yet he somehow managed to drift off into a half-waking delirium, too tired to move, too awake to properly sleep. His eyes itched. Just a little more… just a little more…

A horn blew, so loud it was like a knife splitting the darkness into neat halves. Jon was up in an
instant, stumbling through his solar, his fingers locked around Longclaw’s hilt. When it did not sound again, he calmed… and then grew confused. *One blast means rangers returning… but there are no rangers beyond the Wall, so where are they returning from?*

He threw his cloak over his shoulder and did up the clasp. Then he stepped out onto the walkway. Torches were lighting in the yard, though Jon could barely see anything in the snow. He heard raised voices, though, and somewhere in the blizzard Ghost appeared at his side. Together they approached.

“—need to see Lord Snow, not his lapdogs.”

“I am here!” Jon called out. The snowflakes stung his eyes as he pushed through. “What is it you need to say?” He broke off when he saw who it was. Pink banners, and flayed men on their shields. *The Bastard of the Dreadfort.*

“Lord Ramsay,” said Jon. “I told you to stay at the Nightfort.”

The Bastard curled his lip. “I know. Perhaps we should talk inside…”

“Whatever you want to say to him, you can say in front of all of us.” Tormund Giantsbane appeared to Jon’s left. Presumably he and the wildlings had still been in the Shieldhall when the warhorn blew.

“You will not like what I have to say,” Ramsay warned.

“Aye,” said Jon. “But we will all here it.” He pointed towards the Shieldhall. “Come, my lord. Edd, take Lord Ramsay’s men to their quarters.” He noted that Ramsay had only a small escort.

*Something has happened.* He dreaded the worst.

Jon went into the Shieldhall expecting to be met by a wall of screams and cheers. Instead he found the place disconcertingly quiet; very few of the free folk had stayed up this late, and those that had were quite subdued. It was quite easy for them to assemble the various chieftains and Northern lords at a table. Stewards brought in flagons of wine, and hot loaves with butter. Jon grimaced to see Ramsay partake in the taking of bread and salt. *Would the others judge me if I broke guest right, as Walder Frey and his father did?* But he put that grudge aside. “So, Lord Ramsay,” he said, folding his arms. “Tell me your urgent problem.”

“Wights,” said Ramsay.


“All the way from the Nightfort up to the Shadow Tower and Westwatch-by-the-Bridge.” No one spoke. “Thousands of them, swarming up over our defenses. When Ser Denys Mallister sent his message—”

“What message?”

Ramsay blinked. “You did not… ah. I suppose your raven must have gotten lost in the snow.”

“That hardly sounds believable,” said Alys Karstark, gritting her teeth. “You are saying the Shadow Tower was attacked, and only *you* heard her call?”

“Not only me,” Ramsay said. “I sent half my garrison to the Shadow Tower, but they have not returned, and Luton has not sent word back. Most like they are all dead. But even if they survive, it does not matter. It was a foolish move. I left the Nightfort ill-manned. I did not think they would come…”
“But they did,” Jon said, resignedly. “Did they cross the Wall?”

“Not yet. But when we left, they were climbing in their hundreds. And it is worse to the west of the Nightfort: there has been nothing from Stonedoor or Greyguard, and like you said, Denys Mallister has returned no ravens.”

“Mayhaps he did not receive them,” said Jon. “The snowfall has been thick.”

Ramsay cocked his head. “Mayhaps so. But we must be prepared for any eventuality…”

“Is there anything else?” There was nothing they could do about it tonight. And Jon was still tired; his bed was beckoning to him.

If the gods have any mercy at all, let me have a restful sleep. Just for one night. Somehow he doubted they would be getting much sleep in the coming weeks.

“Forgive me, Lord Snow,” said Ramsay. “But you seem rather unbothered by this news.”

“We will talk again on the morrow. But for now, there is nothing we can do except hope they do not come tonight.” He glanced around. “Lord Umber, Lord Karstark, we need more men up at the Wall. As I understand it, you have some to spare in the Last Hearth and Karhold.”

“You will have them, Lord Snow,” said Harrion Karstark. He followed his sister Alys’s lead in supporting Jon. The Greatjon was harder to convince. He grunted in a vaguely grudging fashion. Jon knew that was the best he would get. “I will write again to Bran,” he said, though he did not know if he would be able to get the raven away. “Lord Manderly has an army in White Harbor; my brother can command them to ride north. When they get here—”

“If they get here,” said Alfyn Crowkiller darkly.

He was right, Jon thought, later that night, after he had sent Ramsay and his men to their rooms in the newly renovated Lord Commander’s Tower. Fifty thousand wildlings, barely a quarter of them fighters. The broken armies of the North, of lords who hate me more than anything. Greatjon Umber, the Mormonts, and the Bastard of Bolton. And no more than six hundred brothers of the Night’s Watch. If the Shadow Tower and Eastwatch have fallen, we’re all that stands between the Seven Kingdoms and the Long Night.

Ramsay had brought two hundred men from the Nightfort, the vilest dregs of his father’s army. He also had an impressive number of hunting hounds that might be of help, but Ghost kept charging wildly at them. In the end, they had to confine both dogs and wolf to their kennels. “This is not ideal,” Jon said to Ramsay outside the Lord Commander’s Tower. “The other Northmen do not love you.”

“Oh, more than that. They hate me. As perhaps you should, too.” Ramsay’s blue eyes glittered without a shred of warmth. “But they will hate me less than the Others.”

“Aye,” said Jon. “Less than the Others. I suppose that will have to do.”

So they parted ways there: Robb Stark’s bastard brother and the son of the man who had betrayed Robb Stark. Jon went back up to his own solar, and found Melisandre of Asshai waiting for him at the hearth.

“Did you know about this?” Jon asked her.

“No. But I warned you that you would be standing alone against the Others, until Azor Ahai—”

“Azor Ahai is not here,” said Jon dismissively. “Unless you mean to tell me he is Ramsay Bolton.
No? Well, then. In that case, you are left with me."

"You have a part to play as well, Jon Snow." She warmed her hands over his fire. "But I do not yet know what. I only know that—"

"—that winter is coming." He sighed. "Forgive my crudeness, my lady, but any fool could tell me that. I hope you will come and see me again when you have something of value to discuss with me."

"Only a warning, for now. Winter is coming for all of us, Jon Snow, as you say. But it is definitely coming for you. I have seen that in my fires. Blood in the snow, blood and blue winter roses. But whose blood, hmm? Whose?"

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title, "Cold Blood" alludes to the coming invasion of the Others, but also to the mental state of a few people around Castle Black. Pyp makes a good point about it, though he's never entirely forthright. It's implied that for most of the Night's Watch, Jon is a cold and calculating Lord Commander without an ounce of sentimentality, which might not be the best trait to have.

Mel was being characteristically vague and spooky at the end here. It's really just a chapter bookend to emphasize Jon's dire situation. I wouldn't place too much stock in that scene...

One of my favourite moments in this chapter was Sam advocating voter fraud, which I found oddly hilarious.
“King Euron does not make empty boasts,” said the envoy. “I don’t know how he’ll do it, or which way he’ll come in, but he will.”

Bran leaned forwards in the chair. “Winterfell’s walls are a hundred feet high,” he said. “Our towers and gates are fully manned. The moat has frozen over. Our archers and swordsmen are ready, thousands of them. Euron will not enter by force. We have watches day and night. He will not enter by subterfuge either, as you did.”

Theon Greyjoy bowed his head. There was a steady drip-drip-drip as melting snow ran out of his hair and down his nose to spatter on the tiles. In Winterfell’s cavernous hall, the sound echoed and echoed. “Bran,” he said, clearing his throat. “Bran, I—”

“You mean Lord Stark,” said Donnor Locke, at Bran’s right. “Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North.”

“Aye,” said Theon. “Lord Stark, I… I beg you to surrender. This is not a battle you can win.”

It is not a battle I can afford to lose, though. Bran gripped the arms of the chair. They had hundreds of men, not thousands, but he could not tell Theon that. And the defenses were not as solid as he might have liked; the damage of the War of the Five Kings had never been entirely erased. “I will not surrender,” said Bran. “There must be a Stark in Winterfell, and there always will be—”

Theon slumped even further. “If you surrender, my lord… Euron may be merciful to you, as he was to me. I… I am his rival to the Seastone Chair, and he would be better served by having me killed—”

“Forgive me if I don’t weep,” muttered Hal Mollen.

“—but my uncle has never hurt me, or maimed me, or… forced me… to do anything. I am here of my own free will, to warn you.” His teeth chattered, though four hearths were burning in the Great Hall. “If you defy him, I will not be able to… to protect you.”

“Protect him?” Hal scoffed. “You, who took our lord captive and burned Winterfell to the ground?”

The Crow Flies

Chapter Summary

“King Euron does not make empty boasts. I don’t know how he’ll do it, or which way he’ll come in, but he will.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“You should go too, Hal,” said Theon. His eyes were empty. “My uncle does not want to kill good, loyal men.”

Hal gave Theon a long, disgusted look. It was not surprising; even in his finery – a thick cloak lined with sable, sheepskin jerkin, and a golden medallion around his neck – the Greyjoy prince looked a pitiful thing. The captain of guards shook his head. “I would spit on you, Greyjoy, but you are not worth the time it would take the servants to clean it up.”

Theon shuffled back a pace. “I hoped you might listen, Br— my lord. I hoped you might remember—”

“All I remember is when you took me captive,” said Bran, “and killed my garrison at Winterfell. For years, I wanted to hurt you back… but then at Castle Black, I saw what a sad and pitiful thing you were, and took pity on you. But I will never give you anything more than that, Theon. You’re the reason Robb is dead.” It wasn’t all true, but most of it was. “You should leave.”

Was Theon stunned that Bran had rejected his advice, or merely surprised by his coldness? You listened to me when I asked for mercy at the Wall, his eyes seemed to say, even as Hal’s men half-dragged him out. So why won’t you listen to me here?

Bran said nothing. He settled back in the lord’s seat as the guards escorted Theon out. They would take the turncloak through the inner gate and outer gate both, and cast him out into the blizzard, to find his own way back to Euron Greyjoy’s host a mile from the walls.

“Do not take note of anything he said, my lord,” Hal Mollen told Bran. “He is probably playing a part in his uncle’s game. There is no shortage of treachery in Greyjoy blood.”

“Yes,” said Bran, though he thought Theon spoke truly. He seemed truly terrified. Even if this is part of Euron’s plan, Theon is not a willing participant in it. Theon had already submitted to weakness and coercion, many times over… and Bran had heard stories of what the Crow’s Eye could do to a man.

He had seen it for himself, too. On the day of Euron’s arrival, three men had been sent forth, dressed in the livery of Glover men – prisoners from the assault on Deepwood Motte. The men approached the walls alone, and then stopped, a couple of hundred yards from the gates. And there they stood. And stood. And stood. The defenders of Winterfell could see no chains or ropes binding them. They had no guards, and no longbows or crossbows being aimed at them, no hidden armies lying in wait for the defenders to open the gate. The men on the walls called down to them, shouting for them to come inside, but the trio did not move. Instead they waited, and waited, all day and all night. When morning came, they had fallen in the place where they once stood, frozen to death. Hal Mollen went out to bring their corpses inside. “Nothing was stopping them from coming in,” he told Bran.

Maester Wolkan said, “It was not only the cold that killed them. They died of fear.”

The first two weeks went by without word from Euron Greyjoy. On a clearer day, you could see the fringes of his army from the maester’s turret, mostly hidden in the forest. Bran wondered how many soldiers he had, but Hal told him it did not matter. “A thousand men can hold these walls against a hundred times that number,” he claimed.

That may not be enough. Nearly three hundred of Winterfell’s soldiers had departed for White Harbor with Barbrey Dustin. Robett Glover had led them; Bran was not so certain about having him as an advisor after his conniving in the library with Lady Dustin. He’d given Glover the task of meeting Lord Wyman Manderly’s army, stationed at the mouth of the White Knife.

And it was not just the Dustin entourage that departed for White Harbor. Bran sent Beth Cassel with
them, and Farrow the cook, and many of the castlefolk and townsfolk. He almost had a change of
heart about Meera, too, but he knew she would only insist on staying here in Winterfell with him, in
the throes of the fiercest blizzard the north had seen in living memory, with an army at their gates.

Bran listened as his councillors gave their thoughts on Theon’s message. “It was meant to frighten
us, nothing more,” said Donnor Locke, who was in charge of the Northern army in Winterfell now
that Robett Glover was gone. “It was an empty threat in the hope that you would surrender, my lord.
You did the right thing by dismissing the turncloak without hesitation.”

He sounded so certain that it made Bran uneasy. If it was an empty threat, then why did he wait so
long to give us it?… why did he bother giving us it at all? But when he voiced his suspicions aloud,
Locke shook his head and smiled. “They must be getting desperate now. True, he raided the
Barrowlands, but what supplies he found there will not be enough to sustain his army forever…
especially if it is as big as the turncloak claimed…”

Hal was a little more cautious. “If they are getting desperate, their attack may not be far off.”

“The attack may be hours away, or months,” said Locke. “They have no siege engines, and their
ladders will not reach over our walls. If they get to the walls at all, that is.” In the days leading up to
Euron’s arrival, the entire castle garrison had been at work building deep trenches and pits filled with
cavalry stakes and caltrops. If the besiegers attacked, they would have a hard time reaching the gate
through the fire of archers and crossbowmen from the ramparts.

“It could be tonight,” Bran said.

Ser Donnor paced across the hall. “My lord, I very much doubt—”

“We shouldn’t take risks if we don’t have to. Maybe he’s lying, but…” He cleared his throat to speak
with his lord’s voice. “Double the guard tonight.”

Hal protested. “My lord, that would mean doubling how long the men spend in this blizzard… you
cannot expect everyone to stay up throughout.”

What would Father do? Bran thought, hesitating. Father would go up on the walls with his men, and
show them that if he could do it, then they could. But his legs would not let him do that; Maester
Wolkan warned that the cold could make his blood clot. “Tell the kitchens we need more soup and
hot wine, for the men on the walls,” he said instead. “They can alternate half-watches tonight. And
make sure Maester Wolkan is on call with everything he needs.” They were fortunate that Winterfell
had enough supplies to accommodate such things. “Oh, and start a big log fire in here after supper,
for when they’re resting, and bring down more furs and blankets and things.”

There was nothing else to be said. A lord’s normal duties dwindled in times of war, and the few that
remained were inconsequential. There was no point counting coppers and settling trade disputes
when there would be nothing left if they lost the siege. As for ravens, there were none. Robett
Glover had probably reached White Harbor by now, but even if Lord Manderly’s army was
marching north, they had no way of knowing. Even the old gods, and their thousands of eyes, were
powerless to help him in that. And the hope of southern assistance was lost, no matter what had been
promised.

As Hodor carried him across the castle courtyard, Bran became all the more aware of how lonely
they were. The castle was in permanent half-darkness, for the sun had set early. Torches flickered in
the hallways and arches, but guttered out underneath the blowing snow. The climbing ivy on the
broken tower turned to shards of green ice, and the iron doors of the great hall froze almost solid.
The sky was black.
In his tower, Maester Wolkan kept a far-eye that had once belonged to his predecessors. As a child, Bran had only disdain for Maester Luwin’s fascination with the stars. There were more exciting things to do, like horse-riding and swimming and fighting and climbing. But now he found a certain simple pleasure in stargazing. It wasn’t as exciting as those other things, but Bran wasn’t sure he wanted excitement any more.

Hodor set Bran down, and Maester Wolkan opened the window. Snowflakes blew across his cloak and into his face as he steadied the lens. “I fear you won’t be able to see much tonight, my lord,” said Wolkan. “There’s supposed to be a full moon, but the snow’s so thick you’ll have—”

“I can see it,” Bran replied. “Sort of. There’s all those clouds in the way, but you can still see it shining. It’s purple.”

Wolkan consulted his charts. “The Ice Dragon’s supposed to be visible tonight, too… you definitely won’t be able to see that, though. Not from here. Like I said, it’s not the best night for stargazing, my lord.”

Unfortunately he was right. Bran nodded. He took his eye away from the lens, but lingered a little while, letting the snowflakes blow across his face. It felt like he was running again, with the wind keening around him. He felt alive, as if he was flying, almost.

Then the maester shut the window and Bran was consigned to the mundane again. He told Wolkan about how he’d be needed tonight to support the double watch. “It won’t be easy, my lord,” warned the maester. “Last night we had a lad lose two fingers from the frostbite, and another nearly fainted from the cold. And of course, there was the matter of those three men…”

Bran nodded. The deaths of those three still worried him. They died of fear…

He tried to let Theon’s warning fade to the back of his mind. It was not easy, but eventually the thought of supper occupied him, so he told Hodor to carry him down to the Great Hall. The guardsmen moved out of the way as they came through, and cast worried looks in Hodor’s direction. They almost seemed afraid… he remembered what Hal Mollen had said: Hodor. That’s what they whisper, down in the crypts. And Melisandre had been afraid, too…

Stop worrying, Bran told himself. Stop worrying, talk to Meera, and eat your supper.

Supper was venison and cranberries, with pease, butter beans and some purplish carrots. Further down the trestle tables the men had bowls of pease pottage, bacon, and thick slices of crusty bread. If there was one thing Winterfell boasted, it was a well-kept larder. Euron Greyjoy would not starve them out before the Manderlys arrived.

If the Manderlys arrived.

“How was the library?” he asked Meera, half in jest.

“Eventful as always.” She smiled over her trencher. “Though I didn’t find anything that useful. I heard you received Theon earlier?”

“Yes. He didn’t really have anything to say. Well… he gave us a message from Euron. He says he’ll attack at midnight—”

“Midnight? Tonight?”

“Yes. Why—?”
“Forgive me, Bran, but you don’t seem very worried about it.”

“I’m not,” he lied. “It’s just a bluff, I know that. Obviously.”

Meera shook her head. “You don’t believe that.”

No. Maybe not. They talked some more, about inconsequential things, but with so little do in Winterfell, there was nothing to really talk about. Bran decided that it would be best for them to go up to bed and get a good night’s sleep, so that they could rise with the dawn.

Many of the castlefolk had taken to sleeping in the great hall, where the hearths were warmest and the walls were hottest. You were less cold if you slept in the company of others. But Bran was the lord of Winterfell, and he could not be seen doing the same, so he had to retain his lonely rooms up in the Great Keep… though he had Meera there to join him some nights. He knew the men would whisper about the pair of them being together, but it was nice to have her there, so he wasn’t always lonely.

She dressed modestly for bed, in bland grey wool, but Bran still coloured when he saw her without her usual heavy furs. Likewise, he noticed her looking at him almost shyly as he undressed himself and threw on his nightshirt. “Is something wrong?” he asked her, levering himself into bed.

“No. Sorry. It’s nothing.” But the way she stared at him suggested otherwise. Neither of them were willing to discuss their phantom kiss. It had never happened, Bran tried to convince himself. He lay back among the pillows, Meera took the other side of the bed. There was a great gulf of space between them, but they did not even attempt to encroach upon it. Not yet. Sometimes, if it was especially cold, they would drift together, and he would put his arms around her shoulders. It made him feel strong, like less of a cripple.

Eventually Bran fell asleep. He drifted away, into a world beyond the walls of Winterfell. He was in Summer’s skin again. The direwolf had followed Euron’s army down from the Barrowlands, always at a distance. Tonight the wolf was feasting on a half-eviscerated deer when Bran joined his world. The meat was tough in his jaws, and the blood around the carcass was starting to freeze.

There was a sound – a breaking twig or something alike – and Summer glanced up. And there he saw it. The shape was not too close, but nearer than he would have liked. It had a familiar, shambling gait as it moved through the trees.

Then snow filled his vision, and he was entirely blind, wrapped up in a world of white… until he emerged into a godswood, somewhere far beyond his knowing. He was a boy once more, instead of a wolf, waiting alone in the dwindling snow flurries.

This place reminded him of Winterfell’s godswood a little, but it lacked castle walls, and as he stared around, Bran realised with a start how huge it was. There were miles and miles of weirwood trees, stretching in every direction he looked, with blood-red leaves and mouths that dripped with blood, drip-drip-drip in the snow, staining it red, red, red…

Then he was drifting away, back into the mist, and he was in a place he had visited before. This was Winterfell’s godswood, and the man kneeling before the weirwood was his father, with Ice on his knee. “Let him be safe,” Eddard Stark said, “and make it so that Robert never knows… nor my lady wife… I promised…”

Promise me. The voice reverberated in Bran’s head, and then Winterfell was swept away in a flood of mist and he caught glimpses of a tall black tower, a red sun, blue winter roses. And then he was tumbling through darkness; he was down in the castle crypts, and he could swear the statues were
following him. He could hear their stone heads turning to follow him, but he dared not look.

In the darkness, there was a boy. Bran vaguely recognised him. The boy ran, breathing heavily. *Something* was chasing him...

“Wake up,” a voice hissed at him. “Bran, wake up.”

He turned, trying to find where the voice came from. The crypts crumbled around him; there was blue sky above him, and then the tree branches were reaching down to him, stretching out... *fly, fly, fly,* they were trying to tell him. *Awake, awake—*

“Wake up, Bran!” Meera said, shaking him by the shoulders. “Wake up!”

“I’m awake,” Bran choked out, “I’m awake, I’m awake. What’s happening?”

A bell was ringing. Meera said something to him, and then she was forcing him into his clothes; shirt, jerkin, breeches, doublet, cloak. She hurriedly said something about it being midnight, about Euron’s army approaching the castle walls.

Bran gazed emptily through the windows as Hodor traipsed up the stairs to fetch him. The giant stableboy gathered Bran in his arms, thundered down the tower, and out onto the wallwalk above the East Gate. Over a hundred guardsmen crowded onto the ramparts, with Hal Mollen and Donnor Locke at the fore. They moved aside so Bran could take his position at the merlon.

When he saw what was gathering before them, all the hairs on his arms stood up. *Theon spoke truly,* he thought, with mounting dread. *Euron has come.*

The mist was rolling in, limiting visibility to just over a hundred metres. The houses of the winter town and the forest surrounding Winterfell had completely disappeared into thick blue darkness. Bran felt a tingling in his fingertips which meant only one thing. *Summer is out there somewhere, in all that darkness.* The direwolf was on the other side of the wall of mist. *Men,* he smelled. *Euron has his men back there.*

But, here, closer by, was the immediate threat. The Winterfell archers had their bows drawn, the bowstrings stiff in their freezing fingers. Their breath rose in sporadic intervals, disappearing into the fog above. *Fear,* he thought, tapping into Summer’s animal instinct. *They are afraid.*

But of what?

The ironborn below numbered about two hundred, but Winterfell’s defenders had the walls, and more men were rushing up the stairs to take their places in the gatehouse towers. “There’s nothing to worry about,” Bran said quietly. Yet he, like the rest of them, was afraid of something he did not quite understand. *This move makes no sense. They must know something we do not.*

“What is he playing at?” Hal Mollen asked, pointing over the rampart.

Bran had the same thought. Euron Greyjoy brought his army to their walls seemingly unprepared to fight, but this was even madder. For now the King of the Iron Isles himself was walking towards them, alone.

“Do you think he wants to parley?” Bran said,

“I don’t know, my lord,” replied Hal. “But I know that the wise thing to do would be to put an arrow in him before he gets to the walls.”
“Why? What’s he going to do? Climb them?” Bran tried to hide his apprehension underneath a laugh. He watched as Euron kept advancing. Finally, about twenty yards from the wall, the ironborn king stopped and drew his sword. All at once the hundred bows strained, each arrow trained on his shiny black scaled armour.

Bran was wondering if he wanted his challenge to be met when Euron dropped his sword in the snow and turned to look up at the walls. “Lord Stark,” he called out. His voice was loud and had a mocking, sing-song quality. “I see you have refused my offer.”

An answer was needed, and Bran had to give it. He cleared his throat and said, “We will not surrender.”

“A pity,” Euron said. “And a surprise. I thought you would want to save the lives of your people.”

“You will never take this castle,” Bran said.

“Oh, I will. And more than that, I will do it alone.” He turned back to face his army and whistled. Bran half-expected them to advance, but instead they turned, and retreated back into the fog. “My turncloak nephew took Winterfell with thirty men. I will break down your defenses unassisted.”

“My lord,” Donnor Locke whispered. “He has delivered himself unaided into our hands. If we are quick—”

“Speak up so I can hear you!” Euron called from beyond the walls. “Oh, yes, you can take me captive. It won’t save you.” He took a couple of steps closer. “Are you sure you want to play this game, Lord Brandon? Theon told me you were bold and brave, but not stupid. If you don’t surrender the castle here and now, I fear my opinion of you might change.”

“I will not surrender,” Bran replied. He said the words and he meant them. “This is my home. I will hold it.”

“Oh, indeed,” Euron said, as if it were funny. “Your home. Winterfell. The great stronghold of the North. Home to Lord Brandon Stark, and all his noble ancestors. His men fight with the strength of all their ancestors. Except… the strength of your ancestors belongs to me, not to you.” From the folds of his cloak, Euron Greyjoy drew forth a lonely horn. Bran had seen that horn before, in his dream of Euron in the barrow king’s grave, with the cracks newly repaired. And far away, he heard Summer shout a warning.

“The Horn doesn’t do everything yet,” Euron said. “I need you for that, Lord Brandon. Your blood. But it does some things.” He brought the horn to his lips and blew a long, bone-chilling blast. The noise felt like a knife across Bran’s face, bright and blue. He could feel blood trickling down from his scalp, as he opened his third eye into a new world: the flicker of a blue eye, staring at him, waking within him. And more blue eyes, hundreds and thousands, a whole army of blue-eyed demons, marching out of his dreams.

Bran gritted his teeth. A raw hiss emerged from his lips, snakelike, unstoppable. Meera turned to look at him with concern. Shaking, he gripped her wrist. His knuckles were white. “Bran,” she said, quietly.

The dead were waking. Their eyes opening for the first time in a hundred years. Their fingers clawing at the soil above them. Their bones and joints stiffening and loosening, playing the tune of the reaper. A scratching on stone. The flash of a blue rose, spotted with blood. Harp music, a-wailing, a-wailing, a-wailing—
Wights.

“The lichyard,” he said quietly. Then his voice turned desperate. “Meera, he has them, they’re in the walls, down below, in the lichyard, they’re in the crypts!” Bran grabbed Hodor’s shoulder, urging him to turn, so they could look out over the lichyard, behind them. He shivered.

One breath, two breaths, three.

All at once, grey hands burst through the snow, clawing at the sky, coming up. “There!” Bran shouted at his men, his throat turning hoarse, “there, fire on them, fire kills them!”

Either the wind tore his words away, or they simply ignored him. Hal and his men were busy firing over the other side. Bran knew at once that Euron had recalled his men to climb the outer wall. Only they’re not men. They’re wights too. Dear gods, he’s leading an army of wights.

Meera knelt beside him. “We have to go,” she said hurriedly. “Bran, we have to get out of here.” She and Hodor managed to lift him between them. “We can’t stay here.”

They ran across the gatehouse and climbed down the inner wall. “They’ll be coming up in the lichyard!” Meera shouted, pointing to their right. “So we’ll go the other way!” Without waiting for Bran’s approval, she started off and Hodor followed. The lights of Hal Mollen’s guardsmen faded behind them.

A mist was falling. Bran could hear screaming from the outer wall, though he could not say whose screams. Guardsmen appeared suddenly from the night and then disappeared past them into the fog. “Where are we going?” Bran shouted to Meera. “Euron has the castle surrounded.”

“They’re weakest on the western side,” she said, “if we can get some horses, and escape into the wolfswood through the Hunter’s Gate, we’ll lose them. And then… then we’ll run to Greywater Watch. To my father. Home.”

Bran shook his head. “I can’t. I’m lord of Winterfell. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.”

“Shut up, Bran!”

“Hodor,” said Hodor, pointing across the yard. Meera let Bran down and ran over; when she returned, she was carrying a sled. She and Hodor lowered Bran into it. A wight came screaming towards them, but Meera had her sword out in time, and stabbed the wight till it stumbled and fell from the wallwalk. They ran, and ran, and…

“Stop!” Meera shouted, pointing. “Look, at the Hunter’s Gate!”

Bran knew what it was without looking. The wights were streaming through the gate at the far end of the yard, trapping them, encircling them. Winterfell’s guardsmen were caught on all sides between the ghosts, and now wights were coming along the wallwalk towards them, ahead and behind.

“The crypts!” Bran shouted. “Meera, we have to get into the crypts.”

“Bran… Bran, they’re coming out of the crypts.”

“The castle’s surrounded. We’ve got nowhere else to go. The crypts… it’s a maze down there… at least that way, we stand a chance.”

It was their last hope, but it was all they had. They blundered to the right, quickly descending a stone stairwell. The wights were relentless in their pursuit, thundering down the wooden stairs… but at the
bottom, with the dead merely five seconds behind them, Hodor stopped running, passed Bran’s sled to Meera alone, and stood in their path. “Hodor,” he said, staring into Bran’s eyes, “Hodor.”

Bran did not understand why Hodor, usually so afraid, decided to halt then and there. He doubted he ever would. “Hodor,” he replied softly, reaching out to the stableboy… but then Meera dragged him back through the doorway, and Hodor was left there, holding the tower door as the wights smashed into it. “Hodor!” he shouted, “Hodor!” A final salute. And there he stood. Alone against the darkness. Without hope. Without witness. Without reward.

The whole thing was so sudden that it left him in shock. It was only after Hodor disappeared – forever – into the mist that the true reality struck Bran. Hodor, who had carried him so far, for leagues and leagues. Hodor, who knew only the one word, but made it a word of love and friendship and hope. Hodor, who he had never admitted his love for.

Hodor, holding the door for no real reason at all.

There were tears on his cheeks. “We have to go back,” he said, his teeth chattering. “We have to go back, Meera. We have to get Hodor. We have to save Hodor!”

She did not answer, even as he screamed and strained against the sled; she only kept pulling him onwards, into the godwood. The leaves brushed his face, and the ravens sang to him as they ran: *Bran, Bran, Bran*, they said, and *blood, blood, blood*. And *Hodor, Hodor, Hodor*.

There was an entrance to the crypts at the far end of the godwood, about two hundred feet away. But while Hodor’s sacrifice had given them some time, the wights were closing in, no question about it. They came sprinting in, screaming, bone knives in their grasp. Bran watched as they drew closer and closer, three hundred feet turning to two hundred, to one-hundred-fifty, to one hundred…

The tunnel entrance was still over a hundred feet away. That was when he knew.

“Meera,” he called back over the screaming wind, “Meera, I… I don’t think we’re going to make it. Not like this.”

She ignored him, and kept pulling. *Ninety feet*, Bran judged from the wights, *eighty*…

“Meera, you have to leave me!”

“No!” She turned back, and her face was stained with frozen tears. “Bran, it was all for—” The wind cut off the rest of her words.

“Meera Reed, I order you to leave me!”

She stumbled, falling in the snow in front of the heart tree. The wights were barely fifty feet away, and the tunnel entrance was at least eighty. “No!” she screamed back, picking up the sledge again. “I’ll… I won’t leave you, Bran. If we can just make it a little further…”

“I won’t let you die for me, Meera,” Bran said. “Which means…?” His voice trembled. “…which means I have to die for you.”

Because hadn’t he always known that this was where his life was heading? Hadn’t he always known that his life, whichever path it took, was always going to end here, in front of the heart tree? *Home*. There was a reason why the tree appeared so often in his dreams, why he dreamed of this place more than anywhere else, why he saw his father cleaning Ice in front of it and his aunt Lyanna splashing around it and Sansa and Arya in the springs…
There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.

Always.

There was only one thing to do. Bran pushed with his arms, and tumbled sideways off the sled. He saw Meera’s look of horror, but a moment later he was in her head, shouting, “Go, run, run!” as loud as he could, scaring her, terrifying her, forcing her to flee…

Then Brandon Stark reached out to the roots of the heart tree, opened his third eye, and became Winterfell.

All at once the trees came alive around him, waking from their thousand-year sleep, beating at the wights with long tendrils, knocking them away, wrapping them up in their branches. Evergreen leaves blew into the sky, and the heart tree hissed and wailed in a thousand different voices. The godswood was suddenly full of golden dust, the mothballs rising as if charged by electricity, and the world was a thousand years older and a thousand years younger at the same time.

It almost looked like—

“Summer,” he said quietly.

In the midst of the golden fire, the prince leant against his weirwood throne, arms outstretched, eyes glowing green and red and blue alternately, golden light streaming from his fingers and broken legs, limbs outstretched as though he were flying. Because he was.

He was every crow and every raven. He was every tree and every flower. “The things we do for love,” the golden man said, as crows circled above his head, witnessing his sin for all time. “Promise me, Ned,” said Lyanna Stark, crushing a blue rose in her bloody fingers, as a babe wept and wailed in her arms. Snow. Jon Snow. “I promise,” Lord Eddard replied.

“Ser Ilyn,” said King Joffrey, “bring me his head,” and Sansa screamed, and Ice came down, and the blood was Lord Eddard’s blood, and his father’s blood, and his son’s blood. “Jaime Lannister sends his regards,” said a man in a pink cloak, thrusting his longsword in. “Burn them all!” a man screamed, the taste of green ash on his tongue as a golden longsword plunged through the back. “Burn them all!”

A silver prince sat beneath a tree with a book and a harp in his hands. He turned to stare directly at Bran, purple eyes bright. “The dragon has three heads,” he said, and burst into smoke, to be reshaped by a silver-haired girl into the form of three serpentine beasts, black and white and green. “One of fire, one of ice, and one who will destroy them both.” The world splintered apart, filling with ghosts. “Who are you?” a voice asked. “No one,” his sister answered.

“He is the prince that was promised,” said Bloodraven. “And his is a song of ice and fire.” A man with a burning sword stepped into a kingdom of ice. The trees rustled.

He was Meera, fleeing through the crypts as the godswood behind her burst into golden light, with tears on her face, sprinting through the crypts as hands poked through the earth, trying to catch her. He watched her run, miles and miles, breaking free of her pursuers, all the way back to Greywater Watch, as she’d promised. He was Hodor, holding the door now and for eternity, loyal to the very end.

He was Theon Greyjoy, watching from afar as golden smoke rose above the cold black walls of Winterfell. He saw Euron’s men entering the castle, and the ironborn king taking his seat in the great hall, taking his horn down into the crypts. He was Summer, howling a dirge at the moon, and
hearing other wolves answer the call.

He was Brandon Stark, building walls, breaking walls, raising ships, burning ships. He was all that man ever was or ever would be, or could be. “Fly or die!” he screamed at himself, falling through his dreams, so long ago. “Fly or die!” And how he was flying, and he was crying, and he was dying.

He never felt the knives.

Chapter End Notes

I feed on your tears. Please donate...

On a (mostly not) optimistic note, I murdered my first Stark, which means I can now join an exclusive club.

Bran was always headed for this ending, bleeding out in front of the Winterfell heart tree... though as you might have guessed, he's not entirely finished. Instead, he's become some sort of tree consciousness, entering the weirNet through the Winterfell heart tree. Hence the fact that he "never felt the knives" that killed his body. I have this lovely/grisly visual in my head of Bran lying on his back in front of the tree, as his blood slowly stains the snow and leaks into the tree roots, and we cut to black on the smiling, bloody lips of the face in the tree.

The ending hearkens back to A GAME OF THRONES. During Bran III (the shortest chapter in ASOIAF, I believe), he's falling through his dreams, and the crow screams at him to "fly or die". Bran tells himself to "fly or die" at the end of this, coming full circle.

As for Hodor... I'd always known that he was going to die here, too. I didn't want to do the "hold the door" moment, because a) there's not much value in stealing an idea directly from the show/books, and it's not going to have as much of an impact because you all know what's coming, and b) I think the ending is a bit unkind to Hodor's character - having his whole life building up to holding the door might be the greatest show of loyalty we've seen in GOT, but it diminishes the independence of his character. Here, Hodor makes his sacrifice independent of Bran and Meera, out of loyalty and love. He's gone so quickly and suddenly, but he definitely saves Meera's life.

As a sunny note to end this bleak chapter on, I promise you that Meera survived. In fact, she appears in the very first chapter of PART THREE.
**Ozymandias**

Chapter Summary

*All these wars have turned my heart to stone.*

Chapter Notes

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

"Ozymandias", by Percy Bysshe Shelley

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**DAENERYS**

The stench of smoke and charred flesh hung heavy in the air, even now. Dany could not say what fumes and pestilence lingered here, but she had a duty to see it. She put her heels into her silver, heading deeper into the heart of the camp. The others followed closely behind, guardedly.

“Your Grace,” said Ser Jorah Mormont. “We had better stick to the outskirts. The Unsullied cannot protect you—”

“I do not need the Unsullied. I did not need them at Yunkai, when the slaves streamed out of the gates and proclaimed me *Mhysa*. This is little different.”
As you say, Your Grace.” But Jorah sounded uneasy.

Dany smiled reassuringly. “These people will not hurt me.” She put her heels into her horse, and they headed down the street away from the Mud Gate. The people did not hurt her. But they did not cheer her either. They simply stared up at her wide-eyed from the shadows of their makeshift huts and hovels, or from the places where they squatted. Not just wide-eyed, but dead-eyed.

The camp smelled awful, but Dany had gone blind to the smell in the last hour. Even so, she knew this was no fit place for her people to be. The grey desolation along the north bank of the Blackwater river could not sustain tens of thousands of refugees. And the city itself was rife with rats and plague and fever, even with winter now upon them. Her Dothraki and the city’s freedmen were forced to live together in darkness and squalor, crammed close against each other on these cold dead lands.

The bloody flux was on its way – the pale mare, as the Unsullied called it. I escaped it in Meereen, only for it to chase me back to King’s Landing, Dany thought, like a ghost following me across the world, bringing terrible devastation with it. There was nothing they could do but separate the afflicted from the healthy and hope the disease ran its course. The Unsullied put them in pens, mothers and children with grey flesh, old men weeping blood and coughing yellow and red bile. Penned in like livestock. Yet even that would not stop the spread of the disease, and more died with each passing day and night. When the Unsullied returned to the pens in the morning, there were always new corpses, pale and bloated things. They covered them with sheets and threw them into wagons and dragged them away to the Dragonpit, where a huge pyre had been built to burn the dead. Marwyn said that if things continued to worsen, it would be the worst plague since the Great Spring Sickness. And Dany was in the midst of it. She would not get the disease – her Targaryen blood gave her protection against all sorts of pestilence – but it was hard to stand there and not want to weep.

But as the day wore on, with the unceasing tide of the ill and the dying all around her, she felt nothing at all. All these wars have turned my heart to stone.

There was an Unsullied post over by the Mud Gate – or what remained of it. The Mud Gate and the King’s Gate had both come down in the chaos, and the wall along the city’s southern side was collapsed. The battle had left the river aflame and stopped with burning hulks. Every day, her men worked to clear the water so her newly returned fleet from Dragonstone could make landfall. She had first intended to send the ships to retrieve her Dothraki from the Disputed Lands under Ko Jhogo, but they did not have nearly enough ships, and besides, what was the point of bringing them here, where they would only place a greater burden on the city’s resources?

The Unsullied had once numbered eight thousand. Now they were barely eight hundred. The battle had been hard-fought, and they had never surrendered, but the costs had been huge. Grey Worm and most of his officers were dead; the eunuchs were now led by Messan, who seemed competent enough, but was not Grey Worm.

“The riots were worse yesterday, Your Grace,” he told Dany when asked. “These ones did what they could, but… it will only get worse. Same for the plague. If it worsens…”

“We may have to instate a curfew,” she said.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“And the sick and the healthy must be kept entirely apart. By force, if necessary.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”
“Good.” Dany nodded. Perhaps her stomach ought to be roiling, but she felt little. She turned to Jorah and wheeled her mare about. “We will return to the Red Keep now.”

On the way up through the city, they passed beneath Visenya’s Hill. The seven towers of Baelor’s Sept had crumbled into ruin, but the great pile of rubble was still unmistakable. Many of the sparrows had died in the collapsing building. Even now, the Unsullied were pulling their corpses from the ruins. The same could be said of the Dragonpit over on Rhaenys’s Hill, where a thousand men had died, all of the Stormcrows among them. And Daario. My captain. My betrayer. Three treasons. For blood, for gold, for love. But Dany did not know why he had betrayed her. Was it for the gold Aegon promised him, or because he could love me no longer?

Dany shrugged it off. She would not feel guilt at Daario’s death. His fate was of his own making, not hers.

She turned to Ser Jorah. “Did you find any more of those tunnels?” Jorah and Marwyn the Mage had been searching underneath the city through the wreckage, finding vaults of unexploded wildfire and warrens and outposts that had been burned and abandoned. The nests of Varys’s little birds, they reckoned.

“Many and more,” said Jorah. “Even within the Red Keep, there were hundreds of tunnels built by Maegor the Cruel. To think: the eunuch knew each and every one of them.”

“And he may still be down there,” Dany said. “Biding his time.”

“We will keep looking.”

“Perhaps you could burn him out.” There would be a sweet irony in that. “Light a fire at one end of the tunnel and follow the smoke. If Varys is down there, you would know—”

Jorah shook his head. “There might be others down there. Orphaned children with nowhere else to leave. Would you smoke out a whole city just to capture one rat?”

“If the rat is Lord Varys, I might.” It had been Varys who betrayed her, who pretended loyalty to her all along, but had really been working for Aegon. Some of the tunnels led right up to the Dragonpit and Visenya’s Hill and the Mud Gate, and out to the river. And Varys was working with Illyrio…

The remnants of the Braavosi fleet had retreated into Blackwater Bay. With Aegon defeated, and half their ships in flame, the enemy had fled in their thousands, leaving behind the stragglers to die or become captives. The Sealord, Tormo Fregar, was among those who had perished. There was no word of Illyrio Mopatis. He might be in league with Varys, but Dany could not see the fat magister making his way down into the sewers when he could instead retreat into his vast luxury. She wanted to hunt him down, but would not risk Drogon on such a thankless task. And besides, Varys and Illyrio are gone, their plans discoered and foiled. What can they do to me?

Aegon’s High Hill had escaped the fire, by one miracle or another. But now it was more fiercely guarded than ever, with rake-thin men and women clamouiring outside her gates begging for bread. Dany watched from afar as she rode in through a side gate. One man had a dying, sickly pig. He waved it above his head as the creature wailed. When the Unsullied tried to push him back, he launched the pig into their ranks. It bounced off their round shields and exploded in a mess of maggots and flies. Dany watched, queasy, as the crowd set upon the pig’s carcass.

Ser Jorah helped her down from her horse. “You are meeting the small council later, Your Grace,” he said quietly. “You might want to change—”
“I know,” Dany snapped. The squalor of the city had angered her, and Jorah’s constant presence was becoming irritating. “Thank you, Ser Jorah.” She crossed the drawbridge of Maegor’s Holdfast alone.

Irri and Jhiqui had made a bath for her, heavy with orange blossom. The sweet smell was nearly enough to sicken her, though it had never bothered her before. As she lay back in the water, Dany became acutely aware of the swell of her tummy. Daario’s child. With every passing week, the swelling became more and more noticeable. Soon she would have no choice but to reveal it to the court. Ordinarily that would have been a horror, but who was there to oppose her? And if a king like Aegon the Fourth could have bastard children, then why not a queen?

*Because the witch said it was so. You can have children of flesh or children of fire, but not both.*

But maybe this was different. Her child of fire, Rhaegal, had perished. Maybe this was the repayment of some blood debt. *Only death can pay for life. Maybe this child will be more than Rhaegal was ever meant to be. The dragon has three heads.* But Aegon was dead, and Dany was alone in the world… so where were the other two heads?

She thought of Tyrion Lannister. The Imp had stolen Viserion and flown off into the distance, but no one had seen either of them since. Dany thought the Imp was probably dead. It would make things a lot easier. Because the Imp was no dragon, so how could he be a dragonrider?

“Prophecy is a fickle friend,” Marwyn had said. “Your Grace should not be entirely reliant on it.”

Benerro said otherwise. “Prophecy is all you are.”

So: the child. *Daario’s child.* What colour would his eyes be? And his hair? She had never known Daario without dye in his hair. Would the child have his father’s easy looks and quick tongue, or would he tend to Dany’s temperament?

If she took Maester Gormon’s tea — as perhaps she ought — Dany would never know.

Dany finished bathing and called for Irri and Jhiqui. Together they helped her to dress: tonight she wore black silk and velvet slashed with red, Targaryen colours, and a cape that trailed almost to the ground. There were metal pauldrons on her shoulders too, shaped like coiled dragons. The battles might be over, but the war was not.

Dany and Ser Jorah went down to the council chambers together. The councillors stood upon her arrival. The small council itself was greatly diminished. Varys was gone. Haldon Halfmaester, Aurane Waters, Willas Tyrell, and half a dozen Tyrell and Martell bannermen were in the black cells. The Tattered Prince and Brown Ben Plumm had left King’s Landing with all their soldiers — or perhaps they had died in the fighting, no one was quite sure. And Lord Jon Connington was dead, too. He had been unable to face life without his king. They took him up to the Dragonpit and burned him with the rest of the bodies, and that was that.

So here they sat: the few that remained. “Where shall we begin?” asked Ser Jorah, taking his seat at her right hand.

“With the war,” Dany said. “That seems prudent.”

“As Your Grace commands. Do we have a map?”

“It is here, ser.” Gormon brought it out and unrolled it flat upon the council table. The map ranged from King’s Landing in the north to Oldtown and Nightsong in the south and the Isle of Tarth in the east. The Grand Maester pointed. “The biggest resistance remains undeterred at Highgarden. Some
twenty thousand men, the reports say.”

“Even with Lord Willas in captivity?” said Marwyn.

“Something tells me that Ser Garlan will not be giving up easily,” the Grand Maester supplied. “And I think executing Lord Tyrell will only strengthen their resolve. Your Grace, might we rethink this —?”

Dany shook her head. “It is hard for you, I know. But even if he is your great-nephew, Lord Willas has betrayed the Iron Throne, and for that, the penalty is death. As for the armies at Highgarden — remind me, who commands them?”

“Ser Garlan, for a start,” said the Grand Maester, tremulously. “Lord Mathis Rowan, Lord Donnel Swann, and Lord Rolland Caron.”

“The Bastard of Nightsong,” Dany said. “One would have thought he might have been more loyal, given that we legitimized him in the first place.”

Ser Jorah shook his head. “That was always Aegon and Connington, Your Grace. Their friends, not ours.”

More complications. Dany shook our head. “What are we to do with the Stormlands?”

“There is Edric Storm, Your Grace,” said Marwyn. “The Usurper’s bastard son. We have him in a cell. He was wounded in the battle.” He hesitated. “Forgive my presumption, but if you were to legitimise him—”

“Legitimise the Usurper’s line?” Dany shook her head. “I will not. And I have met this Edric Storm before. He will be unwilling to bend the knee, I assure you.”

“He was Ser Barristan’s squire,” said Jorah grudgingly. “If anyone was a paragon of good sense, it was Selmy.”

And he is dead too. “You think Edric Storm can be convinced to bend the knee?”

“It is a possibility,” her bear knight said.

“But not likely,” said Dany. “Nonetheless, I must temper justice with mercy. I mean to visit the cells later. I will give this Edric Storm one chance to bend the knee. But only one. Otherwise, he can go the same way as Willas Tyrell and Princess Arianne.”

“What is to be done with Princess Arianne?” the Grand Maester asked.

“For now it is safest to keep her hostage to her father’s good behaviour,” said Dany. “And there may be a threat if she is carrying Aegon’s child. Moon tea—”

“It might be better to keep the child alive, Your Grace,” said Marwyn. “Your reign will be challenged, you know that. Someday you will have to placate the Dornish, and that will be harder if you have… forced Princess Arianne to take the tea. And mayhaps you could raise the child as your own ward, possibly even as your heir… no one could argue with that…”

He does not think I will have a child of my own. “I assure you, Archmaester,” she said, “any heir to the Iron Throne will be of my body, not another’s. I will spare Princess Arianne for now, though. As you say, it is best not to be hasty.”
Marwyn nodded. “We are nearly done, I think. There is just one more letter…” He unrolled the paper, frowning. “Word from the Wall. A letter signed by Jon Snow, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. He says… he claims… there are dead men marching down from the Frostfangs and the Haunted Forest, headed for the Wall.”

“It sounds like lunacy,” said Ser Jorah.

“Jon Snow was your own father’s squire, Ser Jorah,” said the Mage. “Does that mean anything to you?”

The creases of Jorah’s frown deepened. “If my father did trust him…”

“I do not think this is something to be cast aside lightly, Your Grace.” Benerro was sitting bolt upright at the other end of the table. “A great battle in the snow. I have seen it in the flames, and I am not alone. A great battle in the snow… and dragons.”

“You think this Lord Snow is worth helping?” asked Dany.

“Perhaps, Your Grace,” said the red priest. “Times are changing. And the prophecies speak not only of fire, but of ice… their balance is a song, one which must be kept stable. Let us suppose for one moment that Lord Snow speaks truly when he mentions dead men marching on the Wall. Some might say it is your destiny… dragons in the snow. And even if he is lying, you would be the queen who helped the Night’s Watch. No man can argue with that, least of all the Northmen. What you need now is unity, with the Long Night fast approaching.”

Marwyn went on, “Lord Snow writes that he has brought together the free folk – the wildlings, that is – and those living south of the Wall. But he cannot face them alone. He needs our help, and the help of any who will join us.”

*Ice and fire,* Dany thought. She could not say why, but it sounded *right* to her.

“Stannis Baratheon went to the Wall after the Battle of King’s Landing,” said Benerro. “And found enough support to carve out a new Northern kingdom. Your Grace might follow his lead.”

“But still,” said Dany. “Leaving King’s Landing behind…” Then she stared out through the open window, and saw the smoke rising from all across the city. *There is nothing left in King’s Landing to stay for. Nothing but intrigue and liars. The Wall will offer me a respite from all that, if little else. “I will think on it,”* she said. A vague promise, and one she could always go back on.

Dany rose, and they rose with her. “I am done for the day,” she told them. “We will reconvene on the morrow.” Ser Jorah followed her out.

The snow was picking up again as Dany crossed the castle yard back to her chambers. Outside she found Irri, looking glum. “Your Grace,” the Dothraki girl said, “the princess is back again.”

*I should have had her locked in her tower,* Dany thought. She was fast growing tired of Princess Arianne and her general defiance. Part of her was seeking an excuse to have the Dornishwoman executed. “I will see her.”

“Should I fetch wine, Your Grace?”

“There is no need. I doubt it will be a long meeting.” She waved Ser Jorah off and entered her solar alone.

Princess Arianne stood at her arrival, and managed to bend her proud knees just enough to constitute
a curtsey. “Your Grace. I hope I did not disturb your routine. You must be very busy, I know.”

That might well have been a thinly veiled insult, but Dany did not rise to it. “Indeed,” she said, “ruling Seven Kingdoms is not easy work, my lady. A harder task than being heir to one, to be sure.”

“I will not waste your time, then. I will get to the heart of it.” Arianne took a breath. “Your Grace, I know you are currently judging the guilt of Lord Willas Tyrell—”

“I have judged Lord Willas guilty.”

“And…?” The princess knew what she had decided, quite plainly. But she seemed too afraid to say it.

“And the punishment for treason is death, my lady. You can understand that, I assume.”

“Your Grace… it wasn’t his fault, I—”

Dany held up a hand. “Be careful, now. You wouldn’t want to say the same thing, especially after Lord Willas has admitted that he manipulated you into joining his plot… else my suspicions might be aroused, and you might both end up as heads on spikes on walls, Princess.”

“You must spare Willas.”

She calls him Willas, Dany noted. Not Lord Tyrell. Much as I called Daario and Drogo by their names, and not by their titles… three fires, three mounts, three treasons… “And why must I do that?”

“I… Your Grace, I know little of this sort of thing, but it seems to me that—”

“Seems?” said Dany. “Forgive me if I do not believe your womanly weakness, Princess Arianne. It is a feint I have used myself only too often. So tell me, and tell me straight.”

She was not surprised when the Dornishwoman pressed forwards, even if the words spilling from her mouth were lies. “For your own good, Your Grace,” she said. “Doubtless your advisors have told you that the Reach will never be quelled if you execute their lord. The same for Dorne, and your enemies in the Stormlands. Spare Lord Willas’s life, and they will have no choice but to obey you…”

“A reasonable idea,” the queen said. “One my advisors have put to me time and time again. But I have learned in my years of ruling that these things rarely work out as you intend them to. In Slaver’s Bay, I was promised an end to slavery when I sacked Astapor, not once, but twice. But now I am receiving reports from across the Narrow Sea that the trade is now more profitable than ever. The only difference is that the former masters are now the slaves. The wheel turns, and turns. Victory and betrayal and defeat and vengeance, and again, and again.”

“Stop the wheel, then,” said Princess Arianne. “If you spare—”

“If I spare Willas Tyrell, there will be resentment on his part, and I will look weak in the face of disloyalty. I cannot rule among such injustice, no. The wheel needs to be broken, not stopped. Willas, you… and Aegon’s child…”

There was a flicker of shock on Arianne’s face. She hid it well, but not quite well enough. “Are you pregnant?” the queen asked, staring the other woman down. “There is no point hiding it if you are. I will find out.”
“What will you do if I am?” She sounded almost unafraid.

“If it is a girl, I will raise her in the Targaryen tradition, and she may even come into some sort of inheritance one day. We should not be held responsible for the sins of our fathers…”

“And… and if he is a boy?”

“That will complicate things,” Dany said.

Arianne’s cheeks darkened. “I wonder, did Tywin Lannister say the same about Rhaegar’s children? That they would be a complication? I remember Rhaenys. A bright little girl, and she was always smiling, always happy. Or so I assume. I only saw her once. She made her mother smile…”

“Yes,” said the queen. “And I have no doubt that she would have joined her brother’s treasonous cause, had she lived.”

Princess Arianne clenched her fists. “Aegon wronged you, I will not deny that. But he was your kin, all the same. In Dorne, we do not speak ill of our dead family, no matter their failings in life.”

“Then you will die knowing nothing.” Dany shook her head. “Is that all?”

Arianne was already halfway to the door, but on hearing that she stopped and turned back. “I remember my aunt Elia too,” she said. “And I know what she would tell me to do. If you want my son, Your Grace, you will have to prise him from my cold dead hands before I give him up to you.”

“I hope not,” the queen replied. “But I fear I will have to.”

After that she was alone for the rest of the night. Ser Jorah dropped by once, to give her a rather disgruntled report about his doubts of Marwyn, but other than that Dany was alone with her doubts. And there were no shortage of those. In a matter of days, Willas Tyrell would be executed, and if the war did not end then and there, she would go to Highgarden and finish it. As she stood before the window, staring through miles of darkness towards Dragonstone, she heard the flapping of wings, far off in the distance, and then she glimpsed their owner.

_Drogon_, she knew at once. _He does not belong here any more than I do._

The next morning, when Irri and Jhiqui came to her chambers to ask the queen how she would like to break her fast, she instead sent for Ser Jorah and Archmaester Marwyn. “I need you to write back to this Jon Snow,” she told them. “And tell him that we will send what help we can.” Then to Jorah, “I want you to find the captains of my fleet, and tell them that we will be heading back to Dragonstone.” _Heading home._ “And as for my prisoners… bring me Princess Arianne and Edric Storm.”

Ser Jorah nodded. “Of course, Your Grace. And what about Willas Tyrell?”

Dany sighed. She had forgotten about Lord Tyrell. It might be a wise move to let him go free, to appease both the Reach and Dorne, but that would show that the queen’s justice was worth nothing. _He cannot be lord of Highgarden ever again, no._ But, she thought, there had been more than enough death in this city for one lifetime. “I will give him the chance to take the black and join the Night’s Watch,” the queen said. “But if he refuses, he must die.”

Chapter End Notes
And that’s a wrap for Dany in TSK. We've got 5 more chapters before the end: 2 on the Wall, 1 in the Riverlands, and 2 in mystery locations.

The chapter title is "Ozymandias", in reference to the mythic and crumbling "King of Kings" seen in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem. Like Dany's power, the power of Ozymandias is based on material symbols that seem pretentious when you consider that all empires are eventually doomed to collapse into dust. And really, when we think about it, Dany's empire is built on dust. She's queen of the Seven Kingdoms, but she only actually rules one of them (and that's if we're being generous). She might have made a wise move in letting Willas live (assuming he accepts her deal), but ultimately she's being delusional if she thinks that will heal the wounds of Westeros.

Of course, Dany's storyline is something of a cliffhanger. We don't actually know if Willas will accept this plea deal, and then there's the matter of her personal future, including Daario's child.

Some questions about Dany in TSK, if you want to answer them:

1. “Daenerys Targaryen has won the Iron Throne and lost everything else.” Do you agree?

2. To what extent is Daenerys the only credible ruler on the Iron Throne at the end of The Sunset Kingdoms? Is it possible for her to be usurped? Was this the inevitable ending, given the strength of her character and her armies?

3. “Dany is an unnecessarily cruel ruler, as exemplified by her treatment of Arianne and the fact that she is running away from her problems.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?

4. Do you think Dany actually cares about the Night’s Watch’s predicament in the North, or is merely going through with this as it is an easy way out?

5. Do you think Jorah regrets staying by Dany’s side, having seen the aftermath of her battle with Aegon?

6. In Game of Thrones, 5x09 The Dance of Dragons, Shireen says: “And everywhere the dragons danced, people died.” Are there any benefits to the Dance of Dragons? For example, did they prevent a worse conflict further down the line?
From the top of the ridge, Tyrion Lannister could see green grass to the west and to the south, mountains to the north, and the heavy damp-smelling brush to the east, from which they had just emerged. Penny struggled up the stony slope to stand beside him. “Can you see any towns?” she asked.

“If I had, I wouldn’t have waited for you.” Tyrion shook his head. “No. Just grass. Not even any cairns.” If they found a cairn, they would know if they were headed in the right direction. But the mountainside was just an expanse of bland grey nothingness.

“Perhaps we aren’t in the Vale,” said Penny. “Perhaps we’re—”

“We’re in the Vale,” Tyrion asserted. He had no idea if it was true, but if they weren’t in the Vale, they could be wandering anywhere, and in that case they might as well lie down and die. “I know these mountains. This is the Vale.”

Penny peered out from the ridge. The wind blew into her face, tangling her hair. “Which way are we heading?”

“Southwest,” Tyrion said tiredly.

“It’s always southwest. Maybe we should try—”

How many times must I tell you before you listen? “If we go north, we’ll end up in the sea. If we go east, we’ll end up in the sea. If we go south, we may get lucky and reach Gulltown, but more likely we’ll end up on the wrong side of the Giant’s Lance, and we’ll have to head back the way we came.” He did not wait for Penny to answer. Instead he picked up the branch that served as his walking pole and set off down the other side of the ridge.

The ground was squishy under his feet from all the rain. The weather had cleared up a little today, with less snow and mist, so they had decided to forego the cover of the woods to head out over open territory, and to find high ground. Or to find Viserion. If the bloody bastard finally showed up, we
wouldn’t have to bother with this. It was as though this nine-day walk with only Penny for company was punishment for the brief ecstasy of his ride on dragonback. It was your own stupid fault, he told himself, you didn’t have to go back into battle with Rhaegal. But he had, and Viserion had taken his share of battle scars in the fight. As they flew away from the battlefield, the white dragon had started to lose altitude minute by minute, before coming to a sudden landing in the middle of nowhere, shaking his dwarf passengers off, and throwing himself back into the sky. That was the last Tyrion had seen of Viserion in more than a week. He may be a skeleton in a cave for all I know.

They had lingered where he left them for two days before Tyrion decided that the dragon was not returning. And so they started to walk, without direction at first, then definitely southwest, searching for people and cairns all the way, and finding nothing. Tyrion kept an eye out for rivers too, because he and Penny needed fresh water to drink, while she searched for plants which she thought looked edible. Tyrion had no clue how Penny knew which plants were safe to eat. They had gotten lucky so far, but in time she would make a mistake, and they would end up shitting out their bowels. And wouldn’t that be a fine way to go?

Most of the time they travelled near dawn, when the roads were quietest, the light was kindest, and the shadowcats were least likely to appear. They had been fortunate so far. If they were attacked, they had nothing to defend themselves with but a few pointy branches. And Penny was not like to be much help, so Tyrion would be on his own, really.

In the afternoon, it started to rain again. At first it did not bother Tyrion, but then the light spattering rose to a steady roar, filling his ears, soaking his hair and beard. Every step became a trial. The mud was starting to stick around his boots; in places they were practically wading through the stuff. Grey clouds rolled in and the downpour even louder. But still they pressed on, trying to reach vantage points where they might finally see something other than endless hills. They had no such luck, though. Within a few hours the mist had consumed the lowlands and it was impossible to see ahead. “We’ll find a place to rest for the night,” Tyrion decided. “There are some crags up ahead.” He pointed to a stony face about a mile away. “If we’re lucky, we might find a cave to shelter in.”

“If we’re very lucky, we might find Viserion,” said Penny.

“I think we’re more likely to find my father playing cyvasse with Aegon the Conqueror,” Tyrion replied sourly. What do you think, Father? Is this a suitable place for a Lannister to rule? In the godsforsaken interior of the Vale amid the damp and dreary; a dwarf boy with only a dwarf girl for company, lord of a few hills and some piles of sheepshit? Would you sooner see me on dragonback? Or is that no fit place for a Lannister either? He did not think any Lannisters had been dragonriders in the past... and it made him curious, if nothing else. Uncle Kevan once told me about the liberties Aerys may or may not have taken with my mother, your wife... and here I am. Look at me. As twisted and vile as any child born of such unholy wedlock would be. With a ravenous appetite for fire and an interest in dragons that goes far beyond the norm. I see them in my dreams, Father, even now, blowing smoke and fire and blood.

Is that what you tried to tell yourself, I wonder? Did you think that the great Tywin Lannister would surely never sire a dwarf child with a madness as deep-rooted as mine? Did you try and convince yourself that I was Aerys’s son, somehow, born when he forced himself on my mother? Did you intend to carry me into the sea to rid the world of me because you thought I might be a Targaryen bastard... and did you change your mind because you knew it was not so? Because you knew that I was your son, and that there was nothing you could do to change it.

Oh, I know you’re there. And I know you’re listening. I know what you’re thinking. We wouldn’t want to undermine the relationship we had, after everything we’ve been through together. But at the same time you’re thinking, if I’m a dragonrider, I must be a Targaryen, and that resolves that. And I
say, haven’t you learned anything in all your time watching over me? If a Lannister dwarf can be
the Hand of the King and so much more, then why can’t a Lannister dwarf be a dragonrider?

Even if you’re a little surprised, or even disappointed, what you’re seeing is only what was meant to
be. The changing of seasons. And now night is falling over the sunset kingdoms, and everything is
starting to turn. Great lords and noble knights and just kings have fallen, and in their place rise liars
and sellswords and a thousand feasting crows. You thought the heroes were the chivalrous golden
sons and the maidens oh-so-fair with flowers in their hair. But here I am. Hear me roar.

“There’s a cave up ahead,” Penny called out to him over the rain. “I’ll collect some grasses while
you get a fire started. I can make tea.”

Tea. Again. Tyrion nodded. The cave was shallow, and he was quite certain there were no bears
hiding away in here. He set about collecting dry wood in the cave mouth while Penny went
searching among the reeds and leaves. By the time she returned with an armful of flat leaves and
roots, he had succeeded (albeit with difficulty) in getting a flame to burn.

Penny knelt uncertainly beside the fire. “I… do you think we should have a fire? Honestly? It was
alright yesterday, because the forest hid us—”

“Do you have any better ideas besides freezing to death?” Despite his thick woolly cloak, Tyrion still
felt the cold keenly some nights. He and Penny had to huddle together to sleep, a prospect he did not
welcome. Damn Viserion, he thought again, couldn’t he have dropped us somewhere with a
waycastle nearby, at the very least? Or a road? Tyrion would have given much and more for a good
stone road. I would give Penny, without a moment’s hesitation. The girl’s boundless naivety had
long since started to grate on him. And with it being just the two of them, there was no one to keep
him in check. “I have made this journey before,” he said aloud, “with Bronn. He’s probably be dead
now.” The battlefield had been a flaming ruin when they departed. There was no way of knowing
who had lived and who had died. But if there was a way out, Bronn would have found it. And even
then… I have unfinished business with him. Tyrion had not forgotten the sellsword’s betrayal.

He still had debts to pay.

And not only to Bronn. Varys was still out there somewhere, of that, Tyrion had no doubts. And if
Aegon died as a result of Viserion’s intervention, he may have reason to oppose me as well. Tyrion
did not really understand Varys’s motivations. “Did he want Aegon on the Iron Throne, or did he
want to take it for himself, or for Illyrio? And why bother with the Dornishmen and the Tyrells?”
Something did not quite add up.

“My lord?” Penny said. “The tea’s almost done.”

“What do you think, Penny? About Varys?” The girl had no idea, of course, but he needed someone
to vent to.

“I-I don’t think anything, my lord. I don’t know.”

“No. I don’t think I know either. But Varys is not what I thought he was. Call me a fool now, but I
did not honestly think he was motivated by – or indeed capable of – a thirst for vengeance. Evidently
I was wrong… and honestly, I am disappointed. The eunuch is not in service to some higher power.
He is just the same as any of us. Seeking after revenge and retribution and other such… human
things.”

Penny spoke up. “Not… not everyone is seeking retribution, Tyrion. It would be better if we didn’t.
That’s what got us here in the first place. If that weren’t any wars—”
"If there weren’t any wars?” He snorted. “Penny, there will always be wars. Men will always want something more than what they have. And if you don’t understand that, you truly are a child."

"Is that a bad thing? My brother told me—"

"No one cares what your brother told you. Your brother is dead, Penny. You shouldn’t be taking lessons from him.” Tyrion was starting to regret what he was saying, but he found he could not stop. “It’s time for you to start learning what the world really is. First of all, it’s not a kind place to people like you. Oh, you can pretend to be innocent all you like. That won’t save you when your enemies come.”

"I don’t have enemies.”

"Oh? Then who killed your brother?"

She glanced up at him again. There were tears in her eyes and her lip wobbled. “I just want to go home.”

"Home?” Tyrion scoffed. “There is no home for people like us. Oh, you can run, and you can hide, but you will never be home. Not unless you manage to weasel your way into the bed of a man who will rape you and keep you fed. And I may be your only hope, at this rate.” When Tyrion finished, his hands were shaking. Penny was on the verge of tears, but she stubbornly bit her lip and refused to; instead she spent her time slowly inching away from him, as a mouse backs away from a fight against a bigger predator. The smells of the tea leached into the air, stinking.

Outside the cave, the rain was starting to fall in earnest. Fat droplets beaded in the rocks above the mouth and soaked through layers of fern and moss and ivy. Tyrion remembered a different day, a different rain. It had been raining when he met her – why did he always forget that? When they found her in the rain, her clothes were clinging to her shoulders, soaked through so you could see the milk-pale skin beneath. She was shivering all the way down the road, so Tyrion took off his hooded cloak – heavy wool that smelled faintly of library dust – and gave it to her. His hair was wet through by the time they made it to the inn. He told the innkeep who he was, and asked for discretion as befit a Lannister. They tucked themselves away in a corner room, and the innkeep’s wife brought out a spread of two roast chickens, hard cheese, and pickled cucumbers. She was so thin and hungry she ate one of the chickens on her own, tearing the white meat apart with her fingers, shivering inside his cloak and getting crumbs all over it. They did not speak a word to each other, but she stared into his eyes, and he into hers. Blue and bluer.

The first thing she said to him was, “Thank you.” He asked her name. She would not tell him. Tyrion told her his own. She told him that her name was Tysha. “It is a good name,” she said. Not once did she mention Jaime, who was out searching for her attackers.

Some time afterwards he took her up to her room, in the rafters of the inn. One of the guardsmen would have done it for him, if he had asked, but Tyrion felt a certain responsibility for her. As it happened, Tysha did not need him much. She did not have any possessions with her, but he could see that she was still soaked to the bone, and his cloak was all that was keeping her warm. “You can keep the cloak,” he said, though it was richly sewn with gold and fur and the first man on the road would have stolen it off her. Tysha knew as much. “I can’t,” she replied, reaching up to undo the clasp. Tyrion reached for her hands to stop her, and their eyes met again. And then she leant forwards, and kissed him. Not once did she mention his mismatched eyes, or his jutting brow, or his swollen nose.

She kissed his lips and then he kissed hers. Tysha was not tall, though she was taller than him, so it was not as awkward as it might have been. Then he put a shy hand on her face and kissed her again,
and again, and she never left his gaze, and then his fingers were fumbling at the ties of her wet dress, and her hand wrapped around his waist and pulled him in, and on top of her. Not once did she mention his stunted height.

And afterwards, she sang to him. Not the song of some whore, but a girl who loved him. Why did Jaime lie to me? Why? And more than that, why did I ever let Father do to me what he did? I should have killed him, as Bronn said. Tysha...

“I’m sorry,” Tyrion said. The cave walls were suddenly around him again. The rain kept coming. Water dripped from clefts in the ceiling, slow as tears. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. Penny stirred in her corner. “You shouldn’t blame yourself… it’s always been like this… I didn’t mean what I said… I’m just… a bad person, is all.”

There was a long, long pause. “You’re not a bad person,” Penny said at last. “At least, not as bad as most. You… you’ve done bad things, yes. But you’ve done good things, too.”

“Like what?” Tyrion asked sourly.

She thought for a moment. “Gerion. When he was ill, you helped him. In a way.”

“And then I abandoned him.” He had tried to think about Gerion as little as possible, but now the pangs of guilt were returning. “And even the help… that was all you, Penny. I did nothing. I should have done more… I was his cousin, but I never made him feel like I was family…” He had failed his uncle Gerion, too. Maybe that was the cruel price he had to pay for riding a dragon, for his selfish dream.

“You did,” said Penny. “You were his family. He told me… when he was ill… he told me… you were the closest thing he’d ever had to a family. That you taught him that even if you were small and beaten down, there was still a place for you in the world.” She was coming out of the shadows, moving to sit beside him. “And you taught me the same thing. You taught me I could be more than just a curiosity to be laughed at.”

But she was a curiosity, Tyrion thought. What else could you call her, this dwarf girl who was so optimistic in the darkest times, the foil to his black soul? “Thank you,” he said.

There was a long, stagnant pause. Then Penny moved closer towards him. Firelight bloomed across her face and Tyrion knew what was about to happen before it did. “No,” he said, holding her at arms length. “Forgive me, Penny. But after what I said to you… and not just that. I loved another woman. And I still do.”

“Oh.” Penny sat very still. She did not seem hurt; perhaps she, too, had realised the foolishness of her impulse to kiss him. “Did… did you lose her?”

“I did. Her name was Tysha.” Tyrion picked at his fingernails. The cave echoed to the slow patter of the rain. “And yes, I lost her. But it was a long time ago.”

“What was she like?”

He stared at Penny. Did she love him? Would she try to be Tysha for him? Shae had tried to be Tysha too, and had failed dismally. As for Sansa… if they had been together much longer, it might have gone that way too. There are no women in my life that can match the first. “What was she like?” he echoed. “She was… she…” How to explain the love of a lifetime? “She… she had a song.”

“Can you sing it?”
“I can. I… I…” He drew a deep breath. “I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her
hair. I loved a maid as fair as autumn, with sunset in her hair. I loved a maid as white as winter,
with moonglow in her hair. I loved a maid as—”

“Gerion’s song,” breathed Penny.

Tyrion had been slipping away into his memories. “What?” he said. “Gerion… no, I meant
Tysha…”

“No, my lord… I mean, maybe she sung it, but when Gerion was ill… he was drifting, lucid… I
don’t think he knew he was talking to me… he started singing, saying his mother used to—”

And the rest of the words were carried away beneath the roaring current in Tyrion’s ears. Mother.
His mother. The mother of a boy born in Braavos. What was it Varys had said? A mother who fled
to King’s Landing, and then to Braavos. And what was it Varys had promised, when he’d been
about to leave? What had Varys said he’d find out?

Where whores go.

Numbers… had that been some sort of ironic clue? Because the numbers made no sense. How could
the boy claim to be fourteen, when Uncle Gerion had not left until twelve years ago? And Tyrion did
not think that Gerion Lannister would abandon a whore in Braavos… why would he leave her,
when he brought Joy Hill’s mother to the Rock from some backwater village despite Lord Tywin’s
protestations?

And why would Varys need uncle Gerion’s son, when half of House Lannister comes before him?
Unless he isn’t…

Gerion. The name of his favourite uncle. The uncle he’d told Tysha about, so often. Where do
whores go? One green eye and one blue, as blue as hers. Staring at him every day, in plain sight.

“Tyrion?” Penny stood over him. “Are you alright?”

“I… I need some air.” He moved roughly past her and out through the cave mouth, and beyond that.
Numbers, he was thinking as he stumbled along. If he is my son… I abandoned him. When he
looked up, searching for answers, the bright moonlight burned at his eyes, accusing him. Tyrion
blinked it away. Thunder joined the steady chorus of the rain, booming louder and louder… until he
realised, with a start, that it was the sound of hob-nailed boots approaching, not thunder.

They emerged from the night, in steel and leather, covered over with black furs and wool. Their
faces were savage, but the swords in their belt looked castle-forged. Lannister steel, he thought, and
almost wanted to laugh. The steel Father gave to them. They encircled him on all sides, some
curious, some enraged, young and old, tall and short, all looking more fearsome than he was and a
hundred times more dangerous.

One of the clansmen advanced, levelling his spear at Tyrion. “Halfman,” he said, “you are intruding
here. And the punishment for that is death.”

“Yes,” muttered Tyrion. “It would be. So, tell me, my friend, who might you be? So that when you
send me to my gods, I may know which noble fighter hastened me on my way.”

“The halfman makes a joke,” said one of the clansmen, “a mockery of our customs. We should kill
him without ceremony. The Stone Crows do not tolerate—”

“The Stone Crows?” Tyrion could feel a grin coming onto his face for the first time in weeks. Our
sad trek through the Vale may soon come to an end. “Led by Shagga, son of Dolf? A great warrior of the mountain clans, perhaps the greatest of them all? A rightful heir to the Vale of Arryn?” He smirked. “I have no weapons, and nothing that can hurt you. So before you kill me, I humbly beg one request. Tell Shagga son of Dolf I am here. Tell him the Halfman has returned.”

Chapter End Notes

Good news! At 15:50 BST today, I completed the first draft on The Sunset Kingdoms, which means that you'll be getting one update a day from now on until we finish on Chapter 119. And to be honest with you, they're all pretty good chapters.

On this chapter:

The working title was "Full Circle", for obvious reasons, I hope. Tyrion has returned to the Vale - where he was for much of the second act of AGOT, but he's learned a lot on the way. But "Flesh, Mud and Stone" was simply too good to pass up on - flesh for Tyrion and Penny, mud for the muddiness of his past, stone for their location.

Tyrion breaks the fourth wall in this chapter. He might do this again sometime.

Honestly, this has been my favourite Tyrion chapter in the story aside from maybe "The Bloody Hand". I particularly enjoyed writing the Tysha recollections and getting to shed the 'Saint Tyrion' archetype that we see in the show in favour of the venomous, angry, ADWD Tyrion.

Admittedly, I haven't had nearly as much fun with Tyrion in TSK as I did in A COAT OF GOLD, but maybe you preferred his character this time round. His story really picks up in Part Three - which is probably going to be called THE HOUR OF THE NIGHTINGALE or THE YEAR OF THE NIGHTINGALE. Part Three doesn't have the slow build-up of TSK; it reads a lot more like A COAT OF GOLD, albeit with a little more finesse and not as many 'jumping the shark' moments.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this look into Tyrion's psyche; it's a nice two-hander chapter, and very much an internal one that acts as a cooldown to the madness of the King's Landing battle. Personally, I compare it to Daenerys X from ADWD, where it's just her and Drogon in the middle of the Dothraki sea.

Just the one question for reviewers this time, but it's quite a big one:

1. What has Tyrion learned during the course of The Sunset Kingdoms?
The Maester and the Magician

Chapter Summary

He needed us then. He needs us now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SAMWELL

Val sat by the fire with the pile of wolfskins in her lap, working her needle through the piece of cloth. “Your kneeler people might be soft, but they have the right of some things,” she said, looking up. “There is a certain peace and quiet to be found in this. Peace and quiet before the monster starts screaming again.”

Sam did not know how to reply, so he said nothing. He swallowed. Val gave an exasperated sigh. “Don’t just stand there like a sack of suet, Maester Tarly. Have a seat.”

It was a little awkward, sitting in here with the women and children. Black brothers were supposed to be helping about the castle, be they builder or steward or ranger, not sitting inside and watching others work through the window-pane. Sam shifted in his seat. “Forgive me, my lady, but I really should be back in my tower. If someone gets hurt—”

“They will have your man Clydas to see them. Or don’t you trust him?”

“I trust Clydas, yes…but he is old.”

“As was your Maester Aemon.” Val took one of the green branches from the basket and fed it to the hearth; the flames consumed it lovingly. “And yet you trusted him.”

*Maester Aemon had his secrets, though.* He and Melisandre were still no closer to finding out what he had hidden at Castle Black, if their theory was true at all. Sam cleared his throat. “Beg pardon, my lady—”

“Call me Val.”

“Val. Did…did you call me here for a reason?”

“Gilly’s boy will need feeding shortly. I thought you might want to see him. So that you can write to her about him.”

Sam had already written a letter to Gilly. However, the blizzard had never let up long enough for him
to send it. The last letter he had sent to Gilly had been a year ago, in Volantis. *She probably thinks I am dead by now.* “Feeding?” Sam said. “Well… isn’t that a bit… I mean…”

“*Goat’s* milk, Tarly. The boy took a while to wean – probably a result of missing his mother – but he is nearly two. But even if it was from the teat… don’t go telling me you’ve never seen a breast before, Tarly, with all your travels in the south and the east… they love to show off, don’t they?”

_Sarella was from the south, and she was never like that, _Sam thought.

Val set her sewing aside. She might find needle and thread a relaxing pastime, but her work was horribly shoddy. It was strange, he thought, that while many of the Mole’s Town and Northern women were picking up sword and shield for the first time, Val was a stranger to the southron womanly arts. _She hates being called a princess, but she is slowly becoming more and more like one._

Until recently, Castle Black had not needed a proper woman’s wing, but the black brothers – together with Alyss Karstark’s troupe of household staff – had succeeded in making a comfortable, homely hall. The mothers and babes were housed in the previously unused Grey Keep. Othell Yarwyck’s builders were busy putting up timber and stone extensions connecting it to both the library and the armory, and clearing out the wormways below. It was a warm stone keep quite similar to a longhall, with plenty of hearthfires and rugs to keep out the chill. Since the keep backed onto the goatshed, there was always a slight odor, but in a way that was part of its charm.

They passed babes suckling at the teat (Sam averted his eyes), women stirring big kettles of honeyed wine, women knitting in silence save for the clicking of their needles, women sweeping the rushes and laying down fresh grass and herbs. Eventually they came to the nursery at the far end, behind the sleeping quarters. There were a couple of dozen spearwives and wildling women standing round, some with babes in their armies, others leaning over cradles. Bottles of goat’s and horse’s milk and rows of cots with woollen bedding had been lined up along the nursery wall. Val led Sam right down to the far end. The children here were older, some approaching their second nameday, and they crawled and toddled about a little in a pen of straw. Sam did not know which of them was Gilly’s, so he lingered awkwardly while Val ventured into the pen, brought out one of the boys, and placed him into Sam’s arms.

The boy was so heavy Sam nearly dropped him. Val smiled. “He’s getting big, isn’t he?”

“Aye.”

“Big,” said the boy, bending Sam’s fingers back. “Big big.”

Val took the child’s hand. “You know Sam, don’t you? Black Sam. Fat Sam.” She gave him an apologetic look. “Some of your brothers call you Fat Sam.”

“Fat,” said the boy. “Fat Sam.”

“Well,” Sam said despairingly. “they’re not wrong.” *When the stores run out,* Dolorous Edd had told him once, _you’ll be the first one we eat._ He was not hugely fat anymore, but he was far from thin. He stared into the boy’s eyes. He had blue eyes, unlike Gilly’s brown ones, and tufty blond hair.

Val read his thoughts. “He favours his father. In looks and in disposition too, which was good. Craster was always a stubborn and hardy old goat. The hair will darken as he gets older, though.”

“Aye.” He frowned. “Don’t you think he needs a name? Other than ‘monster’, I mean.”

“Well, if he wants one, he’s yet to tell me.”
“How do the free folk choose names?”

“The same way you southerners do, I expect. Boys are named for their father, or their father’s father, or friends of their father who were great warriors. For dead kings and heroic relatives and great men who deserve to be honoured. Names to live up to. And then there are the family names – Steelsong, Battleborn, Giantsbane, that sort of thing – to remind them of the deeds of their fathers. ‘Course, then there are the girls. They don’t get that kind of naming.”

Sam nodded. “There was a Lord Samwell Tarly during the reign of King Aenys. Savage Sam Tarly, they called him. He joined Lord Orys Baratheon in the hunt against the Vulture King and his outlaw brotherhood. They say Heartsbane – our family sword – was red from hilt to handle when he’d finished with them.” He passed Gilly’s babe back into Val’s arms. “I think my father picked the wrong name for me.”

“Yes. Perhaps he did. You would have made a poor wildling, Sam the Slayer.”

“I know. I’d probably have been eaten by… wolves or bears or something.”

“Wolves.” Val hesitated a moment, then asked, “Was there ever a King Jon in your kneeler kingdoms?”

“Jon? Why?”

“It doesn’t matter. No reason. I—”

“There was never a King Jon on the Iron Throne, no. But there was a King Jon Stark, who ruled as King of Winter. And there was at least one King Jon in the Vale, too. But it’s quite a common name, and a short one too. It dates to the First Men: Jon, Stark, Flint, Slate, Reed – those are old names. In the days before the Targaryens, when history was rarely recorded, there might have been a King Jon. He might have ruled from the Arbor to the Wall, and we would not know.”

“Well,” said Val contemplatively. “You know your history, Maester Tarly, make no mistake.”

“Well, I am a maester.” He stared down at Gilly’s babe, busy examining his fingers. Sam brushed the boy’s tufty hair. It was oddly comforting. He looked back at Val. “But you did not ask me here just to look at babes, did you?”

“No.” For once, Val seemed hesitant. “It’s about Lord Snow, actually. Is it wrong that… that I…” She looked down at her hands.

“…that you worry about him,” Sam finished.

“Yes.” Val looked embarrassed. “Only… sometimes it seems to me that Jon Snow is the only thing keeping us all together. If we lose him…”

“Sometimes,” Sam said, “he does drift away, for a time. He has so many responsibilities on his shoulders, so much to do. But he always comes back. Even when you’ve given him up for good, he comes back. I worry about him too, you know. About lots of people. Like him. Like… Gilly.”

“I don’t think of Jon as you think of Gilly,” Val said, not quite able to meet his eye. But Sam was too distracted to take note of that. How do I think about Gilly? He still dreamed of her sometimes. The dreams always left him warm and tingling inside, and a little bit ashamed. He was glad when Val decided to change the subject to the wildling election.

“This vote is going nowhere, Maester Tarly. We all know that. No one has more than a third of the
votes, and there are still twenty fools in the running who have no chance of winning. If we took your solution and did it like they do in Tyresh—"

“Tyrosh.”

“Tyrosh, then. If we did it that way, we might stand a chance of actually ending the election. Or if you were to…” She lowered her voice. “…change some of the votes. I’m sure no one would notice.”

Sam shook his head. “It’s wrong to change the votes of the election.”

“It’s even more wrong to die waiting for someone to win. And if no one wins soon, no one ever will. We’ll all be dead.”

“I’ll… I’ll think about it.”

Val glanced out of the window. It was about six hours to midnight, but it was nearly pitch dark nonetheless. “I’ve kept you too long, Maester Tarly,” she said, standing. “Thank you for your time.”

“Fank you,” said Gilly’s babe.

Sam knelt down to kiss the boy on the forehead, as an impulse. “I will see you some other time,” he said to Val. “Good night.”

He was turning away when she called back to him. “Maester Tarly!”

“Yes?”

“Can you… can you talk to Lord Snow. Make sure he’s… remind him that he doesn’t have to do everything alone.”

So she did care for Jon Snow, even if she tried to hide it. Sam nodded. “I’ll see what I can do. But I make no promises.” That done, he set off through the keep and back down into the wormways.

His maester’s duties would at least wait until after supper. He found Dolorous Edd, Iron Emmett, Pyp, and red-haired Mully at a bench in the front of the common hall. New recruits crowded the back of the hall. “Strange,” Dolorous Edd had commented, “I’m sure we were never that small.” Sam understood it was a jape, but Edd’s words had some truth in it. The youngest of the Watch’s recruits were boys who barely looked their eight or nine years.

Three-Finger Hobb’s near-banishment from the kitchen by the Karstark ladies meant the food had improved somewhat, even if Edd complained about the strain on their resources. “Still,” said Pyp, as they ate stringy venison and mashed neeps. “It’s good to have some actual flavour in our meat.” It was still greasy and stringy, though.

“The neeps have been better mashed these past few days,” Sam added. “Probably because he’s got a few more kitchen-hands.”


“You’re the Lord Steward, Edd. They all work for you.”

“I’m the Lord Steward? Why, I had almost forgotten.” He spat out a bone. “I miss my latrine pit days.”

“Your neeps and latrine pits don’t matter,” said Mully. “We’ve got other problems. Wights.”
“Wights don’t need latrine pits,” Edd said. “They don’t take shits. I s’pose you shit yourself when you die, but there’s no more after that.”

Sam smiled lamely. Edd’s japes had dwindled in importance as the days wore on. “I might need some of your stewards and wildling spearwives,” he told the dour-faced steward. “Anyone who can splint a broken bone or leech out a fever or make poultices with herbs. If the wights start coming – when the wights start coming, I’m going to be a lot more busy.”

Iron Emmett frowned. “What happened to the days when we talked about fighting and girls over supper instead of our duties.”

“Girls don’t tear the skin from your bones.”

“They do if you piss them off enough.” Emmett cracked a knuckle. “Believe me, I should know.”

“Oh, you would,” Sam said, smiling. Everyone knew that Emmett took a couple of wildling spearwives to bed nowadays, and no one seemed to mind.

“It would be good if he let us have girls,” said Pyp. “You know, for morale, and everything.”

Dolorous Edd raised his tankard. “When I’m Lord Commander, Pyp, you can have all the girls you want.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” said Mully.

Edd snorted. “Hold me to it whenever you like. It ain’t never gonna happen.”

“Seriously, though,” said Pyp. “He should let us have girls. People would be a lot happier if they went back to a warm bed at night, if they had someone to hold and to touch and maybe even to love…”

“You know,” Sam said, “our vows don’t actually prevent us from lying with a women. As long as we don’t take any brides or father any children, we’re within our vows.”

“Within our rights,” said Iron Emmett.

Pyp’s ears flapped about. “Will you talk to Jon about it, Sam?”


Sam smiled sadly along with them. See, Jon? he thought, they would still accept you back. I know they would. We’re still your friends. But the mockery of Lord Snow still felt cutting. He remembered something Edd had once said during the Night’s Watch election. It’s a terrible cruel thing to do to a friend, but better you than me.

“Eyes up, Sam,” said Mully. “ Seems you’re needed somewhere.”

A boy tapped him on the shoulder, one of the recruits Clydas was working with. “What is it, Cormick?” Sam asked.

“Master Tarly,” he said, “they sent me to come find you.”

“Who?”
“The bear girl. And your brother. And Clydas.”

“What does he need?”

“There’s highborns, in urgent need of a maester. And of someone important to talk to, he says. More important than him.”

“Well, there’s Lord Snow—” Then he realised that she meant him, and Jon was still busy besides. “I’ll come down,” he said, heading out of the hall.

It was hot and stuffy and smelled sweaty down in the wormway, so the cold fresh air on his face when he emerged into the open was more than welcome. From there they climbed the ice-slick wooden steps to the maester’s tower.

Sam’s solar was well attended. Alongside Clydas, there were half a dozen other stewards, and three Northern ladies: Lyanna Mormont, of Bear Island, who would surely sooner be up on the Wall herself; Alys Karstark, Lord Harrion’s sister; and a third who Sam did not know.

“Ah, Master Tarly.” Lyanna Mormont’s voice was like frost on a lake. “You came. And not a moment too soon.”

“What is the matter, my lady?”

“Ask Lady Talia.” She pointed at the girl he did not know. “She knows the full truth of it.”

The girl stepped forwards. Sam recognised the emblem of her brooch, an ironwood tree in silver. Forrester. “L-Larence,” she said, meaninglessly. “You should see Larence first.”

She was in shock, Sam thought. “My lady? What do you mean, my lady?”

“Her husband,” said Lyanna Mormont. “Larence Hornwood. Lord of the Hornwood. He is in a bad way.”

“He will survive,” Talia assured him. “If you help him, he will survive. He is strong. The dead men… they came… he was protecting me from his horse…”

*Dead men?* “I thought you were at Ironrath, not up on the Wall, my lady,” Sam said.

“We were,” said Talia. “They came from the west. From the Stony Shore, and the Iron Islands beyond that.” She shivered a little; her shoulders hunched. “They flew Greyjoy banners. They came right through… heading east…”

...heading towards the Wall. A stone was hardening in Sam’s stomach. He swallowed down his anger. “How far behind you were they?”

“N-not far. They came to the castle gates. M-my mother…” She shivered. “After they overran Ironrath, they chased us. Larence… he tried to fight them off, but they cut him, and…”

“Where is Lord Larence?” Sam asked.

“Clydas took him through,” Wick Whittlestick explained. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Me?” Sam said. “Why me?”

“You’re a maester,” said Wick. “Aren’t you?”


“I… I suppose.” He nodded. There was no way out of this. “Well, then…” He had done healing and stitching up of wounds before, so he was not exactly new to this… but if he got this wrong…

_I will get this right. And then House Hornwood and House Forrester will both be indebted to the Night’s Watch._ Sam steeled himself. _You can do this. You fought an Other and a Stone Man, and Euron Greyjoy, down in Oldtown. You’ve seen more of the world than anyone else in this room._

They had laid the lordling out on the table upstairs, and Clydas had administered milk of the poppy. Sam had plenty of stewards on hand to help him. He made them light a hearth and fill a copper pan with boiling water, so he could sterilise the equipment, as the Citadel had taught him. Clydas prepared his instruments: scalpels, knives, tongs, a Myrish near-eye glass. Jars of leeches and maggots were on hand, but Sam did not think they would be necessary. He had them boil some hot wine, too, and decanted some milk of the poppy, a half-measure solution.

When he cut away Lord Hornwood’s shirt, the wound was not nearly as intimidating as it had seemed. The cut was big, but it was shallow, and though they had to hold the lordling down and put a rag in his mouth to stop him from screaming as Sam scraped away the pus and poured hot wine over the wound, no leeches or amputation saws were needed. Lord Larence had taken a thigh wound too, so they cleaned that out and bound that cut with bandage, too. After that, he had Clydas take his lordship up to the King’s Tower for some hot broth and a night’s rest. Talia Forrester started after him, but Sam stopped her as she was headed out. “You need to wait here,” he told her. “Lord Larence will be fine. But Jon Snow will be wanting to know about what happened, especially if…”

Talia swallowed. “Bran. He is at Winterfell.”

Sam bowed his head. “Yes. He will need to know.” He sent Jace to fetch Jon from his chambers. As they waited, he offered Talia a cup of honeyed wine and they sat talking about her experience. She seemed shaken at first, but that was only natural. Sam remained attentive throughout, but his thoughts were predominantly of unease. _If there are wights south of the Wall as well as north of it, this may be the end for us._ Perhaps he ought to be more panicked, but panicking would not solve anything.

The door opened without warning and Jon Snow stepped inside. His face was red and windburned. “Bran,” he said, heavily, “you mentioned Bran?”

Sam was momentarily confused. “My lord, I said they knew your brother…” He sighed. “Did Jace bungle the message again?”

“No.” Jon looked round, slightly haggard. _He is not well, _Sam thought. He noticed a chair and slumped into it. “Sorry. I’ve been… caught up in everything.” He stood up again. “But they know Bran.”

_“Knew. It was a while ago.”_ He showed Jon into the next room and let Talia Forrester explain things herself. Meanwhile Sam went back into his solar, sorting through vials of this and that and the other, carefully picking and changing labels. The leeches in the jar tried to attach themselves to his finger; Sam flicked them up. _If leeches could pick up a sword and fight alongside us, I have no doubt we’d make them an offer. We need every man and every creature against the wights._

But what could leeches do against wights? _They have no blood. No arteries and no veins. No muscles and no organs._ Which left another question. _What animates them?_ All the evidence pointed to the sorcery of the white walkers… but Sam had seen wights beyond the Wall, and their mad, often suicidal bloodlust. _If they are controlled by the white walkers, why would they do that?_

He must have been there longer than he realised, for the next thing he knew Jon was back in his doorway. He looked rather grey, and his brow was deeply lined. “Did Talia tell you?” Sam asked.
“Aye. She did.”

“Jon, even if he took Barrowton and Ironrath, maybe he’ll—”

“It will be Winterfell next,” Jon said. “If he hasn’t taken it already.” He was not speaking to Sam but through him. “And then the Wall. Enemies to the north and to the south. We will be surrounded, Sam.”

“We have enough men.” Sam did not know if it was true, but he had to believe it.

“Enough men to die, yes.” Jon leaned heavily against the door frame. “And die and die and die again. Our own friends and brothers will rise up when they fall and we will have to put them down again. Someday I may have to light a pyre for you, Sam. Or you for me.”

“Let’s not think of that day,” Sam said quietly. This was strange; usually Jon was the one who was brave, while he quivered in terror. But that had been before…

…and even then, it was not entirely true. After all, it had been Sam (and Pyp and Grenn and some others) who brought Jon back to Castle Black, that night when he tried to flee. We stopped him from breaking his vows. His spirit was broken, but we brought him back. He needed us then. He needs us now. “Jon,” he said, foregoing the usual address. “Can I ask you something?”

“Ask away.”

He’d meant to ask Jon about how he felt, but the words sounded small and stupid in his head. “Maester Aemon,” he said instead. “Jon, me and Melisandre… well, we were looking for something… when Maester Aemon left for Castle Black, did he give you anything?”


“Do you still have it?”

“Aye. Somewhere. I sent it back down to the library, actually.”

Sam nodded. “All right. Well… you should get some rest, Jon. You look like it would do you some good. I can make you some sweetsleep if you’d like.”

“Best not.” Jon glanced through the window, up at the Wall. “I may need my wits about me tonight.”

“Let’s hope not.”

“Aye, let’s hope.”

There were footsteps on the stairs behind him, and Sam turned to see Clydas, descending. The old man rubbed his eyes when he saw Jon. “Oh. Lord Commander. I… it is lucky that you are here. I have a letter for you.” He passed it across. Sam caught a smear of dark grey wax, but could not make out the sigil pressed into it. Jon broke the seal and read the letter to himself. His grey eyes softened, then hardened, then filled with fire.

“Is something wrong, Lord Commander?” Sam asked tentatively.

“No.” Jon swallowed. “It’s… it’s nothing. But… I may need you later tonight, Sam. It’s… nothing. We should both get some rest.”

“Jon, you look pale—”
“I said we should both get some rest.” Without another word, Jon turned on his heel and strode through the tower door, slamming it behind him.

Sam turned to Clydas. “Who was the letter from?”

“I… I didn’t look. I didn’t want to pry.”

You couldn’t see, more like. Clydas was old and half-blind. Sam sighed. “I’m going down to the library,” he said. You could never do too much reading, especially about the Others. And I need to find the Jade Compendium, and find out why Maester Aemon left it. “If you need me urgently, don’t hesitate to send someone.”

Sam made his way down through the wormways to the library. But when he navigated his way to his accustomed table, he found it already occupied. And more than that, Melisandre’s eyes were not on any of the books or scolls, but on him.

Sam had no choice but to take a seat opposite her. “Do you come to the library often?” he asked. “I have never seen you down here.”

“Perhaps you were not looking hard enough.” She said that with the hint of a smile, and Sam understood.

“Were you glamoured? I know the red priests can do—”

“What do you think, Samwell Tarly?” She waved a hand in front of her face. “Is this a glamour?”

Sam pondered a moment. “If it is,” he said at last, “it is a very good one.”

Melisandre smiled. “You certainly know how to flatter a woman. Or, at least, you know now. I think the past couple of years have changed you a lot, Samwell. And for the better.”

*Jon said the same thing.* “Well,” he muttered. “They were rather eventful years.”

“Maester Aemon gave a book to Jon,” Sam said evasively. “The Jade Compendium. It’ll be down here, somewhere. I should try and find it.” He set off into the stacks. It was very dusty, and it made him sneeze. Sam foraged deeper and deeper among the bookshelves, past yellowing parchment rolls and sheepskin tablets that were grey with dust. When he returned to his table to look on the other side of the hall, he saw that Melisandre had the *Jade Compendium* resting on the table in front of her, a mildly amused smile on her lips.

“My powers have their practical uses,” she said, with a tight-lipped smile, passing the book across.

Sam began to read, skimming through the pages. There were bits about dragonglass and dragonsteel, but it was stuff he already knew, and there was nothing about the Others directly, or about how the First Men had defeated them during the Long Night.

“I was with your friend Lord Snow earlier,” Melisandre told him as he read. “Though I admit we did not have much in the way of conversation. His lordship has been proving rather difficult lately.”

“It is the stress,” Sam said, feeling the need to defend his friend. “It is not easy for him.” He turned the book over and flipped to the back page. *Hmm.* The rear binding was curiously thick. “I think there’s a secret compartment.” He prised apart the back cover carefully, trying not to damage the book.

“If Aemon gave Jon Snow this book, surely the Lord Commander would have found whatever was
hidden inside?”

Sam shook his head. “I doubt it. He doesn’t have the time. He has the Night’s Watch to contend with, and the wildlings, and the Northmen. The black brothers dislike him for treating with the wildlings, the free folk mistrust him because he’s a crow, and the Northmen… well, he is Lord Stark’s bastard, not his trueborn son. Though I suppose his bastardy is less of a problem than the other two. Bastard birth did not stop Bittersteel or Bloodraven or Daemon Blackfyre. Daemon was born a Waters, did you know?” He stuck two fingers into the book and they closed around a thin sheet of parchment. Yes! He drew it out slowly, careful not to rip it, and laid it flat on the table. Maester Aemon’s spidery handwriting filled the page. …Soon I will lose my eyes, and then I will be no good for this… I have left something for my successors… if they know me, they will know where to find the key… Then there was a picture of a carving, of some sort of horned wolf, it seemed. It would have left most searchers clueless, but Sam recognised it at once. “That’s the carving on Aemon’s fireplace, up in the rookery,” he said. “He’s hidden something for us in the fireplace. And there’s a key… yes…” He knew where to find that, too. The place where Aemon kept all his secrets hidden. He stood up. “We should go to the rookery,” he told Melisandre.

He stopped. She was looking at him very strangely. “Say… say that again,” she said. “About the Great Bastards. Daemon Blackfyre was a Waters, you said. If he was born in the North, he would have been a Snow, wouldn’t he?”

When he nodded, Melisandre’s expression only grew stranger, and stranger still, as if the clouds had cleared in her vision, and she was seeing clearly for the first time. Her eyes were even redder than usual. “Is something wrong, my lady?” Sam had to ask.

“Only snow, Master Tarly,” she said cryptically. “He shows me only snow.”

Chapter End Notes

My favourite parts of this chapter were Sam’s conversations with Val and Edd and... ugh... I’m far too tired to write this. I might add to these notes earlier, but for now I’ll just say thanks for all the support.

There are no questions on this chapter, because the next chapter (up tomorrow) follows it directly. Among other things, we’ll get to see what’s in Jon’s letter.
Jon Snow stood by the hearth with the letter in his hands, as though casting it into the flames would make its contents no longer true. “I’m sorry, Lord Snow,” said Val. “Were you close?”

“Aye.”

“Was… was he a brave lad? I’m sure he was.”

“Braver than me.”

“He… he probably died bravely, then. Mance once said… he said… How can man die better, than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his gods?”

_He didn’t die bravely. He died screaming for his father. For his mother. For me. And I never answered him._ Jon curled the letter in his hands. _He said he was the three-eyed crow. A man should only have two, I told him. So here is a gift for you, Lord Snow. Bran screamed when I took it from him._

He had not told them about that part. He did not want them to know how his brother had died. Telling them would make it more than just a nightmare.

“What will you do now?” Val asked.

Jon clenched his fist, crumpling up the paper. He turned back to Val, Alys and Dolorous Edd, standing uncertainly in the middle of his solar. “Call the Night’s Watch to the Shieldhall,” he told Edd. “Lady Alys, I need the Northmen. Val, the free folk. We all need to talk.”

When they were gone, Jon collapsed, exhausted, into the chair by the window. He thought he ought to cry, but he had not cried since leaving Winterfell. Not at his father’s death, not at Robb’s, not at—

_That’s not true. I cried for Ygritte._

But now, nothing would come. All he could do was clench his jaw and his knuckles till they were
white. I am Lord Snow, and I am as cold inside as they say. He picked up the letter again:

Lord Snow,

I have Winterfell. Come and see. Your family’s castle is mine. The garrison are dead. My fifty thousand men were victorious. Come and see.

Your little brother is my captive. Or rather, he was. Lord Brandon was brave to the end. He never told me anything, not even when I took his fingers and made him eat them.

He said he was the three-eyed crow. A man should only have two, I told him. So here is a gift for you, Lord Snow. Bran screamed when I took it from him. He screamed for you. Listen, and you might hear him.

I have your father’s bones, Lord Snow, and his father’s, and his father’s. I dug the dead Starks up from the crypts and had their skulls made into a crown. And I will have my bride, Lord Snow, the one I was promised. I will wed myself to winter. And all you can do is watch us and wait.

Winter is coming for you, Lord Snow. For you and all your little friends.

Euron Greyjoy,

Lord Reaper of Pyke and Winterfell,

King of the Iron Islands and the North

The only mercy Jon could find in the letter was that Bran’s suffering was now over. But he still suffered, and if he had stayed at the Wall, none of this would have happened. He ground the point of his dagger into the desk and gritted his teeth. Cry, damn you, he told himself. Cry for your little brother. They killed him. They murdered him. Let the gods see your tears.

But all he felt was rising anger. “Kill the boy,” he said to himself, as Maester Aemon had told him so long ago. “Kill the boy, and let the man be born.” But at the moment, he could not say what that meant.

Jon went to the window and opened the shutters, letting the night air kiss his cheeks. The wind was quiet tonight, as soft as one of Ygritte’s caresses. And you know nothing, Jon Snow, she said. After all this time, still you know nothing at all.

“I know something,” Jon said. “I know my brother is dead, and I know it is my fault. I know the man who killed him, and I know what I want to do to him. What I should do to him. But it is breaking my vows. The Night’s Watch plays no part in the wars of the Seven Kingdoms.”

That settled that. He stuffed the letter into his cloak pocket and gazed out towards the Wall. Blue-grey mist was rising above it, higher and thicker every minute. It is a matter of days now, Jon thought. He had doubled the guard last week, and doubled it again tonight. Because when the wights came, they would not bring anything less than their full strength.

And with Bran gone...
With Bran gone, they could no longer rely on the support of Winterfell. And if Euron decided to march up the kingsroad as he was suggesting, they would be doomed for certain, caught in an impossible position between the ironborn and the white walkers. All they could do now was hope for the help from the south that seemed so unlikely.

Nothing would come of sitting here and moping. Jon took another moment to think, then made his way down to the Shieldhall. The gathering had mustered the expected turnout of wildlings and Sworn Brothers and Northmen, and all the usual arguments. Jon had to get Mully to bang on pots and pans for a good half-minute before it was quiet enough for him to be heard.

“You must be wondering why I have brought you all here,” he said. “I know I have interrupted the election of the free folk, and the councils of the Northmen. I know I have distracted my Sworn Brothers from their duties. So I will be brief. But this is a matter of the greatest importance. Earlier this evening, I received a message from Euron Greyjoy, who calls himself the King of the Iron Islands…and the North.” Then Jon took the scroll from his pocket and read what Euron had written. *Come and see. Come and see. Come and see.*

“The Night’s Watch takes no part in the wars of the realm,” he finished. “But at this moment, any threat to the realm is a threat to the Night’s Watch, and we must be wary—”

The Greatjon stood up. “If this is true, we *must* ride to Winterfell at once. To liberate the castle.”

Jon frowned. “A siege will be costly, my lord. We do not have the numbers, and—”

“The North is our land,” the Norrey said. “I agree with the Greatjon. We must defend our people and our castles. That is a lord’s first responsibility.”

“We are more than just lords and ladies here,” young Lyanna Mormont said. “There is a greater war ahead. Bear Island is lost, I know that. As are Last Hearth and the mountains, my lords. They may fall to ironborn, and they may fall to the Others. They are lost, and doomed. The North is not, though. And the Others pose a greater threat to the North than the Greyjoys. If you ride south, Lord Umber, you leave us unprotected. That is an act of selfish cowardice.”

“Har!” shouted Tormund Giantsbane. “Girl’s got bigger balls than half you big men!”

“You are not the lady of Bear Island, Lyanna,” said Maege Mormont, her mother. “Nonetheless… I am starting to agree with you. The white walkers pose the greater threat. Much as I would like to, we cannot ride south and meet Euron Greyjoy in battle, no matter what he does.”

Alys Karstark continued, “Lord Umber, your people are only ten leagues from Castle Black. Tell the captain of your garrison to bring them here. That way, they will be safe from Euron.”

“My people will not live among wildlings,” said the Greatjon.

“Then they will die alone,” said Morna o’the White Mask. “Their corpses will fall in the snow, and the Night King will add them to his army.”

“My family have held the Last Hearth for thousands of years—”

“This is bigger than your pride, man,” said Tormund Giantsbane. “This is not about your House, or your people. This is about our world. Men have held this world longer than your people have held your Last Hearth. Your loyalty is to them, first and foremost.”

“I will not abandon my people—”
“Then you will die trying to save doomed men. And we will die because you were not there to help us.”

“You are a wildling. You have no idea what it means to rule.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand your southern traditions. I had my own traditions too, once. But I gave them up when I fled south of your wall, because I knew there were things more important than that.”

Ramsay Bolton said, “And what does Lord Snow himself have to say about all this? It is his brother, after all.”

_Come and see. Come and see. Come and see._ Jon stood up again. Forty lords, ladies, clan chiefs, Night’s Watch officers and captains quietened to hear him speak.

“My vows prevent me from taking part in this war,” he began, “but that does not mean I have no desire to tear Euron Greyjoy’s throat out with my bare hands. But… Bran should have stayed at the Wall. He should have stayed with me. The Wall is not safe, we all know that. But it is the safest place there is. If Bran had stayed at the Wall, he would still be alive. You are alive because you are here. If you ride south, you give up your safety.”

“He murdered your brother!” shouted Big Liddle. “Your own brother, Lord Snow! Mutilated _and_ murdered! Have you forgotten—?”

The blood rose to a roar in Jon’s ears at that. “I have _not_ forgotten! And I will never forget! I am of the North, Lord Liddle, same as you, and the North remembers!”

_The North Remembers!_” the hall echoed.

Jon went on. “One day I will take the fight to Euron Greyjoy and destroy him and his stinking horde. I will mount his head on a spike and put it up on the Wall. And if he rides north, I will gladly deliver vengeance. But for now, we have a bigger fight to face, and we cannot ride south and let ourselves be… let ourselves be…” He had meant to say ‘distracted’, but Bran’s death was no distraction. He clenched his fist even tighter.

“We could have a compromise,” said Ramsay Bolton. “Let the men who would save their people ride south to face Euron while the rest of us stay at the Wall. Ironborn armies break easily without their leaders. They are ill-disciplined even with their commanders around. All it would take is one knife in Euron Greyjoy’s heart and their ranks would melt like butter on a hot day.”

That brought a rumble of agreement and some nods. “I never thought I would agree with the Bastard,” said the Greatjon. “But this would serve for me. Let me have vengeance, and afterwards I will return to your Wall—”

“Our Wall?” Val stood up in the middle of the hall. “You blind bloody fools, there is no Night’s Watch, no free folk, no Northmen. Today, tonight, tomorrow, we are _all_ Night’s Watch, like it or not. And we are here to _defend_ the Wall, whatever the costs. So I ask you, Lord Umber, do you know what the crows to a man who flees his post? They have him killed as a deserter. If you would abandon us now, you deserve the same fate!”

That brought some quiet to the hall, for the first time. The Greatjon stared him down. Jon knew he had to say something. “Together or not at all,” he said. “Either we _all_ go to Winterfell, or none of us do. And there’s only one way to decide.”

“Another vote,” Tormund Giantsbane said, with a slight laugh. “Of course. It would be like that.”
Jon nodded. “All those in favour of riding to Winterfell, stand up.” About one-third of the hall stood. Jon was tempted to stand up himself, but he knew that he had to stay seated. He made a rudimentary count, but it was really just for show.

“All those in favour of staying at the Wall, stand up.” The rest of them stood, Jon among them. They won. It was that easy. The rumble of discontent fell over the room again, and the Greatjon and some of his supporters stormed out. *It will not be easy convincing them to agree,* Jon thought, as they went. Grimacing, he stepped down from the dais.

“Lord Snow,” said Ramsay Bolton. “Maybe it is not my place, but I must urge you to reconsider your decision.”

“My decision has been made,” Jon said, pushing past him. “Though I do not see why this should concern you, Lord Bolton. You have no lands and no people to return to.” He did not wish to talk with Ramsay. The man had already caused him enough trouble, with his dogs and Ghost having to be caged to stop them from killing each other.

“Oh, indeed.” Ramsay went on. “I was on your side in that argument, in truth, as were almost all of them who went north with you to Craster’s Keep. But then there is the matter of the Greatjon. If you have him as your enemy, Lord Snow, things will not be easy for you. You cannot afford to create a rift in the Northern ranks at such a difficult time.”

“If the Greatjon tries to leave the Wall, then he will face justice, as Val said. But he will not leave, and I know that. They say that at the Red Wedding, he fought for my brother for as long as he could. The Greatjon might hate my decision, but he will stay here for the sake of his fellow Northmen, rather than rashly seeking vengeance and endangering them all.”

Ramsay nodded slowly. “For your sake, Lord Snow, I hope you are right.”

“And for yours,” said Jon. “Because if Lord Umber doesn’t act for the greater good, you will be a target of his vengeance.”

That said, Jon stepped out into the passage and climbed the stairs to his chambers. Dryn brought him a cup of mulled wine, unasked for. That made Jon smile for the first time that night. “Thank you.”

“You always have a cup of wine before bed, my lord. Hobb leaves the wine out for you now. It’s no trouble.”

When he was gone, Jon took Euron’s letter out of his cloak once again, crumpling it over and over in his hands. *I will tear him to pieces, even if I have to tear myself as well.*

Then he threw it down on the desk. *Let it be. Let it be.*

There was a knock at the door, an urgent *rat-a-tat.* Dryn poked his head around the door. “Visitor for you, Lord Commander.”

“I can bloody well hear that,” snapped Jon. “Who is it?”

“It’s me,” said Samwell Tarly. Of course it was him. Who else but Sam at this inconvenient, unfortunate hour? Jon did not invite him in, but Sam came in anyway, and stood in the middle of the floor with his arms awkwardly folded. “I’m sorry. I heard about your brother.” Sudden realisation appeared in his eyes. “That… that was in the letter Clydas gave you, wasn’t it? Why didn’t you say something?”

Jon ignored him. “What do you want, Sam?”
“I… I was speaking with Lady Melisandre.”

“About what?”

“About… about you, Jon.”

Couldn’t Sam see that he wanted to be left alone? “Could you be a little more vague?” he said acidly.

“Sorry, my lord.” Sam fidgeted. “It’s… well, I don’t know how to tell you this, but Lady Melisandre has a theory. And… it doesn’t seem too far-fetched, if you ask me.”

“Why hasn’t Lady Melisandre come herself, then?”

“She is consulting the flames, my lord.”

“Of course she is.” The red woman had been nothing but useless since her return to Castle Black. “And what is this new theory of hers, Sam? Perchance she has found some way to magic dragonglass out of thin air?”

“Not out of thin air,” said Sam. “But you’re not far wrong. My lord, don’t you ever wonder exactly how the Wall keeps the white walkers out? Some would say spells, and some would say magic, but maybe some of it is dragonglass. I mean, if you saw a wall of fire, you wouldn’t walk towards it, would you? Fire is as dangerous to men as obsidian is to the Others. Spells can be broken… but if the Wall has its foundations on obsidian—”

“The whole bloody Wall can be made of obsidian for all I care. It won’t stop the wights, and once they get over the top, we’re doomed. And then there’s Euron’s army coming up from the south, too. From the south that has abandoned us.” He slammed his fist down hard on the desk, bruising his knuckles. “Why do we do this, Sam? Why do we risk our lives for them when they would never risk their lives for us? Even the Northmen… Greatjon Umber, the mountain clansmen… they want to run back to their castles. Bran is dead and gone. Sansa and Rickon have failed to deliver on their promises, the Lannisters and the Targaryens are behind a wall the snow, and I have no way to communicate with them—”

“There may still be a way,” said Sam. “Melisandre and I found something hidden in the library.” Gingerly, he drew something out of the folds of his cloak. “Careful. The edges are sharp.”

Jon frowned at the object. It was an ugly shard of greenish-black glass, tapering to a point so that it almost looked like… “A candle,” he said, “you’ve brought me a candle. Well done, Sam.”

Sam sighed. “It’s not just any candle. It’s a glass candle. Made of obsidian. It will kill white walkers, I imagine, but it has other uses. If you can light a glass candle, you can use it to see faraway places, in the present, past and future. And you can talk to people far away.”

Bran had possessed similar powers, as the three-eyed crow. Can you talk to the dead? Jon wondered, turning the candle in his gloved hands. “And who do you propose I talk to?”

“Archmaester Marwyn,” said Sam at once. “He serves at Daenerys Targaryen’s side. If we can speak with her, maybe we can convince her of the reality of this threat. If she comes north… dragons are fire made flesh, Jon. Fire kills the wights.”

“I sent a raven to Daenerys Targaryen. She did not even bother responding.”

“Maybe the raven got lost—”
“Or maybe she, like all the other lords of Westeros, just doesn’t care about some poor bastards on the Wall!” He was getting sick of the hopefulness in Sam’s voice. “Maybe I don’t care either.” It would be so tempting to just leave them all to squabble and die in darkness. But I would die too.

“No.”

“What?”

“No,” Sam repeated sternly. “You do care, Jon, even if you say otherwise. I think you care too much. Maybe you’re on the brink of giving up, but that’s only because you put so much work into this and seem to get so little out of it. Maybe you think you’re alone, but that’s only because you insist on isolating yourself. When was the last time you had a drink with me and Pyp and Edd? When was the last time you danced or sang or even smiled?”

“I’m the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, if you haven’t noticed, Sam. I don’t have time—!”

“Then make time.”

“It’s not that easy—”

“Then let us help you, instead of locking yourself away. You’re the Lord Commander, yes, but before that, you were – and you still are – my friend. Someone’s friend, someone’s brother, someone’s son. A man. And I didn’t travel all the way to Asshai and back to watch you burn yourself out. I didn’t watch—”

“It’s all just words, Sam!” Jon said, standing up. He scrunched Euron’s letter up even tighter. “Words, words, words. Maybe you’re too stupid to realise it, Sam, but words are wind. Say whatever you want, it doesn’t mean anything. We’re all here, and we’ll all die here! We lost thousands of men at Craster’s Keep. I saw them die, and all I could do was run away. We lost Mance too, and now the weight of this has fallen on me… and now here I am, stuck at the Wall in the midst of a snowstorm, and Bran, my blood brother, will die without my help. Winter is coming, Sam, but believe me, I am not far from walking out into the snow and ending it—” Then he broke off abruptly, as if realising that he’d been speaking aloud the whole time.

“You can’t give up,” Sam said quietly.

“I’m not giving up,” Jon spat. “I’m not. I won’t. Damn it, Sam. Why did you let him go?”

“I don’t know what you mean, J—”

“Bran. You let him go north of the Wall, to Bloodraven’s cave. Don’t lie to me. He told me what happened. You met at the Nightfort, and you let him go through, and you did not breathe a word of it to me. Me. You… he would have come back to Castle Black if you asked him. If you told me, none of this would have happened.”

Sam stared back into his eyes. “If I told you, Jon, you would have insisted on riding out to find him. You would have died, and Janos Slynt would be our Lord Commander, and we would all be dead for certain.”

“And what are we now? Dead-for-almost-certain?” Jon scoffed. “Thank you, Sam. I see it all so clearly now. You have saved us. You and Melisandre and your vague murmurings of prophecy. Flaming swords and magic candles and knights of the nightingale. Oh, well done.” His eyes turned cold. “Our saviours. Well, Sam: here is something you need to know. There is no saviour. Only us. Only me.” Jon pointed towards the door. “Go. I need some time on my own, Sam. Go, before I get angry.”
Sam moved reluctantly, but in the end he obeyed, until he reached the door, where he turned around to add a final remark. “You should get some sleep, Jon.”

Jon threw Euron’s balled-up letter at him. The door slammed shut. He’d been hoping that the paper would tear itself – and Sam – into a thousand pieces, somehow; instead it rolled along the sloping floor back towards him. Tiredly, he knelt and picked it up. Why did I do that? he wondered, sitting with the paper in his hands once more. Sam is my friend.

*Or at least, he was.*

After some time, he became aware of a flapping inside the room. Looking up, he saw that Mormont’s raven had alighted on the lintel above the door. “Snow,” it squawked at him, “Jon Snow!”

“What?” Jon asked, irritated.


That was passing strange, Jon thought. *Raven has two syllables.* Usually the bird spoke only in short, sharp, sounds, like ‘snow’ or ‘crow’ or ‘death’, its favourite.

“Snow,” it said, “Death, death, death…”

“Away with you.” Jon shooed it towards the window with a tired hand, but it refused, landing even closer to him. “Horn,” the bird said, “horn, horn.” Then it flew to the window.

*Horn?* Jon thought, a moment before a sound like the scream of a burning, dying man brought a swift end to the quiet. It was a horn, all right, but it was like no horn he had ever heard, louder and shriller than any of the wildling warhorns. The noise it made was a scream at first – a scream of white-hot pain and horrible anguish – and then it was the whistling, keening sound of wind, wailing through an empty mountain pass. *Fire and ice,* he thought.

Mormont’s raven took flight and headed skyward. In the moment that followed, all Jon could hear was the thunder of his own heartbeat, *ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.* It was another moment before he realised the implications of a horn that was not their own. *The Others?* was his first thought, but the white walkers did not announce their presence on the battlefield as men did. *Men, then. But whose men?*

He stumbled across the solar and through the door, picking up Longclaw from its hook as he went. In the courtyard below, others were coming out of the towers and halls to see what was happening. The Wall above reflected the light of their torches.

Jon found Tormund Giantsbane and Val standing amid a circle of wildlings. “Did you hear that?” he asked them.

“Sounds like it came from the south. And look… the mist….”

Pale fronds of blueish-white mist were rising above the towers and walls, tumbling slowly towards Castle Black. “The mist,” said Tormund. “The Others travel in the mist, Lord Snow.” Warily, Tormund took a step back. He was not the only one to do so.

*Stay calm,* Jon wanted to say. “The Others can’t get through the Wall.” But for some reason, he did not really believe himself.

And then, from the top of the Wall, he heard screaming. *The wights cannot have climbed it so*
quickly, he thought, not understanding. Someone blew a horn, but it made a strangled noise, as if the mouthpiece had been cruelly torn away from their lips. Jon drew Longclaw, and the wildlings around took out their weapons. He thought he glimpsed Iron Emmett and some of his Sworn Brothers, but then they too disappeared into the blank white mist.

He knew then that they should move, that they had to move, and then the first horn blew again, a shrill noise from the south, and again: AAAAAAAAAWWHHOOOOOOOOOoooooooo.

And then the earth began to shake. The rumbling impact almost knocked Jon to his knees, but he steadied himself against Tormund’s shoulder. He heard Val gasp, and with mounting horror, he followed her pointing finger. The mist was still thick as anything, but the powers that had made it had cruelly allowed them one line of sight through the towers and buildings, to the Wall, where—

“A crack,” said Jon, disbeliefing. They all stood, dumbstruck, watching as the crack wound its way up the ancient blue ice, widening with every instant, up and up and up, like some ancient hand was pushing through it from the inside, breaking it apart. The cracking noise became louder and louder, and that was what brought the thousands of men gathered in front of the Wall back to life. The mist climbed, but Jon could see them running, in every direction their legs would take them, away from the Wall, towards it, into the wormways, through the doors. As he stood watching, a great thousand-year-old sheet of ice detached itself from the Wall and began an almost graceful descent towards Castle Black. Val grabbed his arm, shouted “Come on!” and dragged him away, even as the sheet met the snow and shattered into a billion crystal fragments.

Far away through the snow he heard howling. Ghost. I have to fetch Ghost. The direwolf was still penned up behind the armory. Jon broke free of Val’s grasp. “Go!” he shouted, “get in the wormways, get down!” Then he was gone, running through the blowing snow, shouldering past men as they fled in the opposite direction. The night was completely black. He tore a torch from a wall sconce and used it to guide his way to the kennels. While he was crossing the courtyard, there was a ruinous boom and the whole of the Wall shuddered, as the foundations went out from underneath it, and the segments came apart, tumbling sideways, sending a shower of snow and ice onto their heads. Avalanche, Jon thought, there is an avalanche coming. Maybe they could wait it out by getting into the wormways... or maybe they were all doomed.

Jon staggered towards the kennels. Dogs were barking inside, horses whinnying in the back stables. As he took the keys out from his belt, a voice called to him. “Mind if I have those after you?”

He turned. It was Ramsay Bolton, flanked by two of his men. “The Wall’s collapsing, Lord Bolton,” Jon said, approaching Ghost’s cage. “There’s no time.” The direwolf snapped and snarled at the bars, only too eager to get out.

“True, but I cannot leave my dogs. Beasts are a bastard’s best friend, wouldn’t you agree? Men don’t love us, but dogs – and wolves – are so loyal.”

Jon fumbled and dropped the keys. Ramsay knelt to pick them up. “A shame about your Wall,” he said, passing them back.

“It’s not my Wall. It’s our Wall.”

“No,” said Ramsay. He put a hand on Jon’s arm. “It’s yours.” His eyes flared, a cold blue—

Blue.

Jon jerked backwards, a moment too late. He went for Longclaw, but his fingers were ungainly, as if he were drunk. When he looked down, Ramsay’s dagger was buried to the hilt in his chest. He put
his hands around it, as if he could somehow tear it out. Strangely, he felt very little pain. “You…” he said, and coughed out blood, “…why?”

The blue eyes smiled back. “I spent half a year north of the Wall after Stannis drove me out of Winterfell, Lord Snow. Do you really think I never encountered our blue-eyed friends, not even once? Oh, I did. And they had so much to say to me. We made great plans together.” He took the knife out and thrust it in again, and again, and again. Jon stumbled back, against the cage. He could feel Ghost throwing himself at the bars. The fifth time, the knife took him in the stomach. Ramsay dragged it out, leaving a trail of blood. Jon tried to beat his hands away, but he was so tired, so very tired…

When he opened his eyes again, Ramsay was gone. Half-frozen blood was running down his tunic. The ground rattled, as big clumps of snow drifted down from atop the Wall. “Ghost,” Jon managed to say, resting his eyes. Flames flickered in front of his vision. A man’s voice said, “Help me bring him inside,” and he felt arms lifting him up. Sam? he wanted to say, half-recognizing his voice. He caught the swirl of a red cloak. Snow kept falling over his head. After that, there was only white.

Chapter End Notes

Something, something, happy ending, something, haven't been paying attention.

"Kill the Boy." Well... the boy is dead.

And yes, I did just leave you on a cliffhanger where Jon Snow is dead and the Wall is in the midst of breaking apart.

Just to quell anyone's doubts/improve their understanding: Jon Snow is dead. Which is going to be problematic, to say the least. This is the oldest twist in the book, and it's one I've been planning for a very, very long time. I've always known that Jon would die at the end of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, and everything leading up to it - getting Sam and Melisandre back to the Wall, for example - is really just a preparation for this.

SerGoldenhand, is Jon Snow really dead?
Jon Snow is dead.

I think we'll move on to some less contentious things.

For example, I'll talk about Euron's letter, and how it seems to contradict continuity that we already know. Which, if you look at it in a certain way, means there is a silver lining to all this. Or not. Because if Euron is suggesting that Bran has been tortured, then he's alive (good), but also he's been tortured (bad). Either way, we're not going back to Winterfell until Part Three, so you'll have to wait to find out.

Yeah, that's really good, SerGoldenhand. But I don't really care. I don't think Jon Snow is dead. You see, Melisandre and Sam took him away at the end of this chapter.
Jon Snow is dead.

I find it similarly heartbreaking that the last proper conversation Jon had with Sam was an argument. But... well, it is what it is. Sam's going to be regretting that for a long time, all throughout THE HOUR/YEAR/KNIGHTS/THINGY OF THE NIGHTINGALE.
We didn't really get much of Melisandre this chapter. Which is a shame, because she has an important role to play. Just to clarify, the men who managed to escape into the wormways will probably be safe even if the whole Wall does come down, and the fallen snow and ice will help keep them safe against the Others - for a time. They've got access to Castle Black's buildings, and they can get food from the cellars. Probably. In a way, it worked out quite nicely for them.

Oh, is she going to bring back Jon? Like she did in the sh-
No. Jon Snow is dead.
Yeah... I would believe you, but HBO and D&D said that too, and they lied to us.
Look here, you little shit. He's dead. JON SNOW IS DEAD.

Join me tomorrow, for a new chapter, in which I murder Davos and Shireen in cold blood.

***

Anyway, for my commenters, some questions for you.

1. “Jon Snow is dead.” Do you agree with this comment?

2. “Without Jon Snow's leadership, the defense at the Wall is doomed to fail.” Do you agree with this comment?

3. With Jon's death, is there anyone left alive who can take command of the armies at the Wall?

4. Was Jon a fool to ever trust Ramsay Bolton, even in the slightest?

5. Did Melisandre know about Jon's impending fate? If so, why didn't she notify him more urgently?

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P.S. I will be replying to your comments with my shiny new Bolton sigil, unlocked specially for this chapter. Praise Lord Ramsay!
Forest of the Dead

Chapter Summary

“There’s good and evil on each side of every war ever fought.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAVOS

The wind off Lion Bay was wailing like an angry bitch. In all his seafaring years, Davos had never heard anything quite like it. Greyfingers’s men said it was the sound of ghosts, trapped beneath the earth. “The ghosts of the Reynes,” Greyfingers himself reckoned. “Them that Tywin Lannister put in the earth, back when you were still sucking yer mother’s teat, Davos.” The smuggler spoke in an age-old fashion, as though he too had not been a suckling babe too when Lord Tywin had put the Reynes of Castamere to the sword.

That night, when they had pitched their tents in the shadow of a vast rocky outcrop about a half-mile from the coast, Davos made his usual foray to his old friend’s tent. “We are too exposed out here,” Greyfingers said, without greeting, as was his wont. “I tell you, Davos—”

“—that we should go inland. You know, Gryff, where I grew up, we had a name for men who said the same stupid things over and over.”

“Don’t hold back, Davos.”

“We called them imbeciles.”

Greyfingers snorted. “Any more, Davos? You done with your insults now? Maybe you should try listening.”

“I’ll listen.” If there was one thing Davos Seaworth could do, other than sail, it was listen. It was the most important quality a King’s Hand could possess. I’ll listen to the same argument you’ve been giving me for days.

“You’re a fool, Davos. And I’ll be damned if we all make it to Castamere through this. Not this close to the coast. We both know what lurks out here…”

Dead men. That was the word in the taverns and winesinks of Lannisport, where Ser Davos had spent days searching for men to ferry him and Princess Shireen to Ser Kevan Lannister, at Castamere. The boy-king had offered some of his Companions, and the support of some Crakehall over in Kayce, but Davos had decided it was safer to make for Ser Kevan. Better the Lannister crony you know than the Lannister crony you don’t. Shireen had argued otherwise, but for once, Davos’s
experience had prevailed. So after a couple of searches in Lannisport’s seedier quarters, he’d managed to find a score of fools willing to act as an escort. The boy-king’s gift of gold had gone that far, at least. It also bought dozens of rumours that the ironborn, or corpses, or both, were stalking the shores of the Westerlands from Banefort in the north to Feastfires in the southwest. They also variously claimed that Fair Isle was now an island of ghosts, or that an invasion fleet was amassing.

“We have seen none of your promised dead men,” Davos said to Greyfingers. “If we go inland, it will be your responsibility to deal with bears and wolves—”

“—and grumpkins and snarks too, Davos?” Greyfingers snorted. “These beasts you are so afraid of are exactly that: beasts. They will quickly run when they see us coming.”

“Maybe so. But sticking to the coast will be quicker, and that is what we need. The sooner we make it to Ser Kevan, the sooner we can stop worrying.” As it stood, Castamere was not much more than a day from here, assuming their garrons kept up a reasonable pace.

“All you do is worry,” said Greyfingers.

“Aye. With good reason.” Davos sighed. He was thankful for the company, but as smugglers went, there were many he would sooner have with him than Gryff Greyfingers. True, the man knew winter (as his close relationship with frostbite proved), but that would only take them so far.

Their fine company also included the likes of Varley the Consistent, Casper Foxman, Mad Darius, and the Syren. “What is a Handship compared to fine friends like these?” Davos had asked as they set off, his voice dripping with scorn. They all seemed to vaguely resent him, for having risen above the world of winesinks and brothels, but smugglers fast learned not to concern themselves with other men’s opinions.

But smugglers never forgot their old companions. Davos reckoned he had ‘old friends’ in every city in Westeros, and a good deal on the far side of the Narrow Sea, too. During their long, quiet rides, he found himself wondering what had happened to Salladhor Saan, and other such trivialities. If Salla had any sense, he never even considered venturing back into the War of the Five Kings. He’s probably in some Lysene pleasure-house even now, lying in a hot bath while I freeze and starve at the end of the world…

“Will you take a cup before bed, Davos?” Greyfingers asked, uncorking a bottle of some vile-looking spirit with gloved hands.

“One. And only one.”

“They always say that.” Varley the Robber entered through the tent flap behind him. “Don’t they, Greyfingers?”

“Aye. That they do.”

Varley squatted in the corner. “There’d better be women at Castamere, m’lord Davos,” he said. The honorific was more of a mockery than anything. “And a privy. A proper, warm privy. I haven’t had a proper shit in six days.”

“A toast to Varley the Constipated,” said Greyfingers, passing round the cups. Davos had to smile. Truth be told, he missed this sort of camaraderie. Aye, there was something to be said for Brynden Blackfish’s stories, and for Marya’s warmth, but he felt a certain kinship with this lot. Our paths have taken us in different directions, but we all started from the same shithole. In another world, they too might have been Davos Seaworths. Then all the great lords and kings would have smugglers at
A world run by smugglers would be much more honest, thought Davos wryly. He shared a cup with Greyfingers and Varley before returning to Shireen’s tent at the edge of camp.

He poked his head slowly into the flap, cautious not to disturb the princess, but there was no need. Despite the darkness, Shireen was awake with her nose buried in a book, squinting to read. “You’ll go blind like that,” Davos warned her.

“It’s better than just sleeping, ser.”

“You need to sleep. We have a long ride ahead of us tomorrow. If we can make it fifteen miles, we’ll be in eyeshot of Castamere.”

“No, we won’t.”

Did she know something he didn’t? “What do you mean?”

“We won’t be in eyeshot of Castamere, because it’s mostly underground. The part of the castle above ground is quite small, actually. But then there are miles and miles of tunnels and mines and caverns—”

“How do you know that?”

Shireen pointed to her book. “It’s a history of the Westerlands. Cousin Tommen let me borrow it from his library.”

He’s not like to get it back. The book had not weathered the journey well, even though it was well protected from the elements in Shireen’s saddlebags. The leather cover was peeling, the pages were as thin as mothpaper and torn at all the edges, the spine was splitting. But when Davos pointed that out to Shireen, she just shook her head. “It’s nearly two hundred years old,” she said. “It was written during the Dance of the Dragons. Ser Tyland Lannister commissioned it, but he never got to read it, because Rhaenyra Targaryen had him blinded for refusing to reveal the Crown’s secrets. Later he was Hand of the King for Aegon the Third. I think he was a brave man. A great man, even.”

“And a Lannister.”

Shireen chewed her lip. “That doesn’t change what he did. Even if we’re still… well, we’re not enemies, not anymore. Not really. I mean… we are, but… there’s good and evil on each side of every war ever fought. You told me that.”

How was he supposed to tell her that he didn’t believe it anymore? How did he tell her that he sometimes dreamed of throttling the Lannister boy, of choking the life from him, of threatening to kill him unless he somehow brought Devan back? For some reason he hated the boy more for trying to act nobly. All he did was absolve himself of guilt and pass the hatred on to me.

“Aye,” he said flatly. “Good and evil on both sides.”

“Mother,” Shireen said. “She was evil, at the end… but she thought she was doing the right thing. Sometimes I worry… I think I’m doing the right thing, but what if I’m not? What if I’m just making things worse? I thought there might be a way to bring us all together, but Father isn’t going to unite with the Lannisters, and even if he does, there’ll just be new wars to take their place. It makes me think that there isn’t an easy solution to all these things. It just goes on and on.”

It hurt Davos to hear those words. That was what he hated most about war. It takes the innocent and
the kind and forces them to become something else, something cold and cynical. It did that to me, and to my elder sons, and it will do the same to Marya and Stanny and Steff if it goes on much longer. “Don’t say that,” he said to Shireen. “It will end, soon. It will end with your father on the Iron Throne... or...” He swallowed. “Or otherwise.” And then the deaths of my sons will all have been for nothing.

Shireen swallowed. “If it is otherwise, what will happen to us?”

“I don’t know, child.” But I am afraid of it nonetheless. “That is a question for another day. To bed, now.” Davos pressed Shireen’s book closed and set it down. “We have a long day of walking ahead of us tomorrow.”

Shireen wrapped herself up in her second cloak – serving as a quilt – and rested her head on the burlap sack that served as her pillow. Davos watched her settle down before moving to his own side of the tent and following suit. After a few minutes, the sounds from Shireen’s side grew quiet. He didn’t think she was sleeping, though. If he asked, she’d say she was “thinking.” She did that quite a lot, but whenever Davos asked her what she was thinking about, she would avert her eyes and try to change the subject.

She is Stannis’s daughter, through and through. If you had asked him at the start of that year, Davos Seaworth might have said otherwise, but now he realised that the only thing Shireen had inherited from Selyse Florent was her protruding ears. Other than that, the girl was as faithful, stubborn and unshakeable as anyone he had ever met. But she is kind, too. Her father took a bleak view of unearned sentiment, while Shireen prized it. She could see value in even the most worthless things and people. Davos liked to think he had taught her that, but such insight was beyond him. She is not just good. She is better.

The men and women of his generation had dragged the world down into war. Their time was done; it had ended in blood and death and darkness. But if their sons and daughters all turned out like Shireen, then there was hope, light at the end of the tunnel. To that end, he said a prayer to the Mother. Have mercy on us. And keep her safe.

And keep my wife and my sons safe too.

That night he dreamed he was warm, back in his four-poster bed with the hand-sewn quilts, in a little keep on the fringest of the Rainwood. Marya was there beside him. Her face had all the years of wisdom, but still the colour of her youth which Davos had fallen in love with. Her breasts were as big and firm as they had ever been, and her hips were gracious curves, not bulges. When he looked down at himself, Davos realised he was young again; the grey hair had given way to brown, the old aches and pains of age had disappeared.

There he lay, with Marya pressed tight against him, drinking in her sweet essence as though it were fruit wine. And there in the bed around them, close and far, were his boys. This was a time when Dale and Allard were still babes, yet Stanny and Steff were there too, of an age with their elder brothers. The Onion Knight, his wife, and seven sons.

That was when he realised this world was not real.

“Ser Davos,” he heard a voice say. It was not Marya, no. This voice was far from hers, harsher and older and yet wiser...

Melisandre?

“No,” said the voice. It was a boy’s voice, he realised, on the cusp of manhood. Is... is this Devan,
“Wake up,” said the voice. “Wake up, Ser Davos...” Then it faded away, a breath on the wind, like a breeze rustling through trees. And suddenly the onion knight was awake, and through the blackness he could see his own breath blowing in front of his face, turning to blue mist.

Only when he pulled off his furs and sat up did he realise how cold it was in the tent. His fingers and toes were nearly numb, and when he felt his way through the darkness to the tent flap he found the canvas lining stiff with frost. That was wrong, he realised at once. It was cold, yes, but not that cold. His breath was coming out in great steaming clouds, but he was finding it increasingly difficult to breathe at all.

All his moving about must have woken Shireen, for suddenly she was at his side, muttering something about the peculiar coldness of the tent. “I want to go outside,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because it doesn’t look like a snowstorm.” She pointed to the shadows of snowflakes through the canvas sheeting. “So why is it so cold?”

Davos was getting increasingly more and more unsettled with every passing moment. “Well,” he said, very quietly. “There’s only way to find out.” He reached up to unfasten the tent flap—

“Stop,” Shireen hissed suddenly, her hand covering her mouth. “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

She shivered. “It was... I don’t know. It looked like a person. But at the same time, it didn’t. I... I’m frightened, Ser Davos.”

Of course she was. Despite his earlier considerations, Shireen was still a child, and a girl at that, untrained in how to defend herself. “Wait here,” he said quietly, drawing his sword from its scabbard under the furs. “I’ll... I’ll go and look.” He figured his bravery only came because he had not seen the figure Shireen spoke of. Davos was as afraid of mysterious figures in the night as any man. Especially here. With what they were saying in Lannisport... with what Greyfingers was saying... maybe they weren’t lying. Dead men walking.

Shakily, he pushed through the tent flap.

A burst of cold wind made him stagger, and snowflakes filled his eyes and then his throat, almost making him retch. Some of the snow must have fallen across his face, because he could not see anything. It was only when he tried to wipe it away and failed that Davos realised the situation: their camp was stranded and alone in this world of white.

Faintly, he heard a voice from the next-nearest tent. It sounded like Varley the Robber, and it was shouting, “Get—,” though Davos could not make out the rest of it. Get over here? Get over there?

Then he squinted through the mist and saw where Varley was pointing. Behind him.

Get away from there, he realised.

He turned slowly, and with mounting dread. His first expectation was a wolf, but that was quickly shattered. “Who’s that?” asked Shireen, peeking through the tent flap behind him. “Ser Davos, who’s that? What does he want?”
Davos knew talking would be of no use here. He put a gloved hand around the hilt of his sword and brought it slowly out of its scabbard; it made a slow, shrieking noise, and then there was complete silence.

The man sprinted towards them, arms outstretched. His mouth was open in a scream, but curiously he made no sound.

Davos’s sword was old and weathered, but it still did what a sword had to do. He lunged sharply, plunging it through the man’s stomach. Shireen screamed. The man did not. Even with three feet of steel protruding from his belly he did not stop coming towards them. Davos tripped backwards, not expecting the force of the charge, and fell. When he found his feet again, the man was standing over Shireen, with blue fire in his eyes, ready to swing—

Suddenly Varley the Robber came out of nowhere and shoulder barged him into the snow. Davos dragged Shireen back towards the cover of the tent, then ran back in to help Varley to finish the man off, pulling out his sword and slamming it down again and again, this time through the man’s skull. The blood that came out was black and tarry, like old pus.


More of the wights were closing in, appearing from the mists around them on all sides. Some walked; others ran. The smugglers and Baratheon soldiers moved together towards the centre of camp, defending all angles. Davos found himself beside Greyfingers. “The horses,” he said, “we have to get the horses.”

He could not find their mounts in the mist, but fortunately Greyfingers knew the way. He pointed. “Go!”

Davos could hear the horses whinnying as he closed in. He set about untying the ropes, but Shireen grabbed him by the shoulder, and pointed to his sword. Even then, it took three hacks of the blade to break the frayed, frozen ropes. The wights were getting more and more numerous. Davos counted at least a hundred, and their torches were dwindling. He gave Shireen a leg up onto the garron’s back. As he did so, she screamed, and pointed behind him.

He spun just in time to catch the wight mid-leap, turning it away into the snow. Fire, he thought desperately. Varley killed it with fire. Not thinking clearly, he threw his torch at it. The horses spooked and broke free of their bindings, dragging broken mooring posts away into the night. Shireen, Davos remembered just in time. Her horse was about to bolt, so his only thought was to throw himself at the flank and hope he managed to find some sort of purchase.

The gods were with him, for once. He caught the hem of Shireen’s cloak and somehow struggled onto the horse’s back as it started off at a mad gallop, away from their tents. Uncontrolled, the garron followed the other horses – and the dozen men riding them – out of the clearing and into the surrounding woods. A wight tried to block their path, but the garron kept on going, breaking the dead man into a hundred tiny fragments of bone.

Davos had the reins. His control of horses was always inhibited by his lack of fingerbones with which to get a good grip, but that did not matter here, as the garron was guided not by its passengers but by its fear. With Shireen clinging to his back, they sped into the trees. “Ser Davos,” the girl murmured against his neck, “what were those things?”

“Wights,” Davos replied tersely. “Dead men.” He did not tell Shireen about the shadows he glimpsed to their left and right, closing in through the mist and snow. Faster, he willed the garron,
faster, damn you!

Suddenly other horses were running with him, and with relief, he saw the men in the forest were not wights, but men, living, breathing men, with blood running in their veins. There was fire, too; sweet, red, fire, and smoke rising in great black plumes. But he still heard hoofbeats, closing in. The wights were still here; he could almost smell them. And then tree branches were whipping at his face, and he could feel blood running down his cheek, and the horse was wilder than ever, and then suddenly—

There was an earsplitting crack of bone and bone, and Davos and Shireen were thrown from the saddle together; the horse kept going, on and on and on. For a moment all was black, but only for a moment. His head throbbed. Princess Shireen was above him, her face swimming. “Ser Davos?” She tugged at his arm. “Ser Davos, are you all right?”

Davos sat up. His ribs were throbbing too, but miraculously, nothing seemed broken. His leg flared in pain when he leaned on it, but with one hand on a tree, he managed to stand up. “There were flames,” he said quietly. “I saw fire. And men… we’re safe now. We’re safe.” If he believed it hard enough, perhaps it would be true.

He put his hands on Shireen’s cheeks, warming her pale skin. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he said, and gave a snort of laughter. There was pain in his ribs, and in his chest, and everywhere, but they were uninjured.

“Oh, Davos,” she said quietly, “I think I have.”

The men stood around them, with fiery torches and swords in their hands. Only… those were not torches and swords in their hands, but flaming swords. Burning swords. Davos had to resist the overwhelming urge to laugh. Why would I ever need your Lightbringer, Melisandre? I’ve found a dozen of my own.

But one sword burned hotter and brighter than all the rest. The man wielding it stepped forwards and lowered his blade. Snowmelt hissed when it met his blade, and evaporated. “Ser Davos,” he said, stepping into the moonlight. “You are lucky to be alive.”

No. Can it be…? “You’re a ghost,” he muttered.

“A ghost,” King Stannis Baratheon agreed, grimacing. “And a living, breathing ghost, at that. I will give you a moment to get over your shock, but only a moment. Time is not something we have in abundance, and we need to get back to Castamere and Ser Kevan before the wights return.”

Davos suddenly felt faint. His legs buckled beneath him, and he had to use his hands to steady himself. And then, at the end of the world, with Shireen at his side, with the moon and Red R’hllor and the Seven looking down on him, he fell to his knees and sobbed.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, come on, guys... you didn't really think I'd killed Stannis the Mannis, did you?

This chapter turned out a lot simpler and more straightforward than I'd originally planned it to be. In the old plans, we had this chapter taking place at Kayce, and Stannis wasn't even in it - just some Baratheon men who said that their king was alive. I understand that having Stannis out scouting in the woods the same time Davos and
Shireen were attacked is an almost unbelievable coincidence, but I didn't really see the point in writing a lengthy fakeout to just reach the same conclusion - Stannis is alive.

So, yeah. The Mannis is back, and from his dialogue, it sounds like he's made a tag-team alliance with Kevan Lannister, which is going to be epic. It also shows the extent of the threat faced by the Westerlands. The attacking ironborn are presumably part of Euron's army of wights.

I think Davos's opinion of Tommen was one of the hardest things to write in this chapter. It's a crushing blow, because it shows the complete failure of Tommen and Shireen's ideology of forgiveness and unity. Most of us would call Davos a "lawful" good character, but we see here that he's not without a thirst for vengeance - he is as fallible in that regard as any man.

On a different note, the first sentence of this chapter is one of my favourite mood-setting lines from THE SUNSET KINGDOMS.

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Questions for reviewers:

1. When Davos discovers Stannis's survival, he falls down and weeps. Why do you think this is?

2. “There's good and evil on each side of every war ever fought.” Davos later tells us that he doesn't believe in this sentiment anymore. How has THE SUNSET KINGDOMS changed his beliefs?

3. “Characters who think like Shireen are naive, and doomed to fail/die, as THE SUNSET KINGDOMS proves.” Do you agree with this statement?

4. Davos thinks that a world run by smugglers would be much more honest [than a world run by kings]. Do you agree?

***

Join me one last time tomorrow, with the final chapter of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS.
Raventree

Chapter Notes

Here we go. The final chapter of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS.

SANSA

The knight’s cloak was wet through, as was his hair. Snowmelt trickled steadily from both onto the stone floor, and the resulting drip-drip-drip echoed around the room. “My father supplied two thousand men to King Robb’s cause, and near as many to King Stannis. Half of these men perished, on both excursions. We do not have many to spare.”

“Are you refusing us, then?” asked Sansa.

“Not at all, my lady. But if you expect Seagard to give you thousands of soldiers, then you should prepare yourself for disappointment.”

Sansa adjusted the sleeve of her gown. The fabric was starting to fray. “I understand the toll the war has had on you,” she said. “But we need every man you can spare. I do not expect the same response King Robb had when he marched south… but I expect the same loyalty and devotion. As does Lord Rickon. Give me that, Ser Patrek, and we will have no quarrel.”

The young knight nodded sagely. Torchlight from the sconces glimmered in his damp hair, making it shine. He was quite fair to look upon, Sansa thought, making him part of a mental list. Though perhaps a little too old. Still, he would make a better candidate for marriage than Harrold Hardyng, or any of the others the Vale lords had offered.

Lady Melissa Blackwood stepped forwards. “The hospitality of Raventree Hall is yours, Ser Patrek, if you will have it.” Bread and salt was offered and taken. The Blackwoods still kept the old traditions and retained a high sense of honour. They would not betray their guests as Walder Frey had.

When Ser Patrek had gone, Sansa turned back to the other ladies gathered around the hearth. “You can trust the Mallisters, my lady,” said Lady Blackwood. “You can trust all of us gathered here. Even the—”

“Now, now, my lady,” said Lady Ceryse Bracken, Lord Jonos’s wife. “I thought the purpose of our negotiations was to bring the Riverlands closer together. Let us not create unnecessary animosity.”

Lady Blackwood gave her a tight-lipped, icy smile. “Quite. You are right, of course, my lady.” She sipped her mulled wine dejectedly.
It had been no easy thing getting the Houses of the Riverlands around one table. Sansa had chosen Raventree Hall as the place for her council for numerous reasons, but showing unnecessary favour to the Blackwoods meant incensing the Brackens even more. She had hoped it would be easier to get the ladies of Raventree Hall and Stone Hedge to reconcile instead of their husbands, but there was bad blood between Melissa Blackwood (whom Lady Ceryse had called a “frigid bitch” more than once) and Ceryse Bracken (who, in the eyes of Lady Melissa, was a “horse-faced whore”).

Any illusions Sansa had of resolving the feud easily evaporated when Lady Blackwood’s daughter Bethany told her of its history. According to her, the Brackens had been lowly horse traders who had eventually found wealth through trickery and lies and used their money to hire sellswords and usurp the Blackwoods, the rightful kings of the eastern Riverlands. During the invasion of the Hoares, Lady Agnes Blackwood had led a defence of the Riverlands against the ironmen, but had been betrayed by Lord Lothar Bracken, and cruelly put down. Some three years before the tourney of Ashford, the Brute of Bracken had slain Lord Quentyn Blackwood in single combat, supposedly by poisoning his weapon. And most famously of all, there had been the feud of the Blackwoods and the Brackens during the reign of Aegon the Unworthy, when both of the Houses had supplied one of Aegon’s famous mistresses.

It had seemed impossible at first, but with tempering influences like Jeyne Darry and the Blackfish, and three evenings where the Blackwoods and Brackens had dined under one roof, Sansa had eventually formulated a peace. When they came of age, Bethany Blackwood would wed Lord Tytos’s youngest son Alyn, and the newlyweds would administrate the towns along the Bracken-Blackwood border. Neither side was especially happy with the arrangement, but it would suffice.

Sansa’s musings were interrupted by the arrival of Maester Larence. “A letter for you, my lady,” he said, presenting her with a scroll.

“Is there still nothing from the Crag?” Lady Blackwood asked as Sansa opened her own letter.

“Nothing, my lady.”

“I told you she would not respond,” said Lady Bracken.

“She has not responded yet,” Lady Blackwood snapped in reply.

Jeyne Darry put herself between them. “If anyone in the West will answer our call, it will be Sybell Spicer. The woman still regrets her role in the Red Wedding, have no doubt. Her own son Raynald was killed there.”

“She has no love for the Northern cause, though—”

This is more than just a matter of the Northern cause, Sansa thought. This is cause for all of us to worry. “Perhaps you should have Lady Jeyne write to her mother,” she said. “That way, we might be more likely to get an answer.”

“If you can convince her, my lady,” said Lady Blackwood. “But again, I doubt that would be overly helpful. The relationship between Jeyne and her mother is… not good.”

Understandably, if she was the cause of Roban’s condition. “I will head up to see Lady Jeyne when we are finished here,” said Sansa. She had other reasons for her conversation with Jeyne, so it would not be a waste of time. “There is another matter of this letter to be dealt with.” She laid it flat on the table for them all to see.

“I see no point in making plans this early,” said Lady Blackwood, once she had read the letter. “It is
more of the same. *Let all true men come forth and declare their loyalty.*” She smiled ruefully. “Since we are true women, I suppose we are exempt.”

“I hope you will have a better excuse for this dragon queen when she finally gets here,” said Lady Bracken.

Maester Laryn nodded. “The bird is waiting for a reply, my ladies.”

Sansa took the letter, walked to the fire, and threw the parchment into the flames. “What bird?” she said. “What Queen Daenerys doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” *Though I will have to be careful that it does not hurt us, either.*

“I think that is all for tonight,” said Lady Blackwood, clapping her hands.

Sansa nodded. “Until the morrow, then. I have other things to attend to.” Jeyne Westerling was chief among them.

On her way up to Jeyne’s solar, she came upon Marya Seaworth, descending. Lady Marya was the wife of King Stannis’s onion Hand, and had birthed seven sons of her own – and had lost five of them, and her husband too. The remaining two boys were friends of Rickon, though they were considerably less merry than Sansa’s brother — probably because of what they’d lost.

“Lady Sansa,” said Marya, curtseying. “Are you on your way up to see Jeyne?”

“I am.”

“Roban woke up. I tried to help her quieten the lad, but she wanted to do it herself.” She shrugged. “She’s like that. Some mothers are. All I’ll say, m’lady, is try not to startle her. Or the babe. He is easily frightened.”

“He won’t be a babe forever,” Sansa said. “Winter is coming.” After, as she opened Jeyne’s door, she wondered why she had said that. Winter was coming, yes; it snowed day and night nowadays, but Roban was not even a year old. It would be some time before he was anything other than a babe.

This tower solar had once been home to her brother, when he had stopped at Raventree on his campaign. Now it was home to his widow. Sansa found Jeyne Westerling sitting in the windowseat, with Roban curled up in her arms. When she looked up and saw Sansa, her eyes showed skittish surprise, for a moment, then softened.

“He looks more and more like his father every day,” Jeyne said, almost proudly. She pushed back Roban’s tufty auburn hair.

*Yes,* thought Sansa sadly, *but he will never ride and fight as his father did.* She wasn’t sure if that was a blessing or a curse. *Let him be,* she prayed, to the gods who so rarely heard her. *If you have any mercy, let this child be just that. A child.*

“He has his eyes, for certain,” Jeyne went on. “Good eyes. Kind eyes.” She held Roban out for Sansa’s arms.

“Brave eyes,” said Sansa, taking him.

“Better kind than brave.” Jeyne was not quite twenty, quite willowy, with a certain fragility, and yet the warm blush of the skin betrayed the strength underneath. *She endured a horrific childbirth, and yet here she is.* Though Jeyne did not mention it, Roban’s birth had been a cruel, painful thing, and it had been a miracle that both mother and babe had survived it. But the gods had denied them a perfect
victory. Roban’s right arm was a withered stump, his right foot was slightly too short, and his right eye seemed to be blind. But it was still a victory, and they were grateful for it from the bottom of their hearts.

“I hope you don’t mind if I take him back,” Jeyne said. “If he wakes up, he might get confused if I’m not holding him.”

“Of course.” Sansa felt strangely hesitant about passing him over. Was that some maternal instinct she was not aware of? She supposed that if she did have a son, he would look like quite a lot like Roban.

But that would not happen for some time. To have a son you needed a husband, and Sansa did not have one of those – at least not nearby. She thought of Willas only sparingly now. The lessons Tyrion had given – and forced upon her – were less easily forgotten. Never forget what you are. Never accept a truth without questioning it first. Never assume anything. Always be on your guard.

“I had a letter,” Jeyne said, flatly.

Sansa’s heart leapt in surprise. “From your mother?”

“No. From my sister. From Eleyna.”

This was a surprise. Jeyne did not talk about her own family, not since the Westerlings had abandoned her and returned to the Westerlands. “Did your sister mention anything about Tytos Blackwood or—”

“No. Different news. Mother’s probably dead, she says.” Jeyne said the words so calmly she might have been talking about the weather.

“I… I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. She’s probably burning in the seven Hells by now. If the gods are just.”

“How… if I may, how did she die?”

“Ironborn, Eleyna says. Ironborn soldiers raiding up and down the coast of the Westerlands. Only… she says something else. Something strange, like it’s out of a book of stories.”

“Dead men walking,” Sansa knew at once. Like Jon said in his letter. Jeyne nodded. “What is King Tommen doing about it?” Her negotiations with Myrcella had been a disaster, but she thought she could come to some sort of arrangement with Tommen.

“Nothing,” said Jeyne. “He’s dead, too.”

For some reason, that news made Sansa both sad and angry. Fate seems determined to turn the world against us. And Tommen was sweet. He was as much a victim of Joffrey as I was. And before that, he was Bran’s friend. “May the gods give him rest,” she muttered.

“Eleyna married him,” Jeyne said. “She married a king, as I married Robb. And then he died, leaving her with… only…” She sounded horribly world-weary. “The Crag, she says, has been overrun. Rollam was wounded in some battle, but they’re going to try and make it over the mountains. Princess Myrcella too.”

“Myrcella is at Casterly Rock?”
Sansa breathed a sigh of relief. Ty Darry, the young lord of Darry, had managed to get her past Bronze Yohn’s men. *See, Ser Jaime,* she thought. *Lannisters are not the only ones who pay their debts.* “I can work with Myrcella,” she said. “It’s Cersei who concerns me. Unless she’s dead as well.”

“Queen Cersei,” said Jeyne, “is just that, it would seem. She claims to be Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. I don’t know where Myrcella comes into all of this.”

“When Queen Daenerys hears of this, she will burn them all to cinders,” Sansa replied. It might be easier to have House Lannister eviscerated than to work with it in the years ahead. But Sansa had a plan, and now she was ready to enact it. “Thank you for the news,” she said to Jeyne. “Though I came here tonight for a different reason.”

“No,” said Jeyne wearily. “I won’t.”

“There are thousands of loyal Northmen in White Harbor—”

“Thousands of loyal Northmen who will tear my son apart. No, Sansa. I’m going to wait for Eleyna and Rollam, and then… I don’t know, but I’m not taking Roban north. I don’t know if he’d survive the journey through the Neck, especially in this weather, and I’m not going to risk finding out.”

Sansa sighed. She hadn’t expected anything different. For a moment she considered threatening Jeyne, but the idea of dishonouring Robb like that repulsed her. “As you will,” she said. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do,” Jeyne said. “When we sent the letters north, we claimed that Roban was born without… without his weaknesses, for the sake of the Northern cause, because Ser Brynden told us too. But now the Northern cause has you and Rickon, and Bran, and even your bastard brother. Leave me out of it.”

Sansa realised it was time to leave. She drew up, smoothed down her skirts, kissed Roban’s forehead, and wished Jeyne goodnight. There was a certain tenseness in the air as she descended the stairs again.

Her solar was in the western wing of the castle, with windows overlooking the heart tree in the courtyard for which Raventree was named. There were no leaves on the tree. The Blackwoods claimed that the Brackens had poisoned the tree thousands of years previously, in an act of vile desecration against the old gods. House Blackwood was the only house in the Riverlands to still keep the old gods, and Raventree Hall had the only proper godswood for a hundred miles around. A long time ago, First Men pilgrims from all across Westeros had come here to worship. Now, the once-great tree held no leaves, only ravens.

Sansa was not concerned with any of that tonight, though. She sent a boy to fetch Brienne of Tarth. The lady knight arrived within five minutes. Her dark blue cloak leaked snow onto the flagstones. She took a seat by the fire and a cup of hot tea when it was offered to her, but that was only out of courtesy. Brienne did not seem to find enjoyment in anything nowadays.

Sansa got straight to the point. “I have a quest for you, Brienne.”

She half-expected Brienne’s eyes to light up, so the lady knight’s complete nonchalance was a disappointment. “I am yours to command, my lady.”

“That you are,” Sansa said. She hesitated. “Brienne… I have to ask you again… is everything
alright? You seem… subdued. And you have ever since… ever since the wedding.”

“I’m fine, my lady.”

Brienne was a dismally poor liar. *She has been like this ever since the wedding,* she thought. *Ever since King Aegon left us… and Ser Jaime.* The realisation was like a smack in the face. *Of course. How did I not see it?* “Brienne,” said Sansa. “I’m sending you west.”

“West?” Brienne’s eyes lit up with concern. “But, my lady, I am sworn to protect you here.”

“You are sworn to *serve* me, Brienne, not to protect me. And right now, I require you to ride to Casterly Rock in order to serve me. I need you to treat with the Lannisters. With Ser Jaime.”

Brienne looked pensive, “My lady, I cannot in good conscience abandon you—”

“You are not abandoning me,” said Sansa. “I am safe here. I have Ser Brynden and Sandor Clegane. And Rickon would doubtless tell you that he was protecting me, too.”

“I trust Ser Brynden. But Clegane is… not someone I am willing to entrust with your life, my lady. And Lord Rickon is still a child, no matter how often he says otherwise.” Brienne sighed. “But if this is your wish, my lady—”

“It is. And I think it is yours too.”

“My lady?”

“You have… a good rapport with Ser Jaime, do you not? Forgive me for my bluntness, Brienne, but I think you are happier in his presence. And your happiness is your honour and your passion… you will serve me better in that way, rather than brooding at my side. I fear for your wellbeing… and when your wellbeing is endangered, so is mine.”

It was the threat to her duty that convinced Brienne. “When I see Ser Jaime, what should I tell him, my lady?”

“Tell him the time has come for the Starks and the Lannisters to work together. Something is coming, Brienne. Jon has written that there are… things in the North. Monsters. Dead men walking. If we are to fight them, we need to fight together. And even if these walking dead are just a story… this long war needs to end. I gave him his niece back. Tell him the time has come to pay his debts.”

Brienne bowed her head. “As you wish, my lady. I’ll leave tomorrow. But as for Podrick… I think he wants to stay here, with you.”

“Won’t you need a squire?”

“He deserves more than just being a squire, Lady Sansa. Especially my squire. And anyhow… I think this is something I have to do alone.”

Sansa nodded. “I understand.” Rickon had been little help in re-establishing order in the Vale, or in reconciling the Blackwoods and the Brackens, but she hadn’t minded. *Rickon’s time is war, she had realised, and mine is peace. We should not infringe upon each other’s roles. Sometimes we all have to do things alone.* “When will you leave?”

Brienne glanced out through the window. “There is no time to waste, I suppose.” She made a final salute, said a last “my lady,” and then she was gone. Sansa listened to her boots echoing down the steps.
That night, she dreamed of the Trident river, fast-flowing and silty beneath the walls of Riverrun. She stood on its far bank looking across through the fog. As she watched, a woman appeared from the fog and walked out into the cold water, letting it lap around her toes, then her ankles, then her waist. The woman kept walking out, till the waters closed over her head, wraithed in bandages and veils, and then she was gone forever. The wind exhaled, as though it had been holding its breath for years and years, and all was still.

Sansa moved to the water and stared down. The pool was the colour of watery blood. When she looked down, a wolf stared back at her. The night stirred with the cawing of crows. She could hear the birds above her, screaming “Bran, Bran, Bran.” That was when she woke up. Why did they shout Bran? she wondered. Why did they call his name?

Sansa stood up. She went to the window and threw the shutters open. Odd. It was still dark, though she felt fully rested. She walked to the servants’ cell outside her chambers, and found her maidservants Myrianne and Essie both awake, going about their morning tasks. “What time is it?” she asked.

“The hour of the nightingale, my lady,” said Essie.

“But it’s still dark.”

Essie shrugged. “That’s what we thought, my lady. We even asked the old maester, though. He says it’s the hour of the nightingale.”

Sansa was completely confused. “May… may I have a bath?” she asked. “To give me some time to think.”

“Of course, my lady.” It took her maidservants the better part of ten minutes to fill her tub. It did not get any lighter. Sansa bathed for nearly an hour. Still, it did not get any lighter. She dressed in a gown of soft blue silk with vines embroidered on the sleeves in pale grey, and put a fur cloak around her shoulders since it was cold. When she was finished, Myrianne entered to tell her that Ser Brynden Tully was without.

“This is one strange dawn, niece,” he said. It was dark enough to warrant carrying a torch. “I spoke to Maester Larence. He says he’s never seen anything like this in his lifetime. It’s the result of some freak weather event, he thinks.”

“Well,” said Sansa. “Until we know what it is, we can only get along with our lives.” She started down the stairs.

The Great Hall was full of baffled-looking lords and ladies. Sansa took her seat at the high table between Rickon and Ser Brynden. “Whatever this is,” her brother said through a mouthful of fried bread, “it came from the north.”

“How do you know that?” asked Sansa.

“I don’t,” he said. “But Shaggy does.”

Sansa frowned. “Rickon, Shaggy’s been gone for a week.” The direwolf had run off when they reached Raventree Hall, seemingly without reason. That being said, Rickon had been unexpectedly calm about the whole thing. “And besides, you can’t talk to a wolf.”

“I didn’t talk to him,” Rickon said firmly. “I dreamed of him last night. We talked. And there was this woman… she climbed into the river. Shaggy said it was Mother. And the trees were calling Bran’s name.”
“It was just a dream,” said Ser Brynden.

“No,” Sansa said. “I had the same dream.” She knew it was ludicrous, but she was unable to stop herself.

Rickon turned to Ser Brynden. “See. I told you so.”

The Blackfish sighed. “I understand. Your mother is long dead, but you both still miss her. As do I. It isn’t strange that you’d dream about her.”

“The wolf dreams are real,” Rickon insisted. “I told you, I see what Shaggy sees.”

“It was a dream,” Ser Brynden stressed. “Rickon, I have warned you before. It is never a good idea to dwell on dreams.”

“It wasn’t just a dream.”

“The trouble with dreams…” Their uncle looked pained. “The trouble with dreams is that they never match up to reality. Dreams are what led me to become the Blackfish. There was someone I loved… but I knew it could never be. Hoster had different intentions for me. I was to marry Bethany Redwyne, and that would have been the end for my dream. And when I realised that, I decided that I would try and pursue the impossible. I ran. And I failed, of course.”

Even Rickon grew quiet. He gave his uncle a wobbly smile. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“You must have loved her very much,” Sansa said.

The Blackfish shook his head. “Him.”

“Him. Oh… you must have loved him very much, then.” She had not expected that. Him. Fortunately, the ensuing awkwardness was interrupted by the arrival of Sandor Clegane. “Lady Sansa,” he growled, making her jump, “you might want to head outside. The bloody Brotherhood’s just turned up at our gate. They want to talk with you.”

“The Brotherhood without Banners? But… I thought they were gone. I thought they went with Aegon.”

“So did I. Seems we were both wrong.”

Sansa set her knife aside and pushed her chair back. Rickon and the Blackfish rose with her. “Come on, then,” said Clegane. Together, they walked back across the hall, out into the semi-darkness. The sky was a very dark grey, and it was starting to snow.

Sandor Clegane led her down one flight of steps and up another, and out into the courtyard. It was the Brotherhood, all right; she recognised the smith Gendry, and the singer Tom o’ Sevens, and Pello of Tyrosh, called Greenbeard by his fellows. “The pink one’s Thoros of Myr,” the Hound pointed out to her. “Though I don’t see his lady love Lem Lemoncloak anywhere.”

Sansa did not see Edric Dayne either, and there were a few more she did not know. A pair of tall and willowy girls – sisters, perhaps – and a boy who looked more like a baker than an outlaw. And she did not recognise the young woman at the front of the column. They’re led by Lady Stoneheart, she thought. That must be her.
But when the young woman dismounted and turned to stare at her across the yard, the breath was driven out of her. She felt Rickon squeeze her hand. “Sansa… Sansa, that’s…”

“I know.” And then she was crossing the yard, and the girl was walking towards her. About ten yards apart they stopped, and Sansa felt tears in her eyes, because this was impossible, this should not be possible. Her words came out in a rasp. “Who… who are you?”

“I’m Arya Stark,” the girl said, “the ghost of Winterfell.”

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Okay, so it turns out that my final Author's Note is far too big to fit in the Endnotes box, so we'll do it here.

**Closing Remarks**

Before anything else, thank you very much for reading.

Firstly, if you have the time, please take part in this [Google survey](https://goo.gl/forms/soolKM08aYKZ60n1) so that I can accurately gauge the demographics and responses to the story. You don’t have to put your name or anything, and it should take only a few minutes. And of course, I'd welcome comments from everyone (regulars and lurkers alike) on this final chapter of the story.

Secondly, I’d really love it if someone could make a [TVTropes page for A Coat of Gold/The Sunset Kingdoms](https://arbitrarianblog.wordpress.com/2017/07/24/review-game-of-thrones-season-7-episode-2-stormborn/).

Thirdly, please leave kudos if you enjoyed it and haven't left any already, so that we can get this story out to everyone who wants to read it.

**What will I be doing until it’s time for The Hour of the Nightingale?** Well, I’d like to write an original story at some point, but you can also find me reviewing/ranting about GOT on my blog. [https://arbitrarianblog.wordpress.com/2017/07/24/review-game-of-thrones-season-7-episode-2-stormborn/](https://arbitrarianblog.wordpress.com/2017/07/24/review-game-of-thrones-season-7-episode-2-stormborn/).

But I’ll be back in around November 2017, with the final part of this series. **The Hour of the Nightingale** will probably be the shortest in the series, with a much quicker plot build than **The Sunset Kingdoms**. It’s going to be a heck of a lot of fun, I promise you. There will be at least three battle sequences on the scale of “The Dance of Dragons”, and we go a lot deeper into the mythology.

And finally, one last tease about the sequel. One final thing. Five words. The five words that will open the first chapter of the sequel. Five words that, I hope, will reveal the POV and the situation,
and will generate a hell of a lot of hype. Possibly the only five words in ASOIAF that can.

The first five words of THE HOUR OF THE NIGHTINGALE are:

They were seven against three.

I’ve got a few commentary points to make below, and then the acknowledgements (and there are a lot of them). The comments/reviews section for this chapter will also act as a sort of Q&A, so feel free to ask away.

Author’s Commentary

There came a point, somewhere around December 2016, when I started to wonder if I was actually insane. Who in their right mind would willingly invest so much time into a fanfic, a story they don’t own any rights to, and can’t realistically do anything with? But then I considered what this story means, and it comes down to two things:

1. a love letter to A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones (admittedly, a very long love letter)
2. a treatise on life, the universe, and everything – a reflection of my thoughts

With this fic, I tried to retain similarities to GRRM’s distinctive writing style – it’s written in third-person limited POV, with over 15 point-of-view characters. You’ll find all your favourite GRRMisms in here: boiled leather, ‘words are wind’, ‘much and more’, even a couple of greasy chins, and so on. To be fair, GRRM’s writing style is fairly similar to my own, but there are parts where I drift away from that. Notably, you’ll find a lot of extended internal monologues (Tyrion’s from Tyrion XI/“Flesh, Mud and Stone” being an example), and some rather abstract repetition. So while it’s GRRM’s work I’m riffing off, parts of it are my own. Think of this as a second-rate cover of ASOIAF. It’s harder to take inspiration from Thrones, but I am quite a visual writer, so I see almost all of the characters as played by their actors in the show, rather than as described in the books.

Evidently, we’re all here because we love ASOIAF/Game of Thrones. I would go so far as to say that those of us reading and writing this stuff are among the most committed of the fandom. We don’t just read or watch ASOIAF/GOT; we live and breathe it. Between AO3 and FF.net, there are thousands of interpretations of every character in the universe. Some writers harbour a bias towards one house or another (try as I may to remain neutral, I keep coming back to House Lannister, my favourites, now and forever). Some writers will give depth to certain characters that I can’t imagine, possibly because of their personal sympathies. For example, I could never write Willas Tyrell like SecondStarOnTheLeft, and I could never portray Arya Stark in the way that Winterlyn_Dow does. And at the same time, we’re constantly building new universes. DolorousEdditor’s Targaryen-centric universe from Our Choices Seal Our Fate is essentially a whole different world compared to canon, and VVSIGNOFTHECROSS has written so many ASOIAF fics that he could practically start a multiverse.

But at the same time, it all comes back to GRRM. The advantage of having such a large cast of characters is that everyone has at least one person they sympathise with and see themselves in, and that’s due to his work. And perhaps there’s an elephant in the room that needs to be addressed here: George still hasn’t finished The Winds of Winter. I never thought I’d finish TSK before TWOW was released, but here we are. It’s easy to get mad. I will admit that I am far from happy about this. I will
admit that I honestly don’t understand how it isn’t finished. But at the same time, I try to remain tolerant. And at the same time, I honestly believe that TWOW will blow away everything else in the series before it.

But enough of the vague circlejerk. Time to talk about The Sunset Kingdoms.

The Sunset Kingdoms is about 585,000 words long, according to my count. Both FF.net and AO3 claim it’s a good deal longer, but that’s probably due to my countless Author’s Notes and appendices. It was never intended to be this long. Granted, I knew that it would be the longest ‘book’ in this series, but 450,000 words and 100 chapters was my somewhat-reasonable target. Obviously, I’ve exceeded that by quite a bit, but I’m still a fair ways off from “Love and Honor” and “A Shadow and A Wolf”, so I’m not feeling too embarrassed about the length yet.

TSK’s length comes about due to the fact that it priorities character moments over moving the plot forwards. Understandably, some of you might hate this, but with TSK, I intended to build a story that had depth instead of breadth (though in the end, of course, it ended up having both). I want you to feel the exultation at the characters’ victories, the sorrow at their losses, the pain at their pain. I want you to laugh and to cry. But there’s something more than that – I want you to learn.

It would be easy to say “The Sunset Kingdoms isn’t intended to be political,” but that’s not true. Every work that ever existed is political. The white walkers in A Song of Ice and Fire are an allegory for the threat of climate change, and there’s a lot other stuff – GRRM isn’t always subtle in his political accusations. But the thing I’m debating in The Sunset Kingdoms goes beyond politics; it’s an argument of two ideologies: idealism and realism.

One of my reviewers (I’ve forgotten who, sorry) pointed out a couple of weeks back that The Sunset Kingdoms is primarily told through the eyes of the younger generation, unlike A Coat of Gold. Tywin and Roose Bolton are gone. The roles of Tyrion, Stannis, Barristan and Jon Connington are cut back, and Dany, Aegon, Sansa, Jon, Bran, Tommen, Myrcella and Shireen (and Arya, though her position on the ‘scale of idealism’ is questionable) step into the limelight. Each of these characters has, at least at the start of The Changing of Seasons (that’s the name of this series, if you’ve forgotten) a certain naïve idealism about them. They believe that they can save the world, end all wars, bring old enemies together despite years and years of war between them. Aegon tries to basically end every war in Westeros, pretending that the War of the Five Kings never happened, and Sansa, though somewhat skeptical, helps him to achieve this aim. Tommen and Shireen work together to bind up the bleeding wounds between Lannister and Baratheon, despite knowing that it’s impossible to forget the war that killed so many of their fellows. Jon Snow (and to a lesser extent, Bran) try to bring an end to deep-rooted ancestral hatred between the wildlings and the Northmen – something which requires charisma and strength, not just a common enemy.

Of course, very few of these characters actually succeed in their aims. Jon Snow is murdered as the Wall comes tumbling down around him. Tommen’s attempt at bringing peace to the Westerlands ends with him bleeding to death in a firestorm. And Sansa’s idealistic innocence to disappear the moment she poisons her own cousin, “for the greater good”. From this, we can conclude that idealism – the naïve dreams, the foolish hopes – is guaranteed to end in death and disaster.

But unlike A Coat of Gold, this is a story about the journey, not the destination. Yes, many of our heroes are dead by the end of the story, but at the same time they are martyrs, in a way. Cersei is not likely to have Jaime’s support in the coming wars. Shireen may stand a chance of convincing King Stannis to end his feud with the Lannisters during the battle against the wights. Tormund Giantsbane
and Maege Mormont have had their attitudes towards their ancient foes changed, for the better, and
their improved relationship may persist even with Jon Snow dead.

There’s another mantra that comes up frequently in this series: the Tully words – family, duty, honor.
I would argue that each of the three parts of this trilogy represent a different one of these attributes. A
Coat of Gold is about honour, and its links to earthly vengeance and divine justice. The Hour of the
Nightingale will place a somewhat soppy emphasis on family, friendship and how important it is to
keep a metaphorical hearthfire burning during the Long Night. The Sunset Kingdoms has to grapple
with the most difficult of the three aims: duty, and its moral complications. If it is Sansa’s duty to
keep the North safe, then is it right for her to poison Sweetrobin to implicate Littlefinger in a
convoluted plot? Is it Dany’s duty to rule Westeros, even if it means subjecting the people of King’s
Landing to one of the bloodiest, most horrific battles in the history of the Seven Kingdoms? Does
Jaime’s duty to his sister come before the promise he made to King Aegon to end the war? Or is duty
just a ridiculous concept that gets people killed?

You’ll have probably noticed by now that nearly every Great House loses out from The Sunset
Kingdoms. A breakdown of their losses:

Targaryen: deaths of King Aegon and Rhaegal, loss of allies

Lannister: death of King Tommen, loss of allies

Stark: deaths of Bran and Jon, capture of Winterfell

Baratheon (of Dragonstone): loss of all land, castles, and most of their army

Tyrell: deaths of Mace and Loras, Willas captured, Margaery now infertile

Martell: death of Quentyn, Arianne captured

Of the lot, only the Tullys and the Arryns get away unscathed, and even then, the Riverlands have
been wrecked by war, and the Vale is basically leaderless. And yes, it’s a very bleak ending, with
everyone flat on their backs, being kicked while they are down, and in a way, duty led them there.
But at the same time, duty will keep them going. The Night’s Watch could give up and die, but they
will rise from the ashes, and keep fighting, perhaps in vain. Jaime still has his commitment to ending
tyranny. And the Tyrells and Martells, with Dany about to bugger off to Dragonstone, have more
autonomy in their lands than they’ve ever had before, and are now united in shared grief. They’re
building up from rock bottom, and they will rise again. They’re bowed and bent, but not broken.

There’s a reason I ended this story with the Sansa chapter, which is possibly the only uplifting
chapter out of the final 10. Because, however clichéd it may sound, the world is not without hope.
Duty led these characters into hell, but it will lead them out the other side.

Some of you are doubtless sat there thinking, “you, ser, are an utter pretentious twat. Why, ’tis but a
story about the woes and fortunes of a cast of characters you don’t even own, to which thou hast
affixed a vast and slightly narcissistic rant.” To you, I say, “I know it’s pretentious, and I’ll probably
cringe at it if I ever get round to re-reading it.” But this is 585,000 words and 15 months of work.
Give me a couple of pages to inflate my ego, okay. We all know Ian McShane was right when he
said it’s just tits and dragons.

Moving on: for all you number-loving folk out there, here are some… uh… numbers.

The longest chapter is obviously The Dance of Dragons, but after that, we’ve got Bran V, “The
"The Sunset Kingdoms" took about 470 days to write, averaging 1311 words a day. The most productive month was August 2016, when I wrote 100,508 words. The least productive month was January 2017 (23,407 words).

My favourite chapter in this story is probably Jaime VIII, “Mother’s Mercy”, where everyone got blown to smithereens, but there are a few close behind that, like “The Broken Man”, “Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken”, “The Dance of Dragons”, “The King Who Fell”, and “The Woman Who Lived”. There aren’t many chapters I don’t care for, but I was never big on Arya’s second chapter, “Valar Dohaeris,” which wasn’t very enjoyable to read or to write. In terms of POVs, I probably had the most fun with Jaime, but towards the end, the chapters at the Wall (Jon and Samwell) were my favourites. I tended to identify quite strongly with the Tommen and Sansa chapters, so these were the most emotional for me.

Obviously, I wrote some characters better than the others. I think I had strengths with the Casterly Rock Lannisters, as in A Coat of Gold, though I think my Cersei still has a lot of room for improvement. Additionally, I think I wrote the Starks a lot better in this installment than I did in A Coat of Gold, especially Arya and Jon. I don’t think Tyrion’s journey in this story was as good as it was in the previous one, and Quentyn and Brienne sort-of-dwindled into insignificance, so I’d count them among my weaknesses, along with the somewhat messy resolution of the Braavos plot.

I’ve got a lot more to talk about, but if I said it all here, I’d be going for days, and you’d have nothing to say in the comments. So I will leave it here, and move on to the most important bit.

Acknowledgements

Writing anything is a monumental task, but there are certain pressures that come from writing in this environment, with the weight of all Mr. Martin’s histories and lore around me. Therefore – though he will never read this – my first thanks go to George R.R. Martin for creating this world, to the teams supporting him, and also to the vast team of writers, producers, actors and supporting staff at HBO who have helped to recreate my favourite series of novels as a TV show far beyond our wildest dreams.

The next set of thank yous is perhaps the most important. The Sunset Kingdoms is for all my readers on FF.net and AO3, people too numerous to list here, and particularly to all those who have provided constant feedback along the way with their fantastic reviews; without them, I never would have made it to the final milestone.

The Sunset Kingdoms never would have left the early stages of planning were it not for the readers on FF.net and AO3, so it is to them that I mostly owe my thanks. To each and every reader, whether you started with that first, awful draft of A Coat of Gold or followed just as this volume of the story was coming up to an end, thank you from the bottom of my heart. The writer is only one half of The Changing of Seasons. You are the other, and by far the most valuable part of it. I’d like to thank everyone who has read, favourited, followed, left kudos, subscribed, reviewed, commented, etc., on both sites, but that would take far too long, so I’m going to name but a few, from both FF.net and AO3:

To VVSIGNOFTHECROSS. I’ve probably said this before, but this story would be nothing without Golden Stag, the tale which inspired the entire story of A Coat of Gold in its earliest form, and has led us to where we are today. VV has a host of fics, so you’ll almost certainly find one you’ll
like. He also has a superpower of being able to reply to any comment within about 10 seconds, so there’s that too.

To Gracques, fellow fic-writer, with whom my journey has been entwined as they continue their epic ASOIAF story alongside mine. I urge any Tyrion/Sansa fans to check out A Shadow and A Wolf, an epic-length story in its own write. Gracques has been both keen supporter and occasional beta-reader, and an example of how to write one hell of a fic.

To Daziy Is SoniQ, invaluable support since around Day 1 in FF.net, one of those who has read the awful first draft, and never afraid to tell me when things just don’t make sense. I don’t know if you’ve reached the ending yet, but I am so sorry about Chapter 110.

To yyzEthan, the first person to leave kudos and to comment on AO3. HODOR.

To aeh, who seems to have attained some sort of moderator status in the AO3 comments section. It’s not rare for me to come across people saying, “I agree with aeh”, because you’re right so very often.

To DanyelN, exemplifying the qualities of a loyal supporter, who has been with this story since the very beginning, and usually puts out something I’ve never considered.

To S058, another of the original readers, whose literary comparisons and acerbic wit are things I’m going to miss until Part Three goes up.

To Tommyginger, who may be slightly crazy, but in a good way. Rarely have I laughed so hard at anyone’s comments. I hope you’re happy now that the Tyrells – ‘trash with new money’ – have been basically obliterated.

To 1thy_truth_is_won0, often among the first to review, a sort of brilliant human bellwether whose comments always make me think long and hard before replying.

To Lypten, winner of the Award for Best (and Most Baffling) Profile Pic. I still have no clue why that cloud is vomiting a rainbow, or why it’s wearing shades.

To Vandal, whose brilliant enthusiasm for TSK far exceeds my own. If I mysteriously disappear, you have my permission to write the sequel.

To Iuvenal, creator of Ser Shire of House Endies, whose considered and humorous comments are always a treat to read whenever they come up.

To Phalanx30, hero of FF.net. When you get round to putting this ASOIAF story of yours up, send me a PM and I’ll get onto it instantly.

To Caver Floyd, who has been consistent all the way, but especially brilliant on these last few chapters, almost singlehandedly sating my hunger for reviews.

To MJB94, who always strikes me as being really honest and genuine, which is an odd thing to say, but your praise always hits hard.

To igl, who asks 20,000 questions in every review, and whose enthusiasm for this story seems to be a health risk.

To nlspeednl. Your review on “The Dance of Dragons” was a joy to read, and you picked up on the thing with Ramsay’s blue eyes before anyone else.
To francisvirus, another hero of the late-game.

To doctorwhofan12345, because you were absolutely fantastic.

To StiegEllroy, for their recent essay-sized comments which exceed AO3’s word limit.

To LordVelaryon, who reviews only sporadically… but when you do review, I have to create a Word document and save my work because your reviews are so long, and completely wonderful.

To Cancer-Chris, to Vwichick, to Hakujingomi, to Harambepride, to Bragation, to imagineagreatadventure. I haven’t heard from you guys in a while, but The Sunset Kingdoms would never have gotten off the ground without you, and I’d love to hear from you again.

To Ecomadness, to William Beckett, to EndlessReign, to Nefertari952, to unnamedguy21, to Blood on my Machete (writer of the second-best fanfic called A Coat of Gold – seriously, though; it’s one of the very best stories on FF.net), to RhaegarTelcontar, to Marvelmyra, to Dracarot, to GrammerJew.

To Zireael07, to morgana67 (who left some really long, interesting reviews on A Coat of Gold that I never replied to and now feel horribly guilty about), to Slicer37, to Lannister4Life, to Courtney580, to treagle, to SnowMercy, to ShotgunInfinity, to R D.

To albrie II, IAPPYc, oluamyd, SSun21, thebramabulll, EmpressSaix, EternalKnight219, Kazetoame, WesterosiFriedChicken, Lu, Snark and Grumkin CO., MrsWilliamHerondale, anime333, calicovirus, Mithrilbel, winterkami, IspentALongTimeWandering, mr. perry, OneThrilledReader, Lindsiria, Metsamies, iliaccresttv, Jasminalaine, TheMostGinger, Jonsnowsoldgirlfriend, robertwhite93, JustBNMe, Defiant_furball, to countless Guests, and to everyone, because, let’s be honest, there are far too many of you to mention.

Thank you all so very much for taking this journey with me.

Until the next time, this is SerGoldenhand, signing out.
Appendix

Chapter Summary

This appendix is designed to clarify a few things about characters, ages, timelines and the likes.

Though I have updated this, I cannot guarantee that this is 100% correct, so feel free to comment if you see any inconsistencies.

This appendix is correct as of the START of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS.

Chapter Notes

A brief timeline note:

The events of THE SUNSET KINGDOMS begin during the early part of the third month of the 301st year after Aegon's Conquest, or thereabouts. Not all storylines take place concurrently.

Appendix

The King on the Iron Throne

KING AEGON TARGARYEN, the Sixth of His Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, Prince of Dragonstone, b. 281AL

- his father, [PRINCE RHAEGAR TARGARYEN], slain by Robert Baratheon during the Battle of the Trident
- his mother, [PRINCESS ELIA MARTELL], murdered by Ser Gregor Clegane during the Sack of King’s Landing
- his sister, [PRINCESS RHAENYS TARGARYEN], murdered by Ser Amory Lorch during the sack of King’s Landing, b. 279AL

the royal court and retainers
• JON CONNINGTON, called the *Red Griffin*, Hand of the King, Lord of Griffin’s Roost and Storm’s End, recently named Warden of the East and Lord Paramount of the Stormlands
• PRINCE OBERYN NYMEROS MARTELL, brother of Prince Doran of Dorne, master of laws
• LORD VARYS, an eunuch, master of whisperers
• SER HARRY STRICKLAND, Captain-General of the Golden Company, commander of King Aegon’s armies
• HALDON HALFMAESTER, Aegon’s companion during his exile, advisor on the small council
• GRAND MAESTER GORMON (TYRELL), Grand Maester from the Citadel, en route to King’s Landing
• GORYS EDORYEN, a Volantene, paymaster-general of the Golden Company, master of coin
  • TYRION LANNISTER, dwarf son of Lord Tywin of Casterly Rock, a captive in King’s Landing, serves as assistant to Gorys Edoryen
  • NUMBERS, a boy of around fifteen years, squire to Gorys Edoryen
• AURANE WATERS, the *Bastard of Driftmark*, master of ships, representative on the council of his young cousin Lord Velaryon
• ARDRIAN CELTIGAR, Lord of Claw Isle, advisor on the small council
• RENFRED RYKKER, Lord of Duskendale, advisor on the small council
• THE HIGH SEPTON, popularly called *the One with the Long Nose*

• PRINCESS ARIANNE MARTELL, daughter of Prince Doran of Dorne, twenty-three years of age, King Aegon’s prospective betrothed
• LORD MYLES ROSBY, new Lord of Rosby, eighteen years of age
• LORD MONTERYS VELARYON, a boy of fifteen, Lord of the Tides and Master of Driftmark, squire to King Aegon
• SER BRONN OF THE BLACKWATER, a former hedge knight once sworn to Tyrion Lannister
  • LOLLYS STOKEWORTH, his wife
  • TYRION TANNER, Lollys’s son from a rape in Flea Bottom

• AEMON ESTERMONT, Lord of Greenstone
• GYLES CAFFEREN, Lord of Fawn Crag
• GULIAN SWANN, Lord of Stonehelm
• ARSTAN SELMY, Lord of Harvest Hall, a boy of ten
  • LADY VALENA SELMY, his mother and the late Lord Selmy’s widow

• SER ROLLY DUCKFIELD, called *Duck*, knight of King Aegon’s Kingsguard
• SER RICKARD FELL, knight of King Aegon’s Kingsguard
The Queen on Dragonstone

QUEEN DAENERYS TARGARYEN, the First of Her Name, *the Stormborn, the Unburnt*, the Breaker of Chains, *Khaleesi* of the Great Grass Sea, Mother of Dragons, Lady of Dragonstone, Queen of Slaver’s Bay, claimant Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Conqueror of Ghis, named Empress of New Valyria

- her first husband, [KHAL DROGO], died of infection
  - their son, [RHAEGO], stillborn in the womb
- her second husband, [HIZDAHR ZO LORAQ], left to die outside the walls of Meereen
- her former betrothed, [VICTARION GREYJOY], captain of the Iron Fleet, died during the Battle of Oldtown

- DROGON, the largest of her three dragons, black-and-red, ridden by Queen Daenerys
- VISERION, a dragon, cream-and-gold
- RHAEGAL, a dragon, green-and-bronze

on Dragonstone

- GREY WORM, the Commander of the Unsullied
- DAARIO NAHARIS, captain of the Stormcrows
- BROWN BEN PLUMM, captain of the Second Sons
- THE TATTERED PRINCE, captain of the Windblown

- IRRI, a handmaiden
- JHIQUI, a handmaiden

- AGGO, former bloodrider of Khal Drogo
- JHOGO, former bloodrider of Khal Drogo
- RAKHARO, former bloodrider of Khal Drogo
• MOQORRO, called the Black Flame, a red priest of R'hllor
• ARCHMAESTER MARWYN, an archmaester of the Citadel, called Marwyn the Mage

in Meereen

• SKAHAZ MO KANDAQ, the Shavepate, Lord Seneschal of Meereen
• REZNAK MO REZNAK, High Lord of the Meereenese Council

elsewhere

• SER BARRISTAN SELMY, called Barristan the Bold, Lord Commander of the Queensguard and Hand of the Queen, in Sunspear to treat with Prince Doran Martell
  • EDRIC STORM, bastard son of King Robert Baratheon, now squire to Ser Barristan Selmy
• SER JORAH MORMONT, called Jorah the Andal, an exile knight

The King in the West

KING TOMMEN LANNISTER, the Third of His Name, Lord of Casterly Rock, Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, King of the West, claimant King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, b. 286AL

• his wife, QUEEN MARGAERY TYRELL, thrice-wed, twice-widowed, at Highgarden
• his elder brother, [KING JOFFREY LANNISTER], sometimes called Joffrey the Illborn, poisoned at his wedding feast, b. 282AL
• his sister, PRINCESS MYRCELLA LANNISTER, b. 284AL
  • her husband of one day, [PRINCE TRYSTANE MARTELL], murdered by the High Sparrow in King’s Landing
• his mother, QUEEN CERSEI LANNISTER, formerly Queen Regent of the Seven Kingdoms, widow of King Robert Baratheon

• the king’s uncle, SER JAIME LANNISTER, called the Kingslayer or Goldenhand, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, missing in the Riverlands

It is widely suspected that Tommen, Myrcella and Joffrey are in fact the bastard children of an
unholy union between Queen Cersei Lannister and Ser Jaime Lannister.

- the king’s uncle, TYRION LANNISTER, a dwarf, called the Imp or Halfman, formerly the Hand of the King, imprisoned by the Targaryens in King’s Landing

- the king’s grandfather, [TYWIN LANNISTER], known as the Old Lion or the Great Lion, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, Shield of Lannisport, Hand of the King, Lord Regent, Saviour of the City of King’s Landing, killed during the Battle of Riverrun

Lord Tywin’s siblings

- KEVAN LANNISTER, Lord of Castamere, Hand of the King, Lord Regent of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm, Lord Regent of the Westerlands, Warden of the West
  - his wife, LADY DORNA SWYFT
  - his eldest son, [SER LANCEL LANNISTER]
  - his twin sons, [WILLEM] and MARTYN
  - his daughter, JANEI
- [GENNA LANNISTER], Lady of Riverrun, killed by the Brotherhood without Banners
  - her husband, [SER EMMON FREY], Lord of Riverrun, hanged before the Battle of the Tumblestone
  - her eldest son, [SER CLEOS FREY], killed by outlaws, m. Lady Jeyne Darry
    - Ser Cleos’s eldest son, TYWIN FREY, a boy of sixteen, called Ty, Lord of the Crossing and Lord of Darry, a prisoner of Lord Edmure Tully in Riverrun
    - Ser Cleos’s younger son, WILLEM FREY, a yong squire at Casterly Rock
  - her second son, [SER LYONEL FREY]
  - her third son, [SER TION FREY]
  - her fourth son, WALDER FREY, called Red Walder, a prisoner of Lord Edmure Tully in Riverrun
- [SER TYGETT LANNISTER], died of a pox, m. Darlessa Marbrand
  - his son, [TYREK], a squire to King Robert Baratheon, disappeared during the riots of King’s Landing, thought dead
- [SER GERION LANNISTER], disappeared in 291AL on a voyage to Valyria to reclaim the Lannister ancestral sword Brightroar, believed long dead
  - his bastard daughter, JOY HILL

- [SER STAFFORD LANNISTER], Lady Joanna’s elder brother, killed at the Battle of Oxcross
  - his son, [SER DAVEN LANNISTER], killed at Riverrun
  - his daughter, CERENNA LANNISTER
  - his daughter, MYRIELLE LANNISTER
- [SER DAMON LANNISTER], Lady Joanna’s younger brother, died in a fall
  - his son, SER DAMION LANNISTER, Lord of Lannisport, sometime castellan of Casterly Rock, on the king’s small council
    - Ser Damion’s son, SER LUCION LANNISTER, a new-made knight
    - Ser Damion’s daughter, LANNA LANNISTER, m. Lord Antario Jast
the royal court and lords of the West

- TAUBERT PAYNE, Lord of Paynehall
  - his eldest son, SER ORMUND PAYNE, heir to Paynehall
  - his second son, [SER CEDRIC PAYNE], died fighting in the Riverlands
  - his third son, [SERTBYALD PAYNE], died fighting in the Greyjoy Rebellion
    - Ser Tybald’s son, PODRICK PAYNE, squire to Tyrion Lannister and now to Brienne of Tarth, at Highgarden

- LEO LEFFORD, Lord of the Golden Tooth, died during the War of the Five Kings
  - his elder daughter, ALYSANNE LEFFORD, Lady of the Golden Tooth
  - his younger daughter, ARIANNE LEFFORD, a girl of seventeen
  - his brother, SER FRANKLYN LEFFORD

- TYTOS BRAX, Lord of Hornvale
  - his brother, [SER ROBERT BRAX], drowned during the Battle of the Fords
  - his brother, [SER FLEMENT BRAX], a well-liked knight, died at the Battle of the Tumblestone
    - SerFlement’s son, ROBERT BRAX, a squire
    - SerFlement’s son, WALDER BRAX, a page at Casterly Rock
    - SerFlement’s son, JON BRAX, a page at Casterly Rock

- DAMON MARBRAND, Lord of Ashemark, an old and dying man
  - his eldest son, SER ADDAM MARBRAND, Commander of the City Watch of Lannisport, commander of the Lannister armies
    - Ser Addam’s elder son, LORENT MARBRAND, a squire at Casterly Rock
    - Ser Addam’s daughter, ELENA MARBRAND, a handmaiden of Princess Myrcella
    - Ser Addam’s younger son, STEFFON MARBRAND, a page at Casterly Rock

- ROLLAM WESTERLING, Lord of the Crag, a boy of fourteen
  - his mother, SYBELL SPICER, who allied with the King in the North prior to the Red Wedding
  - his elder brother, [SER RAYNALD WESTERLING], believed killed at the Red Wedding
  - his eldest sister, JEYNE WESTERLING, m. [King Robb Stark], went missing on the journey between Riverrun and Casterly Rock
  - his elder sister, ELEYNA WESTERLING, a handmaiden of Princess Myrcella

- GARETT SARSFIELD, Lord of Sarsfield
  - SER RAYMUND SARSFIELD, his son and heir, twin to Medwyck
  - SER MEDWYCK SARSFIELD, his second son, twin to Raymund
TYGETT SARSFIELD, squire to Princess Myrcella, at Casterly Rock

- ROBERT LYDDEN, Lord of Deep Den
  - his eldest son, SER LORENT LYDDEN, a widely despised knight
  - his younger son, ELYAS LYDDEN, a squire at Casterly Rock

- [SER GREGOR CLEGANE], called the Mountain that Rides a landed knight of ill repute, killed in a trial by combat against Prince Oberyn Martell, the Red Viper
  - his younger brother, SANDOR CLEGANE, called the Hound, formerly King Joffrey’s sworn shield and a member of the Kingsguard, fled after the Battle of the Blackwater, believed dead
  - his sister, [LAENA], died under suspicious circumstances

- SER HARYS SWYFT, the Knight of Cornfield
  - his eldest son and heir, SER STEFFON SWYFT
  - his daughter, LADY DORNA SWYFT, m. Ser Kevan Lannister
  - at least one other son

...among others

household at Casterly Rock

MAESTER CREYLEN, maester of Casterly Rock

QYBURN, a chainless maester and self-proclaimed scientist

SER BENEDICT BROOM, master-at-arms

SER FORLEY PRESTER, a household knight

SER TYBOLT HETHERSPOON, a household knight

CAPTAIN VYLARR, a Lannister guard captain

CAPTAIN FORLEY, a Lannister guard captain

the Kingsguard

SER JAIME LANNISTER, the Kingslayer, Lord Commander, missing, possibly dead
The King in the North

KING STANNIS BARATHEON, the First of His Name, King in the North and King at the Wall, claimant King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, Lord of Dragonstone and Storm’s End

- his wife, QUEEN SELYSE FLORENT
- his daughter, PRINCESS SHIREEN BARATHEON, b. 285AL
  - Shireen’s betrothed, RICKON STARK, of Winterfell, b. 288AL
  - Patchface, a fool and companion to Princess Shireen

- at Riverrun

SER DAVOS SEAWORTH, called the Onion Knight or Shorthand, Lord of the Rainwood, Admiral of the Narrow Sea, Hand of the King

- his wife of many years, LADY MARYA, of no noble house, on Cape Wrath
- his elder sons, [DALE], [ALLARD], [Matthos], [Maric], died in the Battle of the Blackwater
- his fifth-born son, DEVAN, squire to King Stannis, b. 285AL
- his sixth-born son, STANNIS, on Cape Wrath, b. 287AL
- his seventh-born son, STEFFON, on Cape Wrath, b. 289AL

MELISANDRE OF ASSHAI, the Shadowbinder, called the Red Woman, a red priestess of the Lord of Light

SER AXELL FLORENT, self-styled Queen’s Hand, Queen Selyse’s uncle, Lord of Brightwater
Keep by King Stannis’s decree

SER JUSTIN MASSEY, searching for sellswords in Braavos

SER GODRY FARRING, called Godry the Giantslayer, one of the king’s knights

SER RICHARD HORPE, one of the king’s knights

SER ORMUND WYLDE, one of the king’s knights
SER PATREK OF KING’S MOUNTAIN, one of Queen Selyse’s knights
SER MALEGORN OF REDPOOL, one of Queen Selyse’s knights
SER BRUS BUCKLER, one of Queen Selyse’s knights
SER BENETHON SCALES, one of Queen Selyse’s knights

BRYEN FARRING, one of the king’s squires

SER WYLIS MANDERLY, son of Lord Wyman of White Harbor
SER BRYNDEN TULLY, the Blackfish, a reputable knight
SER ROBETT GLOVER, brother to Galbart Glover

- at Winterfell

- MANCE RAYDER, once the self-proclaimed King-beyond-the-Wall, now Lord of the Dreadfort
  - THE GREAT WALRUS, a wildling chieftain
  - MORNA O’ THE WHITE MASK, a wildling chieftainess
  - OLD HALLECK, a wildling chieftain
  - HARLE THE HUNTSMAN, a wildling chieftain

ASHA GREYJOY, Captain of the Black Wind, rightful Lady of Pyke and the Iron Islands by King Stannis’s decree
THEON GREYJOY, Lady Asha’s brother
  - Lady Asha’s assorted crewmates from the Black Wind…

King Stannis’s sworn bannermen

  - RICKON STARK, Lord of Winterfell, a boy of eleven, betrothed to Princess Shireen, in Riverrun
  - EDMURE TULLY, Lord of Riverrun and Warden of the North
  - YOHN ROYCE, Lord of Runestone
  - MARWYN BELMORE, Lord of Strongsong
  - HORTON REDFORT, Lord of the Redfort
among others…
(see lords of the Vale, the North and the Riverlands for details)

**The King of the Iron Isles**

[KING EURON GREYJOY], called *Crow’s Eye*, the Third of His Name, King of the Iron Isles, King of Salt and Rock, *claimant* King in the North and *claimant* King of All Westeros, possibly slain by Samwell Tarly at the Battle of Oldtown, now missing

- his elder brother, [KING BALON GREYJOY], King of the Iron Isles, fell to his death in a storm
  - Balon’s daughter, ASHA, at Winterfell, Lady of Pyke and the Iron Islands by *King Stannis’s decree*
  - Balon’s son, THEON, called *Theon Turncloak*, at Winterfell
- *his younger brother, [VICTARION GREYJOY], died during the Battle of Oldtown*
- *his youngest brother, AERON GREYJOY, called Damphair, a priest*

**Theon and Asha’s retinue, at Winterfell**

- QARL THE MAID, a fearsome warrior
- TRISTIFER BOTLEY, dispossessed heir of [LORD SAWANE BOTLEY] of Lordsport
- GRIMTONGUE, a foul-mouthed reaver
- DROOPEYE DALE, a lazy-eyed reaver
- EERL HARLAW, a Harlaw of Harlaw Hall
- LORREN LONGAXE, a reaver
- ROGGON REDBEARD, a reaver

**on the Isles**

- RODRIK HARLAW, called *Rodrik the Reader*, Lord of Ten Towers and Harlaw Isle
  - his sister, LADY ALANNYS HARLAW, wife of King Balon Greyjoy, half-mad in her grief
  - his cousin, SER HARRAS HARLAW, named Lord of Greyshield by *King Euron’s decree*, called *the Knight of Grey Garden*, captain of his household guard, now Lord Rodrik’s designated heir
  - his cousin, HOTHO HARLAW, of the Tower of Glimmering, called *Humpback*, an ambitious man

- GYLBERT FARWYND, Lord of the Lonely Light, presumed a madman by many
  - at least three sons
House Arryn

House Arryn of the Eyrie are one of the most ancient and pure Andal bloodlines, and one of only two of the Great Houses to not take sides in the War of Five Kings, despite recent blood ties to House Tully and cordial relations with Houses Stark and Baratheon – much to the frustration of some of its vassals. Since the death of Lady Lysa Arryn, the Vale is ruled nominally by its Lord Protector, Petyr Baelish, Lord of Harrenhal, again contrasting with the wishes of some of the Eyrie’s most powerful vassal lords. House Arryn supports King Tommen’s claim to the Iron Throne, but several of its notable vassals have rebelled against Lord Robert in recent months.

Their words are As High As Honor.

ROBERT ARRYN, called Sweetrobin, Lord of the Eyrie and Warden of the East, Defender of the Vale, thirteen years of age, at Harrenhal

- his mother, [LADY LYSAR RRYN], Lady Regent of the Vale, fell through the Moon Door to her death
- his stepfather, LORD PETYR BAELISH, called Littlefinger, Lord of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, Lord Regent and Lord Protector of the Vale, Warden of the North

MAESTER COLEMON, a maester serving the Eyrie

SER LYN CORBRAY, a knight who wields the Valyrian steel sword Lady Forlorn

SER LOTHROR BRUNE, a hedge knight in service to Lord Baelish

- SER SHADRIC OF THE SHADY GLEN, called the Mad Mouse, a hedge knight in service to Lord Baelish
- SER OSWELL KETTLEBLACK, a hedge knight in service to Lord Baelish
  - His sons, [OSMUND], [OSFURY] and [OSNEY], died in King’s Landing
- ALESTER LONGWYCK, a captain of the Long Lances
- VEREGO, a captain of the Long Lances
- HARLEN OSGREY, captain of the Mirror Shields
- captains of the Snail Men, the Company of the Shattered, and the Stormweatherers, three sellsword companies
- MYA STONE, the Mule Girl, dismissed from her duties by Lord Baelish

Lord Robert’s current and former bannermen
• ANYA WAYNWOOD, Lady of Ironoaks, loyal to Lord Robert
  ○ her eldest son, SER DONNEL WAYNWOOD
    ▪ Ser Donnel’s son, JON WAYNWOOD, companion of Lord Robert
    ▪ Ser Donnel’s daughter, ROWENA WAYNWOOD, companion of Lord Robert
  ○ her ward, SER HARROLD HARDYNG, called Harry the Heir, heir to the Vale through his mother’s line

• NESTOR ROYCE, Keeper of the Gates of the Moon, High Steward of the Vale, loyal to Lord Robert
  ○ his eldest son, SER ALBAR ROYCE
  ○ his daughter, LADY MYRANDA ROYCE, called Randa

• LYONEL CORBRAY, Lord of Heart’s Home, loyal to Lord Robert
  ○ his younger brother, SER LYN CORBRAY, a quarrelsome knight, at Harrenhal
  ○ his youngest brother, SER LUCAS CORBRAY

• YOHN ROYCE, Lord of Runestone, called Bronze Yohn, allied with Stannis Baratheon
  ○ his eldest son, [SER ANDAR ROYCE], murdered by Cersei Lannister and the High Sparrow in King’s Landing
    ▪ Ser Andar’s son, ROBAR, an infant, heir to Runestone
  ○ his second son, [SER ROBAR ROYCE], slain by Ser Loras Tyrell
  ○ his third son, [SER WAYMAR ROYCE], of the Night’s Watch, killed during a ranging beyond the Wall
  ○ his daughter, LADY YSILLA ROYCE, m. [SER MYCHEL REDFORT]

• HORTON REDFORT, Lord of Redfort, allied with Stannis Baratheon
  ○ his eldest son, SER JASPER REDFORT
  ○ his second son, [SER CREIGHTON REDFORT], died in King’s Landing
  ○ his third son, SER JON REDFORT
  ○ his fourth son, [SER MYCHEL REDFORT], died in King’s Landing

…among others

House Martell

House Martell of Sunspear played no part in the early stages of the War of Five Kings, but has recently pledged its loyalty to King Aegon Targaryen, the son of Prince Doran’s dearly-remembered sister Elia Martell. However, despite professing loyalty to the Iron Throne, the memory of the last
rebellion is not forgotten in Dorne, and some do not believe that giving Aegon a crown is sufficient for vengeance against those who murdered their princess in Robert’s Rebellion.

Their words are *Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken.*

DORAN NYMEROS MARTELL, Prince of Dorne, Lord of Sunspear, Lord of the Sandship

- his daughter and heir, PRINCESS ARIANNE MARTELL, b. 276AL, betrothed to King Aegon VI Targaryen
- his eldest son, PRINCE QUENTYN MARTELL, b. 280AL, sometimes called *Frog*
- his second son, [PRINCE TRYSTANE MARTELL], b. 284AL, killed in King’s Landing by the High Sparrow and Cersei Lannister
  - his wife of one day, PRINCESS MYRCELLA LANNISTER

Prince Doran’s sister, [PRINCESS ELIA MARTELL], m. [PRINCESS RHAEGAR TARGARYEN], murdered during the Sack of King’s Landing

- her daughter, [PRINCESS RHAENYS TARGARYEN], murdered during the Sack of King’s Landing
- her son, KING AEGON VI TARGARYEN, the Sixth of His Name, King on the Iron Throne

Prince Doran’s brother, PRINCE OBERYN NYMEROS MARTELL, infamously called *the Red Viper of Dorne*

- his eldest daughter, OBARA SAND
- his second daughter, NYMERIA SAND
- his third daughter, TYENE SAND
- his fourth daughter, SARELLA SAND, at the Citadel in Oldtown
- his paramour, [ELLARIA SAND], bastard daughter of Lord Harmen Uller, killed by Cersei Lannister in King’s Landing
  - their daughters: ELIA, OBELLA, DOREA, LOREZA, between nine and fourteen years of age

*Prince Oberyn’s daughters are collectively known as the ‘Sand Snakes’.*

the household at Sunspear and the Water Gardens

MAESTER MYLES, a maester serving Sunspear

MAESTER CALEOTTE, a maester serving the Water Gardens

SER MANFREY MARTELL, castellan at the Water Gardens

AREO HOTAH, captain of the guards, sworn to Prince Doran

Prince Doran’s sworn bannermen
• EDRIC DAYNE, Lord of Starfall, called Ned, a boy of fifteen years, with the Brotherhood without Banners
  • his aunt, ASHARA DAYNE, widely believed dead, but living in King Aegon’s court under the alias of Septa Lemore
  • his aunt, ALLYIADAYNE, betrothed to [LORD BERIC DONDARRION]
  • his uncle, [SER ARTHUR DAYNE], a knight of the Kingsguard, called the Sword of the Morning, wielder of the greatsword Dawn
  • his cousin, SER GEROLD DAYNE, calledDarkstar, a Dayne of High Hermitage

• ANDERS YRONWOOD, Lord of Yronwood, Warden of the Stone Way, called the Bloodroyal
  • his eldest daughter and heir, YNYS YRONWOOD, m. Ser Ryon Allyrion
  • his son, SER CLETUS YRONWOOD, a companion of Prince Quentyn Martell
  • his second daughter, GWYNETH YRONWOOD
  • his cousin, SER ARCHIBALD YRONWOOD, called the Big Man, a companion of Prince Quentyn Martell

• HARMEN ULLER, Lord of Hellholt
  • at least two sons
  • his bastard daughter, [ELLARIA SAND], Prince Oberyn’s paramour
  • his brother, SER ULWYCK ULLER, a well-respected knight

• RYON ALLYRION, Lord of Godsgrace, m. Lady Ynys Yronwood
  • his son and heir, MANFREY ALLYRION, a squire
  • his second son, OLYVAR ALLYRION
  • his bastard son, SER DAEMON SAND, called the Bastard of Godsgrace, sometime squire to Prince Oberyn Martell

• TREBOR JORDAYNE, Lord of the Tor
  • his eldest daughter and heir, MYRIA JORDAYNE
  • at least four other daughters

• NYMELLA TOLAND, Lady of Ghost Hill
  • her eldest daughter, VALENA TOLAND, sixteen years of age
  • her second daughter, TEORA TOLAND

…among others
House Stark

The Starks of Winterfell are as old as the North. Despite their fall after the Red Wedding, the family has rebounded to prominence with the aid of Stannis Baratheon, though their ancestral seat of Winterfell remains in ruins, and the Starks are scattered to the winds. Rickon Stark rules the North nominally, but as little more than a boy he remains a effectively a hostage of King Stannis Baratheon, to whom House Stark newly owes its loyalty.

Their words are Winter is Coming.

RICKON STARK, Lord of Winterfell and the North, b. 289AL

- his eldest brother, [KING ROBB STARK], called the Young Wolf, King in the North and of the Trident, Lord of Winterfell, murdered at the Red Wedding, b. 280AL
  - his pregnant widow, JEYNE WESTERLING, at Riverrun
- his eldest sister, SANSA STARK, b. 282AL betrothed to Willas Tyrell, at Highgarden
- his elder sister, {ARYA STARK}, b. 284AL, missing and widely believed dead
- his elder brother, BRANDON STARK, b. 285AL, a cripple, believed dead after the Sack of Winterfell
- his bastard brother, JON SNOW, b. 281AL, called the Bastard of Winterfell, 998th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, believed dead

- his mother, [LADY CATELYN TULLY], murdered at the Red Wedding
- his father, [LORD EDDARD STARK], called Ned or the Quiet Wolf, Lord of Winterfell, Warden of the North, Hand of the King, executed on the orders of King Joffrey Baratheon
  - Lord Eddard’s elder brother, [BRANDON STARK], called the Wild Wolf, murdered by King Aerys Targaryen
  - Lord Eddard’s brother, [BENJEN STARK], First Ranger of the Night’s Watch, long-missing, believed dead
  - Lord Eddard’s sister, [LYANNA STARK], died at the Tower of Joy during Robert’s Rebellion

Lord Rickon’s current and former sworn bannermen

- [ROOSE BOLTON], Lord of the Dreadfort and now Lord of Winterfell, Lord Paramount of the North, Warden of the North, called the Leech Lord, murdered by his bastard, Ramsay (Snow) Bolton, during the Battle of Winterfell
  - his first wife, [BETHANY RYSWELL], died of a fever
  - his son by his first wife, [DOMERIC BOLTON], died of a fever, suspected to have been murdered
  - his second wife, [WALDA FREY], called Fat Walda, murdered by Ramsay Bolton
his bastard son, RAMSAY BOLTON, formerly Snow, called the Bastard of the Dreadfort, missing somewhere in the North, claims to be Lord of Winterfell, the Hornwood, the Dreadfort and the Warden of the North

Ramsay’s claim to these titles is unsupported, as he has been declared outlaw by every king competing for the Iron Throne

- Ramsay’s pregnant wife, JEYNE POOLE, once believed to be ‘Arya Stark’, at Barrowton in the care of Lady Barbrey Ryswell
- JON UMBER, called the Greatjon, Lord of the Last Hearth, en route to the North from Riverrun
  - his son, [JON UMBER], called the Smalljon, murdered at the Red Wedding
  - his uncles, MORS, called Crowfood, and HOTHER, called Whoresbane, castellans of the Last Hearth
- MAEGE MORMONT, Lady of Bear Island, a warrior woman
  - her eldest daughter, [DACEY MORMONT], murdered at the Red Wedding
  - her second daughter and heir, ALYSANE MORMONT, called the She-Bear
  - her third daughter, LYRA MORMONT
  - her fourth daughter, JORELLE MORMONT
  - her fifth daughter, LYANNA MORMONT, b. 288AL
- her brother, [LORD COMMANDER JEOR MORMONT], formerly Lord of Bear Island, 997th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, murdered by his own men during the Mutiny at Craster’s Keep
  - Jeor’s son, SER JORAH MORMONT, briefly Lord of Bear Island, an exiled knight once in service to Daenerys Targaryen
- WYMAN MANDERLY, Lord of White Harbor, Warden of the White Knife, Defender of the Dispossessed, Knight of the Order of the Green Hand, serving as Lord Regent and Castellan of Winterfell, called the Lord Lamprey, immensely fat
  - his eldest son, SER WYLIS MANDERLY, master of coin to King Stannis Baratheon, at Riverrun
    - Ser Wylis’s eldest daughter, WYNAFRYD MANDERLY
    - Ser Wylis’s second daughter, WYLLA MANDERLY
  - his second son, [SER WENDEL MANDERLY], murdered at the Red Wedding
  - his cousin, SER MARLON MANDERLY, commander of the City Watch of White Harbor
- GALBART GLOVER, Master of Deepwood Motte
  - his brother, SER ROBETT GLOVER, m. Lady Sybell Locke
    - Robett’s son, GAWEN GLOVER, a boy of seven
    - Robett’s daughter, ERENA GLOVER
- RODRIK FORRESTER, Lord of Ironrath, m. Lady Elaena Glenmore, now pregnant
  - his younger brother, ASHER FORRESTER, a former sellsword
  - his younger sister, MIRA FORRESTER, a handmaiden to Queen Margaery Tyrell in King’s Landing
  - his younger brother, [ETHAN FORRESTER], twin to Talia, briefly Lord of Ironrath, murdered by Ramsay Bolton
  - his youngest sister, TALIA FORRESTER, twin to Ethan, betrothed to Lord Larence Hornwood
  - his youngest brother, RYON FORRESTER

- his mother, LADY ELISSA BRANFIELD

- HOWLAND REED, Lord of Greywater Watch, Lord of the Neck, m. Jyana Lymewater
  - his son, JOJEN REED, a greenseer, with Brandon Stark beyond the Wall
  - his daughter, MEERA REED, with Brandon Stark beyond the Wall

- LARENCE HORNWOOD, formerly Snow, Lord of the Hornwood, sixteen years of age, betrothed to Lady Talia Forrester
  - his brother, [DARYN HORNWOOD], slain by Ser Jaime Lannister at the Battle of the Whispering Wood

- ROGER RYSWELL, Lord of Rillwater
  - his eldest daughter, [BETHANY RYSWELL], m. Lord Roose Bolton
  - his second daughter, BARBREY RYSWELL, now Dustin, m. [Lord William Dustin], Lady of Barrowton
  - his eldest son, ROGER RYSWELL
  - his second son, RICKARD RYSWELL
  - his third son, ROOSE RYSWELL

- JYANA RYDER, Lady of Ryewash
  - her eldest son, RICKARD RYDER
  - her daughter, LYANNA RYDER, fifteen years of age
  - her nephew, DONNEL SNOW

- HARRION KARSTARK, Lord of Karhold, with Lord Petyr Baelish in Harrenhal
  - his brothers, [TORRHEN] and [EDDARD], cut down by Ser Jaime Lannister at the Battle of the Whispering Wood
  - his sister and heir, ALYS KARSTARK, the de facto Lady of Karhold, at the wall under the protection of Lord Commander Jon Snow
    - Alys’s new husband, SIGORN, the Magnar of Thenn
House Tully

The Tullys of Riverrun and their bannermen were among the principal supporters of King Robb Stark’s fight for independence, and now lean towards King Stannis Baratheon, though they are doubtful of some of his methods. Ruling from the seat of Riverrun in the Riverlands, they sent large levies to war to fight in the name of the Young Wolf, and suffered massive losses. But recently, King Stannis’s ascension in the North brought them back to their previous strength, surpassing the Freys to consolidate their paramount status once more.

Their words are *Family, Duty, Honor.*

EDMURE TULLY, Lord of Riverrun, Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, Warden of the North
- his pregnant wife, LADY ROSLIN FREY
- his eldest sister, [CATELYN], m. Lord Eddard Stark, murdered at the Red Wedding
- his elder sister, [LYSA], m. Lord Jon Arryn, then m. Lord Petyr Baelish, fell through the Moon Door to her death
- his uncle, SER BRYNDEN TULLY, called the Blackfish, a well-renowned knight

- the household at Riverrun
  - MAESTER VYMAN, a maester in service to Riverrun
  - Utherydes Wayn, head steward of Riverrun
  - SER DESMOND GRELL, master-at-arms of Riverrun

Lord Edmure’s current and former sworn bannermen
- [LORD WALDER FREY], sometimes called the Late Lord, Lord of the Crossing and Lord
of the Twins, killed at Riverrun during the Second Red Wedding, an old man with heirs too numerous to list

- his eldest son, [SER STEVRON FREY], died from wounds after the Battle of Oxcross
  - Ser Stevron’s eldest son, [SER RYMAN FREY], a fat dullard, hanged by the Brotherhood without Banners
    - Ser Ryman’s eldest son, [SER EDWYN FREY], died at the Crossing
    - Edwyn’s daughter, WALDA
  - Ser Ryman’s second son, [WALDER FREY], called Black Walder, of ill repute, killed at Riverrun
  - Ser Ryman’s third son, [PETYR FREY], called Petyr Pimple, hanged by the Brotherhood without Banners
    - Petyr’s daughter, PERRA FREY
  - Ser Stevron’s second son, [AEGON FREY], called Jinglebell, killed by Catelyn Stark at the Red Wedding
  - Ser Stevron’s daughter, MAEGELLE, m. Ser Dafyn Vance

- Lord Walder’s second son, [SER EMMON FREY], Lord of Riverrun, m. Lady Genna Lannister, hanged before the battle of the Tumblestone
  - Ser Emmon’s eldest son, [SER CLEOS FREY], killed by outlaws, m. Lady Jeyne Darry, Regent of Darry
    - Ser Cleos’s eldest son, TYWIN FREY, called Ty, 285AL, Lord of Darry, a hostage at Riverrun
    - Ser Cleos’s second son, WILLEM FREY, b. 289AL, a page at Casterly Rock
  - Ser Emmon’s second son, [SER LYONEL FREY]
  - Ser Emmon’s third son, [SER TION FREY]
  - Ser Emmon’s fourth son, WALDER FREY, called Red Walder, a hostage at Riverrun

- Lord Walder’s third son, [SER AENYS FREY], commander of the Frey armies at Winterfell, killed in battle
  - Ser Aenys’s eldest son, AEGON FREY, called Aegon Bloodborn, an outlaw, claimant Lord of the Crossing
  - Ser Aenys’s second son, [RHAEGAR FREY], died on the road from White Harbor
    - Rhaegar’s eldest son, [ROBERT FREY]
    - Rhaegar’s daughter, WALDA FREY, called White Walda
    - Rhaegar’s second son, JONOS FREY
  - Lord Walder’s eldest daughter, PERIANNE FREY, m. Ser Leslyn Haigh

other notable descendants

- SEPTON LUCEON, Lord Walder’s fifth son, in King’s Landing
- [SER HOSTEEN FREY], Lord Walder’s sixth son, called Ser Stupid, died in the Battle of the Crossing
- [MERRETT FREY], Lord Walder’s ninth son, hanged by the Brotherhood without Banners
- [LOTHAR FREY], Lord Walder’s twelfth son, called Lame Lothar, steward of the Twins, fled the Crossing, whereabouts unknown
- ROSLIN FREY, Lord Walder’s fifth daughter, m. Lord Edmure Tully, now Lady of Riverrun

- JASON MALLISTER, Lord of Seagard, Admiral of the Northern Fleet
- his son and heir, SER PATREK MALLISTER, a young well-liked knight
- his daughter, LADY LAENA MALLISTER

- TYTOS BLACKWOOD, Lord of Raventree Hall
  - his eldest son and heir, SER BRYNDEYN BLACKWOOD
  - his second son, [SER LUCAS BLACKWOOD], murdered at the Red Wedding
  - his third son, HOSTER BLACKWOOD, a bookish boy
  - his fourth son, SER EDMUND BLACKWOOD, called *Ben*, a new-made knight
  - his fifth son, ALYN BLACKWOOD
  - his daughter, BETHANY BLACKWOOD
  - his sixth son, [ROBERT BLACKWOOD], died of a fever

- JONOS BRACKEN, Lord of Stone Hedge
  - his eldest daughter, BARBARA BRACKEN
  - his second daughter, JAYNE BRACKEN
  - his third daughter, CATELYN BRACKEN
  - his fourth daughter, BESS BRACKEN
  - his fifth daughter, ALYSANNE BRACKEN
  - his nephew, [HENDRY BRACKEN], died during the Siege of Stone Hedge
  - his bastard son, [HARRY RIVERS], died during the War of Five Kings

- CLEMENT PIPER, Lord of Pinkmaiden, currently loyal to House Lannister
  - his eldest son, SER MARQ PIPER, returning from the captivity of House Frey at the Twins
  - his second son, LEWYS PIPER, called *Little Lew*, currently a hostage of the Lannisters at Casterly Rock

- LORD KARYL VANCE, Lord of Wayfarer’s Rest and Lord of Atranta by *King Tommen’s decree*, currently loyal to House Lannister
  - his only son and heir, TYMONDE VANCE, currently a hostage of the Lannisters at Casterly Rock
  - his eldest daughter, MYRIELLE VANCE
  - his second daughter, ELIANA VANCE
  - his third daughter, ANYA VANCE

…among others

**House Tyrell**
The Tyrells of Highgarden were principal supporters to Renly Baratheon before his untimely death, whereupon they switched their allegiance to the Iron Throne after the Battle of the Blackwater, sealing this agreement with a marriage contract between the lord’s daughter, Lady Margaery, and the late King Joffrey. Following Joffrey’s death, King Tommen Baratheon wed Margaery in his brother’s place, but the alliance has since fallen apart. Tyrion Lannister attainted the house following their flight from the Second Battle of the Blackwater and offered the position of Warden of the South to House Tarly, though this is not widely known.

Their words are *Growing Strong.*

MACE TYRELL, Lord of Highgarden, Warden of the South, High Marshal of the Reach and Defender of the Marches, *de facto and claimant* Lord Paramount of the Mander, Hand of the King, Lord Regent of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm

- his wife, LADY ALERIE HIGHTOWER
- his eldest son and heir, SER WILLAS TYRELL, crippled in a tourney, b. 274AL, newly knighted
  - his betrothed, LADY SANSA STARK, of Winterfell
- his second son, SER GARLAN TYRELL, b. 277AL, Lord of Brightwater Keep, called *Garlan the Gallant*, m. Lady Leonette Fossoway
  - his son, OSMUND TYRELL, an infant, twin to Alysane
  - his daughter, ALYSANE TYRELL, an infant, twin to Osmund
- his third son, SER LORAS TYRELL, b. 279AL, called *the Knight of the Flowers*, a knight of the Kingsguard, in Highgarden
- his only daughter, QUEEN MARGAERY TYRELL, b. 280AL
  - her first husband, [KING RENLY BARATHEON], slain by a shadow
  - her second husband, [KING JOFFREY BARATHEON], possibly choked on his pigeon pie
  - her third husband, KING TOMMEN LANNISTER, currently disregarding her vows of marriage, in Highgarden
- his sister, JANNA TYRELL, m. Ser Jon Fossoway
- his sister, MINA TYRELL, m. Lord Paxter Redwyne
- his widowed mother, OLENNA REDWYNE, called *the Queen of Thorns*, [Lord Luthor Tyrell]

the court at Highgarden

- Lord Mace’s uncle, GARTH TYRELL, called *the Gross*
  - Garth’s bastard sons, Garse Flowers and Garrett Flowers
- Lord Mace’s uncle, SER MORYN TYRELL, Lord Commander of the City Watch of Oldtown
  - Moryn’s son, [SER LUTHOR TYRELL], died of illness
Moryn’s son, [LEO TYRELL], *the Lazy*, a former acolyte of the Citadel, died during the Battle of Oldtown

- Lord Mace’s uncle, GRAND MAESTER GORMON (TYRELL)

- ALLA TYRELL, Lady Margaery’s handmaiden and cousin
- ELINOR TYRELL, Lady Margaery’s handmaiden and cousin
- [MEGGA TYRELL], Lady Margaery’s handmaiden and cousin, killed by the High Sparrow in King’s Landing
- MAESTER LOMYS, the maester of Highgarden
- SER IGON VYRWEL, master-at-arms
- BUTTERBUMPS, a fool
- ERRYK and ARRYK, called *Left and Right*, Lady Olenna’s guardsmen

**Lord Mace’s sworn bannermen**

- ERRONHIGHTOWER, Lord of Oldtown and Defender of the Port, b. 286AL, at Highgarden, effectively a hostage
  - his brother, TYBALD HIGHTOWER, a page at Highgarden, twin to Lysa, b.290AL
  - his sister, LYSA HIGHTOWER, twin to Tybald, b. 290AL
  - his uncle, SER GARTH HIGHTOWER, called *Garth Greysteel*, once a wandering knight
    - Garth’s progeny, likely numerous bastards
  - his aunt, ALERIE, m. Lord Mace Tyrell
  - his aunt, [LEYLA], m. Ser Jon Cupps, died of illness
  - his aunt, [DENYSE], m. Ser Desmond Redwyne, died during Euron Greyjoy’s sack of the Arbor

- his aunt, ALYSANNE, m. Ser Arthur Ambrose
- his uncle, [SER GUNTHOR HIGHTOWER], m. Lady Jeyne Oldflowers
- his uncle, SER HUMFREY HIGHTOWER, in Lys seeking ships from his sister
- his aunt, LYNESSE, m. Ser Jorah Mormont, now a concubine of Tregar Ormollen, a merchant prince of Lys

- RANDYLL TARLY, Lord of Horn Hill, *claimant* Lord Paramount of the Mander, Defender of the Marches, High Marshal of the Reach, Warden of the South, *claimant and de facto* Lord of Oldtown, commander of the royal armies, m. Lady Melessa Florent
  - his eldest son, SAMWELL TARLY, of the Night’s Watch, called *Sam the Slayer*, in Oldtown, training to become amaester, b. 279AL
  - his eldest daughter, TALLA TARLY
  - at least two other daughters
  - his youngest son and heir, SER DICKON TARLY, a new-made knight, m. Eleanor Mooton, b. 285AL

- PAXTER REDWYNE, Lord of the Arbor, lord admiral on the king’s small council, crippled
after the Sack of the Arbor, m. Lady Mina Tyrell
  • his twin sons, SER HORAS REDWYNE and SER HOBBER REDWYNE, nicknamed Horror and Slobber respectively
  • his daughter, DESMERA REDWYNE

  • MATHIS ROWAN, Lord of Goldengrove, on the king’s small council, m. Lady Bethany Redwyne
    • his eldest son and heir, SER OSWALD ROWAN
    • his eldest daughter, ELINOR ROWAN
    • his second son, ALESTER ROWAN, a squire at Highgarden
    • his second daughter, VICTARIA ROWAN

  • ORTON MERRYWEATHER, Lord of Longtable, m. Lady Taena of Myr
    • his son and heir, RUSSELL MERRYWEATHER, a page at Highgarden

  • ARWYN OAKHEART, Lady of Old Oak, m. Ser Bradamar Crane of Red Lake
    • her eldest son, SER ROLAND OAKHEART
    • her second son, [SER ERREN OAKHEART]
    • her third son, SER ARYS OAKHEART, a knight of the Kingsguard

  • [WARRYN BEESBURY], Lord of Honeyholt, killed by Lord Peake
    • his only son, HARLEN BEESBURY, b. 287AL, now Lord of Honeyholt, a hostage in Oldtown serving as squire to Randyll Tarly

  • OSCAR CRANE, Lord of Red Lake, an old and dying man
    • his daughter, LADY MEREDYTH CRANE, called Merry
    • his brother and heir, SER PARMEN CRANE, called the Purple

  • RUSSELL ASHFORD, Lord of Ashford
    • his eldest son, EDRIC ASHFORD, a squire at Highgarden
    • his bastard son, SER LEO FLOWERS, the Bastard of Ashford, a knight of Highgarden’s household guard
    • at least three other children

  • TITUS PEAKE, Lord of Starpike, unmarried and aging
    • his bastard son, ADDAM FLOWERS, a boy of ten
    • his brother, [SER DARYN PEAKE], died in the Battle of Oldtown
      • Ser Daryn’s son and Lord Peake’s heir, SER WILLEM PEAKE, a new-made knight
      • Ser Daryn’s eldest daughter, MELESSA PEAKE
      • Ser Daryn’s second daughter, ROSAMUND PEAKE
The Night’s Watch

{Lord Commander Jon Snow}, the Bastard of Winterfell, bastard son of Lord Eddard Stark, 998th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, commander of Castle Black, missing and widely thought dead

brothers of the Night’s Watch

- Bowen Marsh, Lord Steward, head of the Ruling Council, interim Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch
- Ser Alliser Thorne, First Ranger, currently at Hardhome with Tormund Giantsbane
- Othell Yarwyck, First Builder, on the Ruling Council
- {Cotter Pyke}, commander of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, missing in the general area of Hardhome
- Ser Denys Mallister, commander of the Shadow Tower

- Samwell Tarly, called Sam the Slayer, a steward, in Oldtown studying to become a maester
- [Maester Aemon], formerly of House Targaryen, maester at Castle Black, very old, died during the sea voyage between Braavos and Oldtown

- Eddison Tollett, called Dolorous Edd, a steward
- Jeren, a steward
- Satin, a steward
- Mully, a steward
- Clydas, a steward
- Owen, called Owen the Oaf, a steward
- Left Hand Lew, a steward
- Tim Tangletongue, a steward
- Ty, a steward
- Wick Whittlestick, a steward
- Wallace Massey, a steward

- Grenn, called the Aurochs, a ranger
• Pyp, a ranger
• Mathtar, a ranger
• Tom Barleycorn, a ranger
• Kedge Whiteye, a ranger
• Black Bernarr, a ranger
• Black Jack Bulwer, a ranger
• Tumberjon, a ranger
• Leathers, a ranger, speaks the Old Tongue
• Iron Emmett, a ranger
• Toad, a ranger
• Ser Jarmen Buckwell, a ranger
• Ser Wynton Stout, a ranger
• Ulmer, a ranger

• Halder, a builder
• Hareth, called Horse, a builder
• Kegs, a builder
• Spare Boot, a builder with one leg
• Alf of Runnymudd, a builder

…among others

• [Coldhands], likely a former ranger, killed by Others beyond the Wall

The Free Folk

Mance Rayder, the King-beyond-the-Wall, known as the Mance, formerly of the Night’s Watch

• [Dalla], his woman, died in childbirth
  ○ Aemon Steelsong, his son, in Horn Hill with Gilly

• Val, Dalla’s sister, called the Wildling Princess, a spearwife
  ○ [Jarl], Val’s man, died climbing the Wall

- other chieftains and wildlings
- Tormund Giantsbane, the *Thunderfist*, Tall-talker, Horn-blower and Breaker of Ice, Husband to Bears, Mead-king of Ruddy Hall, Speaker to Gods and Father of Hosts, at Hardhome
  - his wife of many years, Doanna
  - his eldest son, Toregg, called *Tall Toregg*
  - his second son, [Dormund], died during the Battle of Castle Black
  - his third son, [Torwynd], called *Torwynd the Tame*, died after the Battle of Castle Black
  - his daughter, Munda, pregnant with child
    - Munda’s man, Longspier Ryk
  - his fourth son, Dryn, a boy of twelve, squire to Jon Snow at Castle Black

- Mother Mole, a woods witch, at Hardhome
- Harle the Huntsman, a seasoned ranger, on the Hardhome Ranging
- Gerrick Kingsblood, on the Hardhome Ranging
  - his three daughters
- Young Halleck, on the Hardhome Ranging
- Alfyn Crowkiller, on the Hardhome Ranging
- Gavin the Trader, on the Hardhome Ranging
- Howd Wanderer, on the Hardhome Ranging
- [Rattleshirt], called *the Lord of Bones*, burned by Melisandre
  - his son or other descendant, Rattleshirt (the Second), called *the Lord of Bones*

- The Great Walrus, with Mance at Winterfell
- Old Halleck, with Mance at Winterfell
- Devyn Sealskinner, with Mance at Winterfell
- Harle the Handsome, a seasoned ranger, with Mance at Winterfell
- Morna o’ the White Mask, with Mance at Winterfell
- Blind Doss, with Mance at Winterfell
- Kyleg of the Wooden Ear, with Mance at Winterfell

- Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun, called *Wun Wun*, a giant, on the Hardhome Ranging
- [Mag Mar Tun Doh Weg,] called *Mag the Mighty*, a giant, died during the Battle of Castle Black

**other wildlings**

- [Ygritte], Jon Snow’s lover, died during the Battle of Castle Black
- Karsi, a wildling spearwife, at Hardhome
- Styr, the Magnar of Thenn, at Hardhome
- [Orell], a skinchanger, slain by Jon Snow
- [Varamyr Sixskins], a skinchanger
The Maesters

- Archmaester Theobald, Seneschal of the Citadel, specialising in astrology
- Archmaester Marwyn, called Marwyn the Mage, specialising in magic and the occult, on Dragonstone with Queen Daenerys
- Archmaester Perestan, specialising in history, now part of Randyll Tarly’s war council
- Archmaester Castos, specialising in warcraft, now part of Randyll Tarly’s war council
- [Archmaester Vaellyn], called Vinegar Vaellyn, specialising in astronomy, died in the Battle of Oldtown
- [Archmaester Ebrose], specialising in medicine, died in the Battle of Oldtown
- Archmaester Guyne, specialising in economics
- [Archmaester Walgrave], an old man of uncertain wit, specialising in ravenry, died of old age

Acolytes and novices

- Samwell Tarly, called Sam the Slayer
- Alleras, called the Sphinx, actually Sarella Sand
- [Armen], called the Acolyte, died in the Battle of Oldtown
- [Pate], a novice, disappeared in the Battle of Oldtown
- [Mollander], a novice, died in the Battle of Oldtown
- [Leo Tyrell], called Leo the Lazy, died in the Battle of Oldtown
- Roone, an acolyte

…among others

Maesters serving castles

- Grand Maester Gormon, formerly a Tyrell of Highgarden, newly named Grand Maester by the Conclave
- [Grand Maester Pycelle], serving King’s Landing, died in Qyburn’s dungeon
- [Maester Luwin], serving Winterfell, killed during the Sack of Winterfell
- [Maester Aemon], serving Castle Black, died en route to Oldtown
- [Maester Cressen], serving Storm’s End and then Dragonstone, killed by Melisandre of Asshai
- [Maester Theomore], formerly a Lannister of Lannisport, serving White Harbor, died mysteriously
- Maester Pylos, now serving Dragonstone
- Maester Henly, serving Winterfell
- Maester Lomys, serving Highgarden
- Maester Creylen, serving Castle Rock
- Maester Vyman, serving Riverrun
- Maester Colemon, serving the Eyrie
Maester Ballabar, serving the Arbor
Maester Myles, serving Sunspear
Maester Toman, serving Ghost Hill
Maester Yandel, serving Paynehall
Maester Ethen, serving the Hightower
Maester Ranmore, serving Cider Hall
Maester Wayam, serving Starfall
Maester Ballabar, serving the Arbor
Maester Androw, serving Horn Hill

Qyburn, disgraced and stripped of his chain, serving Queen Cersei Lannister in Casterly Rock

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The Brotherhood without Banners

Lady Stoneheart, sometimes called the Hangwoman, Mother Merciless and the Silent Sister, leader of the Brotherhood without Banners

[Lord Beric Dondarrion], the Lightning Lord, Lord of Blackhaven, former leader of the Brotherhood without Banners

- Lem Lemoncloak, an outlaw of yellow cloak
- Thoros of Myr, a red priest of R’hllor, the Lord of Light
- Harwin, son of Hullen, former guardsman of Winterfell
- Jack-be-Lucky, an outlaw
- Tom of Sevenstreams, called Tom o’ Sevens, a singer
- Ser Gendry, of the hollow hill
- Notch, an outlaw
- Likely Luke, an outlaw
- Mudge, an outlaw
- Beardless Dick, an outlaw
- Dennett, an outlaw
- Edric Dayne, called Ned, Lord of Starfall, a boy of sixteen years, Lord Beric’s former squire
- The Mad Huntsman, an outlaw
- Pello of Tyrosh, called Greenbeard, an outlaw
- Anguy, called Anguy the Archer, a Bowman from the Dornish Marches
- Merrit O’Moontown, an outlaw
- Watty the Miller, an outlaw
- Swampy Meg, an outlaw
- Jon O’Nutten, an outlaw
- Melly, an outlaw
- Puddingfoot, an outlaw
- Twopenny, an outlaw
• Alan of Oldstream, an outlaw
• Ser Melwyn, the Knight of Brandy Bridge
• Arron and Rory, twin outlaws, only young boys
• Elena, an outlaw girl
• Morros, an outlaw boy
• among others...
SUPPLEMENTARY: Deleted Scenes, Odds and Ends: Part One

Chapter Notes

A compilation of various scenes and filler that were deleted from THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, Chapters 1-73, prior to uploading, for numerous story-related reasons.

As such, all of these scenes should be considered NON-CANON within the fic, and nothing you read here means anything in the context of the actual story.

These scenes are unedited, so spelling and grammar errors, continuity issues, etc. are expected.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Scene 1 – The Pinkish-Scarlet Woman

An original version of Melisandre I, The Red Woman. As you can see, this chapter is something that I’d had planned out for quite a long time, though it did go through a number of changes. This is just an excerpt from the middle of the chapter – the ending is exactly as you’d expect, but Davos isn’t in prison and so Melisandre goes up to his chambers and they have a different talk to the one they have in the original.

Also noteworthy: The earliest plans had Davos, Shireen, Melisandre et al. following Stannis on his quest, so their plotline concluded with Davos throwing Melisandre out of a window and then abseiling down the side of the Golden Tooth with Shireen. Which was pretty cool, but also presented a whole new onslaught of problems, and made Mel into an evil caricature.

MELISANDRE

Melisandre stood and looked away from the flames. Those same snows had not yet fallen in the Riverlands, but there was frost on her windowsill, and a chill that even she felt despite the warmth in her heart. She went to the window and flung it open slightly. In the bailey below, the ground was black with frost, and the leaves of the heart tree fluttered pink and red in the breeze. The old gods are strong here, Melisandre mused, I cannot be certain that my visions are true. Still, the eternally sceptical Onion Knight had asked her to tell him if she saw anything in her flames, and she did not intend to mislead him.

See what your folly has brought, Ser Davos. She stepped out of her chambers and onto the wallwalk. Two Baratheon soldiers were passing in the other direction, carrying torches. “My lady,” they said, stepping aside to let her past.

“May the Lord of Light bless you both,” Melisandre told them. The younger one blushed red at the fact that he was lucky enough to receive a personal blessing. Most men were such fools, the red woman thought, if you showed them what they wanted to see and told them what they wanted to hear. Stannis and Ser Davos had always been a little more difficult to convince, but the former, at
The nights were getting colder, even in Melisandre’s opinion. The lord’s fire ran through her veins, but she had to spare some of her power for less trivial things than warming herself. Having spent time in chilly Westeros, she was doubtless more practised in the art than many of her peers. The Sunset Kingdoms were just that—a cold and inhospitable land, where Melisandre found herself greatly misplaced. Only scant few of the Lord’s priests had spent time in Westeros. An acquaintance of hers called Moqorro was serving Daenerys Targaryen on Dragonstone, just as his mentor had once attempted to serve Aerys the Mad in King’s Landing. That had not ended well for him. There was nothing in Aerys’s flames but death, ‘an old evil with a thousand eyes and one’, or so Arreno had said.

Melisandre had seen this ancient evil for herself, many years ago. It was part of a holy ritual that all the Lord’s servants had to go through before they could be initiated into His service. She had been little more than a girl at the time, but she remembered it clearly. An ancient evil with a thousand eyes and one.

She would worry over that later, though. Now, it was time to seek out the Onion Knight.

Ser Davos Seaworth’s chambers were located on the second-highest floor of Riverrun’s Great Keep, near the Blue Tower. Melisandre walked across the walkway that linked the ramparts and the keep, passing over the godswood below. She could hear evil things hissing, things that hated her and everything she stood for, but she paid them no heed.

The spiral stairs up to Ser Davos’s chambers were plentiful, and they gave her time to think on what she had seen in the flames. Those were Stannis’s soldiers, for sure. Golden stags, with flames streaming from their antlers. She had seen those as well, back at Winterfell, five or six months ago now, and assumed that they would mean Stannis’s victory. You read the fires well, Melony, she remembered Benerro telling her, but you do not always understand them. None of us can be perfect.

Azor Ahai is perfect, Melisandre convinced herself. She could say now, with all certainty, that Stannis Baratheon was not the prophesised prince she was looking for. The man had been too stubborn to take heed of her warnings, too narrow-minded to truly see in the flames. And Melisandre was convinced that he would have made an equally stubborn king. Even if he had been victorious at the Blackwater, he certainly would not have lasted until winter, which would have falsified Melisandre’s vision of him sitting on a throne in an icy hall, surrounded by champions. That must have been idle nonsense. She did not sleep much, and sometimes she—like many of the Lord’s servants—interpreted her sleeping dreams as waking visions.

She reached the landing and knocked twice upon the wooden door. The knocker was bronze, and she could see her reflection distorted within it. A moment passed, and then another, and then Ser Davos Seaworth opened the door and squinted at her. “What?”

Melisandre did not waste time. There was so little of it in the world. “I saw Stannis defeated in the snow.”

He looked strangely unconcerned by this, more irritated. “Then you’d best come inside, my lady.”

She did. Davos’s chambers were too big for him alone, like a pair of baggy breeches that did not fit, but he kept his family in the same rooms most nights, so it was snug. His wife’s sewing needles were discarded on a chair, and the wooden swords and shields belonging to his sons were scattered across the floor on one side. Melisandre felt a pang of sadness at that. She had always known that Devan would die in battle, hadn’t she? But it was best that she had decided not to tell Davos. Despite their innumerable disagreements, she was oddly fond of the man.
He poured two cups of mulled wine and went and sat down behind his desk. “The night is dark,” he said, “and probably full of terrors as well, come to think of it.”

Melisandre ignored the attempt at mockery. “Your king is in retreat.” She raised an eyebrow. “You seem unconcerned.”

“Your visions are not always correct,” he said.

“I admit that.” She sighed. “But this one came to me plain as day, and there was no mystery regarding it.”

Ser Davos sipped his wine. Then, for the longest time, he did not speak. “If Stannis has fallen, then there is nothing I can do about it. He holds the Golden Tooth. All he need do is retreat there, and he can regroup his men for another attack.”

“It was the snow that caused his defeat, not an error of battle, Ser Davos. This was the Lord’s work alone. It may be that the Great Choice has been made.”

Davos did not stir for a moment, then he leaned forward over his desk. “Victory does not make us conquerors,” he said, “but defeat does not make the defeated. And the way I see it is this: if your god is true, then Stannis will prevail. Mayhaps later rather than sooner, but he will prevail. And if he does not… I will at least say this for you and your god, my lady – you make a very convincing mummer.”

That ought to offend her, but Melisandre had many other thoughts to contend with. “What will you do, Ser Davos?” Not because it mattered, but merely because she was interested. As far as she knew, Davos Seaworth lived for Stannis Baratheon’s sake and nothing more than that.

He shrugged. “What can I do, my lady? If your visions are as true as you would have me believe – and I am loath to believe that – then Stannis may well have been defeated. If the time comes when that defeat is final, I suppose you and I will go our separate ways.”

“Yes,” Melisandre said. “I suppose we will.” No harm would come of her returning to Asshai for guidance, but she must be quick about it, because her road went in the other direction.

“You will take the Princess Shireen with you?” she asked.

“Aye.” Davos’s eyes narrowed. “In my own separate way from yours.”

“Must you continuously associate me with deceit, ser? I told you that I will bring no harm to Shireen, and that was a promise I made, despite my own… personal feelings. You think me an evil woman, I know that, but you – you who professes to be a man of the people – have never looked at things from my point of view. Keep your gods by all means, Ser Davos. It is for the sake of your children that I request that you look into the fire with me one last time.”

Truly, Melisandre was not sure what sort of reaction to expect. A harsh refusal would be as likely as anything. But Ser Davos did not grant her that. Instead, he said, “may your Lord of Light look upon you favourably, Lady Melisandre. As my gods look upon me and my children.”

[...redacted...]

She returned to her chambers, but she did not sleep. The bathtub had not been emptied; that was good. Melisandre spoke a word, and steam began to rise off the surface of the water, and bubbles burst at the surface. When she stepped in, the water was silky and smooth as balm against her form, and hot as dragon’s breath. It smelled of citrus and spice and the shadows. She lit a tallow candle on the side of the tub and watched as the light flickered, the flames burning red and yellow in the
reflection of the copper tub.

When that candle burned out, she was quick to replace it. *For the night is dark and full of terrors.* Melisandre did not fear the darkness itself, but she feared what hid within it. Sometimes, when she closed her eyes, she could see them crawling through the fog. *An evil with a thousand eyes and one.* But she decided not to dwell upon that. By the time she climbed from the bath her skin was wrinkled, and then smooth.

She changed her robes, checking her pockets for her powders, and then started in surprise when she heard a knock at the door. For a moment she thought that she had imagined it, but then she heard it again, insistent.

It was no terror of the night in the doorway, but Selyse Baratheon. Melisandre caught a glimpse of steel outside the door, but then the queen was inside and the men were shut out.

“I hope I am not disturbing you, my lady,” the queen said.

Melisandre played her part. “Not at all, Your Grace. But I must inquire, why have you come to my rooms so late at night?”

The queen wrung her hands. “... trivial matters, my lady… but one you might be able to assist me with.”

“Speak then, so that the Lord might hear your qualms.” Melisandre rubbed the ruby at her throat. “What would you have of me?”

Queen Selyse glanced around in worry. “Fear not,” Melisandre said, “it is only the two of us here. No one is listening.”

“Ah.” The queen bit her lip. “You and… ah… Stannis.” She pursed her lips again. “I dreamed of my husband.”

Melisandre groaned inwardly. Sometimes the faithful had fever dreams so vivid they became convinced that they were visions. Unfortunately, said dreams occasionally turned out to be true. That had given rise to a wave of false preachers in Volantis in the years past, and the Lord’s true chosen had been hard-pressed to make their word known. “What did you see, Your Grace?”

Selyse did not seem certain of whether to tell. “I saw… red hearts aflame… golden stags, with fire streaming from her antlers.”

Melisandre gave her a suitably mystical glance. “That is most… intriguing, my lady. Especially when you consider that I happen to have dreamed the same.”

“You have?” Selyse seemed overjoyed. “Thank you, my lady. For a moment, I was convinced that I was going mad.”

*That remains to be discovered.* “Many of us look mad to unbelievers,” Melisandre said. “Tell me, Your Grace, what did you manage to gather from this… vision?”

Selyse glanced around again, as though searching for a chair upon which to rest. “I am no servant of R’hil!’or,” she said, “not you, my lady.” She smiled. “But I will do my best. It means… victory… for Stannis… flaming stags… the Lord is with him…”

“Perhaps.” Speaking thusly would maintain an air of spirituality. Carefully, Melisandre extracted a jar of powder from inside her sleeve and scattered some in the air. Selyse was a shallow creature,
easily consumed by mysticism; the powder would do the rest.

“Perchance you saw arrows as well? Tipped with fire, trailing tendrils of smoke?”

“Perhaps.” Selyse screwed up her face, trying to remember. “I think… maybe… yes, I am certain I did.” She beamed like an idiot. “The Lord’s deliverance upon the faithless. I wonder, did the Lord predict my actions beforehand, or…”

“Your Grace?”

“Shireen,” said the queen. “My sacrifice—”

“Shireen?” Melisandre was horrified. “You haven’t—?”

“Not yet, my lady. I have sent Ser Axell and some of my men to retrieve the child, but we will need you to conduct the rites.” She frowned. “I trust you have the words prepared already?”

Melisandre was thinking a thousand things and none of them made sense. Fool, fool, fool. “Of course,” she said softly. “You have prepared a… a pyre?”

“Ser Benethon has taken that task, my lady,” said Queen Selyse. Her eyes were feverish, gone the colour of fire.

Melisandre nodded dumbly. This is not necessary, she knew. “My lady, perhaps the Lord was already quite satisfied—”

Selyse did not let her finish. “Lady Melisandre,” she said, “you promised that I would bear Stannis a son, a boy, a strong boy, with the strength of his father’s house and the wits of his mother’s. My three boys were beautiful and trueborn, but the false gods did not favour them, not truly. Petyr, Tommard, Edric, I still remember them all.” Her eyes flashed. “Petyr was the strongest of them, and the longest-lived, but he was a tiny babe, smaller than Cressen had anticipated… I prayed to the Mother and the Crone, but I knew that he would not live… but this, I can feel it, my lady. I can feel it in my loins. You said it yourself. Light and dark, life and death, they are linked. Only light can pay for darkness, and a sacrifice of life must be made to bring Stannis’s trueborn heir into the world. A prince of fire, heir to the throne of iron. Isn’t that what you want, my lady?”

Yes, Melisandre thought, it is. Because it was. Long ago, Benerro had told her that she must go to Dragonstone, to bring about the birth of such a prince. She had always – until today - thought that Stannis must be Azor Ahai reborn, but Stannis was a king. Surely a ceremony on a beach and the glamouring of a sword would not be all that was needed to bring about such an ancient prophecy. No, that would require something… more… surely…

And then, she realised what to do.

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**Scene 2 – Fish and Onions**

Some random scenes that take place at Riverrun, that ended up being incorporated into the four opening Davos chapters. I’m not entirely sure on the context for these, but here they are. We see
some Davos/Blackfish interaction, and a bit more of Davos and Edmure, talking about Melisandre and Stannis among other things (but mostly Melisandre and Stannis – Davos doesn’t exactly live the most interesting life).

DAVOS

“Lord, cast your light upon us!” the red woman sang with the voice of a nightingale. “For the night is dark and full of terrors!”

“For the night is dark and full of terrors!” the crowd echoed. Aye, Davos Seaworth thought, one stands before you. Melisandre smiled into the embers of the crackling nightfire as the embers climbed higher and higher into the darkness, bright as one hundred stars. The flames twisted and coiled, snakelike as they ascended, entwining as lovers, fiery and passionate. The knight could see the heat radiating off them from here, smell it, taste it, even.

Her crowd numbered in the hundreds. They were knights and ladies alike, squires and grooms and washerwomen, hedge knights and sellswords, young and old, high and low, all singing as one. The red priestess stood before them on a raised platform at the edge of the camp, running her slender fingers across the streams of dancing flame as if they were some queer stringed instrument with a music that only she knew.  “We are your servants, O Lord, your most humble and most holy! In your name, we plead, deliver us from darkness! Deliver our swords and our hearts into the light! Be true! Be strong! Be good! Be fire!” At this the flames leapt into the air, clawing at the moon, flickering purple and red and yellow. The onlookers cried out in worship, Queen Selyse loudest of all. “For the night is dark and full of terrors!”

“For the night is dark and full of terrors,” Davos muttered, then turned away and resigned himself to the darkness. And may Melisandre’s lord forgive me.

He found Ser Brynden Tully sitting on a low wall in one of Riverrun’s cloisters, beside a fire much smaller than the one that burned in the centre of the courtyard, sharpening his sword with a smooth grey whetstone. Every scrape of the steel brought new sparks that were promptly swallowed by the fire.

Ser Brynden nodded towards the smoke rising from Melisandre’s nightfire. “The Red Woman has quite an audience tonight.” He sounded tense, guarded.

“Queen Selyse and her knights came out in full force,” Davos explained. “The Lady Melisandre’s staunchest supporters.”

“Of course they are. Perhaps Her Grace originally hoped that the Lord might help her draw her own lord into the marriage bed.” The Blackfish smiled, blue eyes catching the light of his fire. “A jest, ser. But true as well.” He ran the whetstone along the length of his sword, pausing to run his finger lightly along the blade’s edge. “This one has carried me for many years, ser. A good sword. But of course, a good sword is only worth the man who wields it.” He lowered his voice a little. “I trust you to speak truly, Ser Davos; you are a good man. You may tell your king what I have said in your next letter… I know that the two of you do not keep secrets from one another.”

Davos scowled a little, wondering what the Blackfish was implying. “Go on, ser.”

“Do you think there is any truth to the Red Woman’s words… that King Stannis is this fabled prince,
Azor Ahai reborn, destined to bring light to the darkness?”

“I believe in what I see, Ser Brynden.” *And I believe in Stannis.*

The Blackfish nodded and placed the whetstone down beside his bench. “A year ago I might have said the same, ser. About scepticism. And yet… I have seen things that cannot merely be chance. I rode with the Brotherhood without Banners after Riverrun’s fall, with Thoros of Myr. I am not the sort to suddenly declare myself a believer… but afterwards… after I saw the red priest and this Melisandre, believing with such… fervour… I must admit that I have begun to doubt my own lack of faith.”

Davos glanced down into Ser Brynden’s fire. The kindling crackled and spat loudly, peppering the soil with red-hot embers. “Here is what I know,” he said. “I was born in Flea Bottom, and the only gods I knew there were the Seven. Perhaps they set me on a path sometime, but everything else I know has come from the whims and wishes of man. Marya gave me seven sons – and later the Imp’s wildfire reclaimed four of them. That was no work of god.

“Paxter Redwyne and Mace Tyrell besieged Storm’s End, not the Lord of Light. I slipped through the barricade, not Red R’hllor, and Stannis took my onions and gave me my name. I had no guiding light that night, ser; it was deathly dark outside. Sometimes when I listen closely I can still hear my oars, lapping through the waves.

“Jon Arryn and Eddard Stark discovered the truth, and the Lannisters – men, not gods – killed them for it. King Robert was gored by a boar; mayhaps he was helped towards death by Cersei Lannister - but boar, man, it makes no difference. And then Renly… Renly…” Davos paused then, for he knew what he had seen in the tunnels beneath Storm’s End when he had rowed Melisandre there, and he knew what had slain Ser Cortnay Penrose.

“You have your doubts too,” the Blackfish muttered. “I am sixty years old now, ser, and in all that time I have never doubted myself like this. Not even then…” He gazed into the fire, seeing some memory where Davos saw only flames, then rose to his feet. “The girl does not worship the god, does she?”

“The girl… Shireen, you mean? Nay, she does not but her mother and the red woman have tried—”

“Guard her, Ser Davos,” said Brynden Tully. “Guard her well.” He went.

Melisandre’s flames were dying done now, and the chanting with them. Davos stood up uneasily, then kicked some earth over the fire, quenching the flames forever. *If only Melisandre was so easy to snuff out,* he thought. Her faith divided Stannis’s supporters, among so many other things. The Northmen who had travelled south with her were understandably cautious, and some of the Vale lords refused to even walk within a hundred yards of the nightfire.

Night beckoned to him, and so did his bed. Davos wandered back up the spiral staircase to the castellan’s chambers, where he found the expected letter waiting for him on his bedsheets. Maester Vyman must have left it here. He poured himself a cup of weak wine, cracked the seal, and read:

*Ser Davos,*

*Oxcross has fallen, and the road is clear to the Rock. You may have wondered why we took so long to take Wayfarer’s Rest, though; Lord Vance surrendered rather easily, but we had to stage a siege*
for the man’s sake so that the Lannisters would not kill his sons for his cowardice. I only agreed in the hope that it will better secure his loyalty.

We will besiege Lannisport on the morrow. I intend to lead this assault.

I have sent Lord Blackwood south to circumvent Deep Den, though Jonos Bracken was rather aggrieved to be passed over for command, as I suspected. He has seven thousand, I have fourteen, but once we get through the mountains we will have – I hope – good conditions to face this Lannister host. The Northmen are better suited to fighting through snow than these Westermen, and also we can weather storms with ease. If we break them once in the field, the lords of the West will come to my banners. You may receive a command instructing you to march on Casterly Rock sooner rather than later.

Meanwhile, I have had word – doubtless coming your way as well – that Bronze Yohn is at Pinkmaiden, laying siege to Clement Piper. Once he leaves the castle behind, you may tell Ser Brynden and Lord Mallister that the time is ripe for the march on Harrenhal.

Send my regards to Selyse, Shireen and the Lady Melisandre. Tell her that the rituals will be observed, Ser Davos. A false king’s blood is better than none, I suppose.

Regards,

Stannis, of the House Baratheon, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm, Lord of Dragonstone

The contents of the letter did surprise him, particularly the fact that Stannis was at the Tooth already. Davos supposed that he must have already taken the castle, what with the time the bird would take to travel from Riverrun. Or failed. That was a small though, but not an impossible one, and Stannis had taught him never to rule such impossibilities out. But Stannis will not fall, he knew, he is the best commander in Westeros.

Then, more worryingly, the second thought came to him: and Lady Melisandre has not seen it in her flames either.

He lay in bed for a while, pondering those words. Then he slept. The morrow came too soon.

Ty Frey brought him poached eggs and barley bread, with a couple of kippers on the side. Davos ate them wolfishly, finishing not a moment too soon, for Edmure Tully was coming up the stairs.

“Today, Maester Vyman says.”

“My lord?” Davos did not understand.

Ty stepped forward out of the shadow. “Will you take wine, my lord Tully?”

Lord Edmure sniffed the jug. “Hmm… a sour vintage. No. I daresay the time for wine will come later. Go and see Lady Roslin, boy. I think she’ll appreciate your company.”

When the squire was gone, the lord of Riverrun turned back to Davos. “He’s a Frey of the viler sort,” he said warily, “but the boy’s to be lord of Darry someday through his mother. That, and Roslin seems to appreciate the company of her family – though she and Tywin are little more than second cousins. Anyhow,” he murmured, leaning on the doorframe. “The maester says today for Roslin – the midwife says another week, but still – and a month for Jeyne, which is odd, given that she and Robb… anyhow…”
Davos started on his fish. “I received a letter from King Stannis,” he said. “It sounded like he was in a good mood.”

“The day Stannis Baratheon is in a good mood will be the day it snows in Dorne,” Tully said. “What does he say of Harrenhal?”

“He says that you can march once we receive word from Bronze Yohn. He wants Lord Mallister to head south with him. Can that be arranged?”

“Aye.” Tully nodded. “But I will not miss the birth of my heir, so Stannis should be prepared to wait. You need not write to him.”

“You know that I must, my lord,” Davos said, “but I think I could make that minor omission.”

“Is it seven sons you have, Ser Davos?”

“Had.” He smiled grimly. “My four eldest died on the Blackwater. Devan is a squire to King Stannis, and the younger two—”

Tully smiled. “I am fond of bringing surprises to my friends, Ser Davos. Your wife and sons arrived at my gates this morning, escorted by Ser Osmund Cox of Saltpans. They arrived in Maidenpool ten days ago, on the morning tide. And now they are here.”

“My… wife…” Davos bit his lip. He must have misheard something. “What? My lord? Did you say—”

“You heard me correct, ser. I suppose that we are friends now.”

The onion knight rose very slowly from his chair. “Marya is here? Stannis and Steffon?”

“Aye.” Tully broke out into a grin. “They came through our gates at dawn as the castle was rising. Guards were falling asleep on duty, but their arrival perked them right up. I planned to bring them up here, but I figured that I’d best wait till you woke up properly – that, and the youngest one was looking like a scarecrow, so I judged it past time they got some proper food in them, so…”

He might have been tempted to hug Edmure Tully then – or punch him for not alerting him to this earlier – but by then he was already running down the stairs.

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**Scene 3 – Stannis the Mannis’s motivational speech**

“The king is within,” Ser Richard Horpe told her.

_The king is inside the king’s tent. How unexpected._ Mya gave him a half-sympathetic look, wondering whether the knight’s propensity to state the blatantly obvious had come about because the snowdrifts had addled his wits or because he was the sort of man who believed that she – as a woman – was incapable of making the most basic observations.

She was not expecting to find King Stannis so sobered, however. He stood behind his table in the middle of the tent. The figurines and the maps were cleared away. Instead the body of a boy lay in their place. A slight beard was growing on his chin, but he did not look much more than fourteen, Mya thought, his skin pale as milk save for the two grey spots on his cheeks, blood drying under his fingernails and around the wound where an arrow had pierced his heart. _The king’s squire_, she thought, trying to remember the boy’s name.

“This was his first war,” the king said emptly. “He did his duty till the very end, as his father would have.” He paused a moment. “It was a Lannister arrow that took him, in the heart, as he was protecting my back. He died in an instant. My other squire… that one was lost to the Lannisters at the Tooth; he surrendered to the pretender’s army. But he lived, girl. And Devan died, despite whatever duties he might have fulfilled.” He ground his teeth. “Will his father forgive me for his son’s death? I do not know, but the circumstances surrounding it will matter but little to Ser Davos. His son is dead. And honour means little and less to the dead.” He turned to look at Mya for the first time, but he was not really looking at her, as such, more _through_ her. “I remember something that your father told me once, when we lost our own father Lord Steffon to the cruel waters of Shipbreaker Bay. _Stop brooding on how he died, Stannis, and look at the life he lived instead._” I suppose that is all any of us can do, when we lose our friends.”

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**Scene 4 – Petyr Baelish and the classic villain entrance™**

King Aegon sends Sansa _inside_ the walls of Harrenhal to treat with Littlefinger, rather than meeting them in his encampment. Also, Brienne goes with her, and has her only verbal exchange with LF. Some of the dialogue is adapted into Sansa VI, _Mockingbird_, though most of it is slightly different given the changes in location and situation.

Petyr makes a classically villainesque entrance during some fog and alludes creepily to pushing people off castle ramparts. Also he smirks a lot.

**Note:** bear in mind that Sansa’s attitudes towards LF may be different to those we see in _The Sunset Kingdoms._

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**SANSA**
The stones of the tower were wet, interwoven with moss and weeds, and the damp had softened the wooden hoardings to little more than pulp. It was a curious place to meet, but in retrospect, this was no less than she expected from Lord Petyr Baelish.

Ser Lothor Brune had conducted her horse to the stables upon her arrival, but instead of taking her to a warm hall he had led Sansa to this damp, half-finished gatehouse tower. There was a tarpaulin over her head, but it had holes in it, so the raindrops were splattering against the stone endlessly, *plip, plip, plip*. Brienne and Podrick were about twenty yards down the wallwalk, standing sentry with Ser Lothor. Aegon’s men, who had brought her here, had gone inside the hall below. Sansa could smell bread baking. *Why couldn’t we meet somewhere sensible?* Doubtless Lord Baelish had a reason for it, but she got the impression that he would explain it in a confusing, whispery monologue if she were to ask him, and she wanted nothing more right now than to go inside.

He arrived after twenty minutes, or near enough as made no matter. She heard his footsteps first, and turned, nearly slipping on the stone, just in time to watch his arrival. Lord Baelish wore black wool breeches and a dark blue doublet, with a thick dark grey cloak over his shoulders, clasped, as always, by a silver pin in the shape of a mockingbird.

“You will excuse my lateness, I hope, Sansa,” he said quietly. “I had a few difficult guests to deal with, but our Sweetrobin is entertaining them now. You will see him later, I think.”

*He is trying to pretend that nothing has changed, that I was never away.* “Lord Baelish,” she said curtly, “You look… just the same as you did earlier… you have aged well, my lord.”

“Now that’s a backhanded compliment if I ever saw one, sweetling.” He stepped closer, as if he meant to embrace her, then stepped past and walked to the rampart. “Perchance you have had an opportunity to admire the view.” He cocked his head to one side. “Or lack thereof.”

The latter description would be more apt, Sansa thought. They were quite high up here, on the western side of Harrenhal, where Lord Edmure’s army was stationed, but the grey fog was so thick that she would never have known that an army was there. “If you were trying to make me depressed, you’ve certainly managed it, my lord.”

He chuckled a little. “You aren’t half wrong there, my lady. I find that Harrenhal is a very depressing place. With all the darkness and gloom and damp, it’s a wonder I haven’t slipped and broken my neck climbing the stairs yet. But let’s not tempt fate.” He reached out to take a strand of her hair that hung loose, twisting it between his fingers, then tucked it back behind her head.

Sansa did not break his gaze. *You sold me to the Lannisters*, she thought. Of that, she did not doubt. Tyrion had not seemed remotely surprised by her sudden arrival in King’s Landing – she was certain that he had known of her presence for a good long time. *And you sold me to the Tyrells, like as not.* Lady Olenna and Lord Baelish had collaborated to bring about Joffrey’s death – what else had they worked together on?

“You are here at King Aegon’s behest, correct?”

As if you did not already know. “Yes, my lord.”

He tutted. “Must I remind you again to call me Petyr, sweet Sansa?”

“There might be spies listening,” she said, before realising how stupid that sounded. “They… it would be better if we were to keep up formal pretenses, despite our familiarity, especially when it comes to negotiation.”
He made a show of looking impressed at that. “As you wish, my lady. Though you seem to have
told all the spies that we know about their presence.”

“Then they will be fleeing,” Sansa told him.

“Yes,” Lord Petyr said, a suspicious look on his face. “Fleeing like spiders back to the nest. Perhaps
the gods will be kind, and they will be the ones to slip and break their necks.”

Sansa was unsure how to respond to that, so she said nothing. For a long time, Lord Petyr did not
speak either. “The weather is rather gloomy,” he said at last. “It is snowing in the Vale, last we heard
from Lord Coldwater, and the same can be said for all of the lands of the Green Fork. And the
North, of course, though it would be more of a surprise to hear that it was not snowing in winter.”
He smiled, then bit his lip. “But all we get is this wretched rain.”

“It makes the castle look rather imposing, though,” Sansa said. “Harrenhal wasn’t made for snow. If
it was, all of the towers would be white, and then it would look like—”

“A snowcastle,” Lord Petyr exclaimed with surprising enthusiasm. “Just like the ones we built in the
Eyrie, Sansa.” He fiddled with his mockingbird pin.

He wants you to remember the Vale, she told herself, he wants you to call him Petyr, not Lord
Baelish, not—

“I think they would look like fingers,” Sansa said coolly, “this tower’s smaller than the others,
though, so I suppose it would be…”

“A little finger.” He smiled. “A rather false identity the royal court concocted for me, but I must
admit that I grew to enjoy it. Much as you grew to enjoy your guise of Alayne.” And he smiled some
more.

*He has me beaten there,* Sansa thought. Mercifully, the game did not continue much longer. “Shall
we go inside, my lady?” Lord Petyr asked, offering her his arm.

She let him lead her along the wallwalk. Brienne, Podrick and Ser Lothor were following in their
wake, their footsteps echoing behind as Lord Petyr led Sansa into the next tower. “We had the king
as a guest not long ago,” he said. “A rather distinguished guest, but he was humble enough that he
did not make me give up my chambers in the King’s Tower. Nonetheless, he seemed rather
impressed with his accommodation. I’m afraid his chambers are occupied at the moment, but you
shall have the ones across the hall.”

Sansa did not follow. “If the king, then… why…”

“No, sweetling,” he told her, as though she were eight. “Not King Aegon, no. King Tommen. I
travelled from the capital a couple of days ahead of Lord Tywin, ready and eager to explore my new
stronghold. Can you imagine my surprise when I found the best rooms already occupied? It was no
small thing to have a royal guest, and we were woefully unprepared. I had to import some
summerwine from Braavos at the price of a small fortune, Sansa! He didn’t even drink it, after all
that.”

She was completely clueless to all of this. Tyrion had told her that his nephew was at Riverrun, but
he hadn’t mentioned Harrenhal as far as she could remember. Even now, Sansa was still unsure
whether it had been a mercy or an unfortunate consequence to have missed the king’s visit entirely.
Tommen, she reminded herself, was certainly no Joffrey, but she hadn’t seen him in a year, so what
would she know?
Lord Petyr conducted her through a wide passage, past two suits of armour that he would probably never use, and up a flight of carpeted stairs. At the top, he turned and leaned over the railing to speak with his guard. “Ser Lothor,” he commanded, “conduct Lady Brienne and young Podrick to accommodations that suit their rank, on the same floor as Lady Sansa.”

“My lord,” called Brienne, “I would share an adjoining cell with the lady, however meagre it is.”

Lord Petyr shrugged. “As you will, but I make you no promises of comfort.”

“If I had wanted comfort, my lord, I would have stayed at Evenfall Hall.”

He smirked at that. “You are truly something else, my lady. Would you do me an honour and join us for dinner this evening? I do not think a gown would suit you well, so you may take your pick from some knightly raiment, as it please you.”

She nodded. “Thank you, my lord.”

Sansa was thankful of Brienne’s intervention, but something told her that she had nothing to fear from Lord Petyr – at least, not here.

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**Scene 5 – Sansa eats pease, with an ‘e’**

**SANSA**

In which Sansa has a depressing dinner, but has a nice conversation with Podrick that became the basis for some of their other dialogue; see *Sansa IV, The Lone Wolf*. This excerpt cuts off right when things start to get interesting, because what comes after is the basis for part of the next Sansa chapter in the main story.

Podrick also confesses some random attraction to one of Margaery Tyrell’s cousins, which has no basis in the main fic, but you can ship Podlinor if you like.

Sansa put down her fork and stared bleakly at the pease. They did not look all that appetising, even after being nearly drowned in butter. She did not really want to eat *anything*, but some cook had spent their time making this steak-and-kidney pie, and she had learned to appreciate the little things in life, no matter how insignificant.

Yet no sooner had she put the food in her mouth than she found that she could not take another bite. Every mouthful became a chore, and eventually she gave up and dropped her fork at the side of her plate with a dull ringing clatter.
“Podrick,” she called. “More wine, if you please.”

The squire dutifully obliged. In the absence of Lady Brienne, who had gone off for the day with Lem Lemoncloak, he had come to serve Sansa instead, and seemed to take great pride in that. “Pod,” she said as he picked up her glass, “Would you pour another cup for yourself? I have need of companionship, and you may well be my very best friend in this part of the world.”

He blushed at that, as he did at most things. “My lady, I’m only a squire.”

“And yet you have proved a better and more loyal man than almost all of my rescuers.” Sansa scoffed at the last word. “Sit down, and I’m afraid I shall have to insist that you taste the wine for yourself.”

Podrick’s lip wobbled, but eventually he nodded and sat, holding the cup to his mouth and quivering. “M-m-my lady,” he managed.

Sansa could not help but smile. “We’ve come a long way, Podrick, but we’re here at last.” She leaned back in her chair. “Home.”

“Home, my lady? But Winterfell—”

She took his hand in hers. “Home is more than just a place, Pod. Home… is something else… it’s the place where your friends and family are, the place where you’re happiest in the world.”

He seemed to mull over that for a moment. “My lady… I don’t… I don’t know about… I mean, I was born at Payne Hall, but I was never at home there… b-but here…”

“It’s alright, Pod,” she said, squeezing his fingers. “This can be your home too. And I’m glad you’re here to share it with me.”

He picked up his wine and sipped it, then made a face. “I don’t like it, my lady. But I like this. Us, together – I mean, the two of us, talking.” He blushed again. “Sorry, my lady. It’s just… what with Ser Cedric and all that… I never had many friends.”

Sansa smiled sweetly at him. “There must have been some,” she said, “other squires your age… or…” She smirked. “Girls?”

Podrick turned red again. He was about sixteen, with a round face and big brown eyes, not particularly unpleasant to look out, and when he wasn’t blushing or stammering he could be rather endearing. “N-no, my lady,” he said. “No. Never. Except…”

“Except?” Sansa felt a little odd, as though she were a stupid little girl again, sitting with Jeyne Poole and eating lemoncakes planning out silly little marriages for the court. She did not know what had happened to Jeyne, but she hoped that the other girl had made it home in the end.

Podrick was still crimson. “Lady Margaery’s cousin Elinor danced with me at your wedding feast.” He grinned. “She was… very… uh… nice…” He coughed loudly, “and she said I was a good dancer, my lady.”

All Sansa remembered was that he had done a lot of standing on her toes during the wedding. “We shall have to test that someday, Podrick.”

He looked back to his wine and finished it in one gulp, reddening again. “She told me that I must be —” Then there came the sound of knocking at the door, and Pod was only too relieved to run and open it. “Who is it, Podrick?” she called.
“The…” He gulped and stammered, “I think you should come and see for yourself, my lady.”

She did. When she looked, it was King Aegon standing in the doorway, his features silhouetted against the light from the torch sconces behind him. Tonight he had dressed in a doublet of dark blue velvet stitched with silver, with a purple half-cape the same colour as his eyes, bound at his shoulder by a silver dragon pin. The Valyrian steel sword Blackfyre twinkled at his belt. He brushed down his tunic and bowed. “My lady,” he said.

“Your Grace.” Sansa curtseyed. Podrick, caught awkwardly in the middle of them, circled round the king and went from the room, closing the door behind him. Inside the chamber, the night was quite still, and the storm seemed to have quietened. Unnerved by his presence, Sansa said the only thing that came to mind. “Would you care for refreshments, Your Grace?”

“If they’re being offered.” His tone was not impolite.

Cautiously, Sansa filled his cup, and did not spill a drop. “Dornish red,” Aegon said, tasting the wine and setting down his goblet. “I suppose I shall have to become rather used to that, if I am to marry Arianne Martell.” He pursed his lips at the thought, but Sansa could not tell what he was thinking. “You look rather fetching tonight, my lady,” he said.

Sansa was wearing one of the gowns they had found in Lady Whent’s wardrobe, sea blue and white, the colours of House Arryn, as it happened. The castle embroiderers had managed to fix it up, cutting it for her size and working in a new trim of golden lace. “It’s nothing particularly special, Your Grace,” she replied.

“I suppose you’ll wear something more… catching on the morrow, then. Since you’re meeting your brother.” Sansa nodded, and felt an unexpected stab of pity for the king. He is floundering out of his depth here, she thought. From what she had heard Aegon had been raised among fishermen and farmers and sellswords in Essos, and thus courtly courtesy must be almost as foreign to him as war was to her. He wrung his hands, helpless. “May… may I sit with you, my lady?”

She nodded again, dumb to sense. He had the good grace to pull her chair out for her, so he was not lacking for manners. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him taking a long gulp from his goblet, as though he meant to drink away the awkwardness. If that was intention, he was unsuccessful. “Are you… looking forward to the morrow, my lady?”

“Of course, Your Grace. I have not seen my brother for two years now.”

He smiled in sympathy. “I-I never knew my sister. It was Jon who raised me.”

“Jon, Your Grace?”

“Oh. Lord Connington, I mean. He was… a father to me in all but name.” Aegon glanced around, staring up at the ceilings of the room. “Of course, my actual father came here. For the Tourney of Harrenhal.”

She privately decided not to continue with that conversation. Doubtless she and King Aegon had been told very different stories of what had happened at the Tourney of Harrenhal all those years ago. “They say your father was a great man,” she tried.

“Yes.” Aegon nodded. He had a queer expression on his face. “I think… I think he died not far from here, on the Trident. I might ride there… maybe…”

Sansa was well aware that one’s dead father was not an often appreciated topic of conversation, but she had nothing else to go on. “They say he lost his rubies at the battle. And they’ve found all of
them except one. Maybe you might be able to find it…"

“…as his trueborn son,” Aegon finished, “maybe. I don’t have the time now, but maybe one day…” He blushed a sudden fierce scarlet, even redder than Podrick Payne.

[…redacted…]

It was jarring, really. In the command tent he had seemed so confident of himself, but here… on this very different battlefield in the shadow of Harrenhal’s walls, he was little more than a boy.

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**Scene 6 – Barristan and the bastard**

Technically this takes place at Storm’s End or Summerhall, but it could take place at Highgarden or Nightsong or anywhere Ser Barristan Selmy and Edric Storm have travelled. It doesn’t really mean much on its own, but it does play into the original plot, where [redacted, redacted, redacted]

**BARRISTAN**

The evening was wet and blue-black, beneath a sky of solemn grey clouds. Raindrops sounded out a fierce drumbeat against the canvas of their tents. The long grass that grew among the pavilions was soaked through, and dew droplets shone off every surface, catching the light of the yellow moon.

Ser Barristan came in through the front, freshly changed out of his mail into a casual tunic and breeches. He saw Edric Storm squatting beside the fire, cleaning his sword with long, careful strokes of a fresh-oiled cloth. The edge seemed to shimmer whenever it caught the light, and the young man watched it with queer fascination. His thick black hair was still wet from the rain, and his clothes soaked, so it seemed that this was the very first thing that he had done when he came inside. Selmy had to admire his determination, but he was worried that his squire would soon catch cold. “That steel looks sharp, lad,” he said.

Edric grinned at him. “Sharp, aye.” He pricked his finger with the point. “Not quite Valyrian steel, but it’ll do.” He stood up and made a few practise swings.

“You should do that outside,” Ser Barristan said. “Not now, though, but once the rain stops.”


“You’re still standing wrong,” he told him. “Posture is an important skill for any fighter to learn. Move your foot, there.” He gave the boy a soft push, “and you should stand sideface.”

Edric growled quietly under his breath, sounding aggrieved. “I know what I am doing, ser.”
“How long have you been here?”

“An hour. I have to practise.” He shifted his position then, letting out a deep breath. “I have to avenge them,” he said quietly.

Vengeance, Barristan mused worriedly. He was unsure who Edric meant to avenge, and of whom he was meaning to have vengeance upon. So he asked.

“For my family, ser,” Edric said.

“Ah,” the old knight replied, pursing his lips. “Edric… I should hope that day never comes. Make sure… just make sure that you do not let that anger consume you, lad. If you wish… we can talk about—”

The boy shook his head stubbornly. And I pray you do not mean to avenge yourself upon Daenerys Targaryen, Barristan thought sadly. I would have no choice but to put a sword through you. He was old, and cutting down a boy would only add to his sorrows. It was not unknown for old men to die of sadness, and killing the boy – he doubted that he’d be able to take that.

He stepped closer and knelt down on the rushes beside the boy, catching his eye. “You’re a good lad, boy, remember that. But vengeance… I won’t ask, don’t worry… but no good has ever come from that. Only blood, Edric, only blood.”

Edric grunted some sort form of understanding, but Barristan was unconvinced of the fact. He moved across the tent to his bedroll and began to ease off his boots when he heard shouting close by, just outside the tent. It was a while before he recognised his own name. “Ser Barristan Selmy!”

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Scene 7 – Several Second Sons Supping Sensibly

Back in the days when the Second Sons plot was actually going somewhere (it may still be, though I’m uncertain), this scene for Brown Ben and Tyrion was written. It takes place sometime around Tyrion III, Debts to Pay, either shortly before or shortly afterward. I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with some of Tyrion’s nonsensical jokes, though. On the other hand, it has cyvasse, which is always moderately amusing.

TYRION

Brown Ben Plumm smelled of red wine, boiled leather and old age. The sellsword leaned back in his chair, letting loose a heavy sigh with a loud whistling noise. “Death in three,” he proclaimed.

“Two if you play stupidly,” said Tyrion. “Five if you play smartly.”
“When death is inevitable either way, I see little point in fighting on,” Plumm said, moving a random piece across a square. “A foolish move, there. Come kill me quickly, Lord Tyrion.”

“Many of the Westerosi knights would disagree. There is glory in a noble death, aye, and honour as well. Men will sing songs—”

“None of which I will hear,” Brown Ben said, moving his king into the path of Tyrion’s light horse, thus forfeiting the game. “Dead men don’t need their honour… and neither do the living, some might say.” On that we agree.

Brown Ben motioned a hand to call for more wine, which he drank from a rusted silver goblet, supposedly the spoil of some battle or over… though at first, Tyrion did have to wonder what sort of warrior carried a silver goblet around with him. “A bad one,” Brown Ben had replied. “He had a plate in there too, a shiny brass one; a shame he wasn’t so good with a knife.” He’d smiled at that. “A young man, bold as his shiny brass plate, aye. Now he’s dead. And so life goes on…”

The night chill was coming in through the tent flap, so he had his shadowskin wrapped round his soldiers, black fur dappled with grey. Few men could afford such a cloak, so it helped him to convince the various lords and sellsword captains of his own grandeur when he supped with them, as did the padded velvet doublet and the golden chain he wore around his neck. Tyrion had learned that status meant everything among certain sellswords, and other times it meant nothing at all. Brown Ben was of the latter sort, but he had a queer fondness for Tyrion’s company. This was the third time in a week that the sellsword had hosted the dwarf in his pavilion; tonight they’d dined on stewed chicken in an ale-and-honey sauce, studded with cloves and garlic, alongside barley bread and buttered turnips. After the talk had turned to war, but then Brown Ben ordered a cyvasse board brought out and Tyrion had beaten him soundly three times in a row. The fourth game had started out a little in the old sellsword’s favour, but had reached the same conclusion in the end.

A gentle pattering was audible from up above, of something pattering against the fabric of the tent repeatedly. “Rain,” Plumm muttered darkly. “I had not expected it so early. And it may get worse.”

“They do call it the Stormlands for a reason.”

Brown Ben nodded. “With any luck it’ll have stopped by tomorrow, and we’ll be at Summerhall by sunset.”

“I’ve always wanted to see Summerhall, you know. Destroyed by fire, aye, but it remains one of the greatest monuments of the Targaryen dynasty—”

Plumm snorted. “You and your history, dwarf. I can’t deny that the old books hold something of an allure for me too, but I rarely have the time in between all the wars.”

“Perhaps you should stop fighting them, then.”

Brown Ben’s lips upturned into a smirk, but no laugh ever came. “Aye. Perhaps I should. There are few old sellswords, after all. I remember when I was seven-and-twenty we were in the Disputed Lands fighting some war or other for one of the Three Daughters. I don’t remember which, but I’ve fought for all three - the Lyseni hate sellswords, by the way, thinking that their perfumed boy soldiers are superior in every way—”

“I suppose that they tend to be the first to die, then.”

“Oh, aye.” Brown Ben smiled. “I’ve killed many of those silver-haired, dancing ponces in my time. Anyhow, we were fighting this war in the Disputed Lands, and this was when I was company
second-in-command. We went to meet with the Long Lances, who were at the time led by the most ancient Volantene I’ve ever seen; he must have been past ninety. During the middle of one of our talks he had the unfortunate grace to die in his chair – of age, I suppose, but the Lances claimed that we’d poisoned him for whatever reason. We had to run out of their camp, cutting down the Lances left and right, and when we got back to our side old Fyberion - blessed be his memory – took me aside and said ‘Ben, there are bold sellswords, and old sellswords, but there are no old, bold sellswords.’

“Very wise of him. And which are you, my good Brown Ben?”

“How old do you suppose I am?”

Tyrion answered immediately. “Not a day over one-and-thirty.”

“Would that it were true. The world was a very different place when I was one-and-thirty.” He picked up his wine goblet, swilled the purplish liquid around a few times, then took a long sip. “Old age does strange things to a man, Lord Tyrion,” he said. “War does not favour me so much anymore… and I am not so fond of it… will you have another game of cyvasse?”

“I fear that you’d beat me,” the dwarf said, “this wine seems to have taken some of my wits. Nay, it seems I must bid you farewell, Brown Ben.” He drained his goblet and stood shakily to his feet. “I’ll see myself out,” he said, waddling towards the tent flap and then out into the night.

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**Scene 9 – The Slow Regard of Absolutely Nothing**

There’s a lot of stuff hanging around in the ‘odds and ends’ box that takes place in Casterly Rock, most of it from Myrcella’s perspective. You may recognise some bits as being adapted into *Myrcella II, I Only See What Matters*, but most of it stayed out for various reasons, primarily because it’s INCREDIBLY hard to link together these scenes with actually meaningful activity instead of just making a series of one-shots.

So, anyway. Here are some one-shots.

**MYRCELLA**

“The russet red, I think,” Princess Myrcella said. “It reminds me of the sunset.” She turned a little, so that the faint light of the evening could catch upon the patterns at the hem of her gown and turn them to sparkling gold.

“Very good, my lady,” said Eleya. “It’s one of your better gowns.”

Myrcella smiled faintly at the other girl. “You’re to be a queen one day, if everything goes well, and we are to be sisters. For the thousandth time, call me Myrcella.” She stepped down from the stool and took the cup of wine from Rosamund’s hand, taking only a chaste sip. A good deal more wine
would flow over supper, she was certain of it.

“It’s a nice gown, my lady,” Cerenna Lannister commented. “I like the metalwork as well. It makes you look…”

“Heroic?” Myrcella could not stifle her giggle. “I would scarce call myself a knight, though, Cerenna. Personally, I favour the long sleeves; the nights are getting colder with every passing day now that winter is here.”

“Some of the winter colours are lovely,” Rosamund said. “But I do prefer summer, and I eagerly await its return.” Stupid girl, thought Myrcella, you may be waiting a very long while.

Eleyna voiced her thoughts, if a little less bluntly. “It could be years before summer returns, Rosie.” She smiled a little. “But while summer friends are fleeting like summer snows, winter friends last forever.”

“My ladies,” Myrcella said, offering Rosamund and Cerenna her hands. “Let us be winter friends, then.” Though one of you is reporting on me to Mother, I am certain of it… With a little luck, Tyg would find out which of them the betrayer was before the problem could escalate any further.

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Ser Kevan was out on the balcony when she arrived, gazing down to Lannisport below. The roofs of the houses and the churches and the wharves were tiled in pastel red, and the older parts of town were all in pale yellow brick, so that the city seemed crimson and gold by the light of dusk.

“The Casterlys started their town in the Age of Heroes,” Myrcella recited from memory, “but it was the Lannisters of the Rock who populated the town with uncles, cousins and their other kin, and the Lannys, the Lantells and of course the Lannisters of the city who gave the place its name.”

Ser Kevan murmured his agreement. “And our words are Hear Me Roar,” he said. “I am glad that you presented yourself early. This will not take too long.” He moved across the room to his desk. “Please, sit.”

“I would, but I fear that I would crease my dress all over again,” Myrcella said. “And it took my handmaidens so long to make it the way it is.”

“As you will.” Ser Kevan had made it quite clear that he’d prefer to stand as well. A standing man has power, and is more likely to remain alert.

[They’re now in the Small Hall, apparently.]

The Small Hall was not the largest of feasting rooms – as its name plainly suggested – but it did not make compromises when it came to luxury. Blackwood chairs were cushioned in Lannister crimson, with carved lion heads on their backs and golden studs upon the arms. The table was set with the finest silverware, and overhead a crystal chandelier teetered back and forth, casting differing shadows across the table with every movement.

They were seven in total; Myrcella and her mother, Ser Kevan, his wife Dorna and their children Willem and Janei, and Joy Hill, her great-uncle Gerion’s bastard daughter – who had come at Myrcella’s insistence and to Queen Cersei’s disgust. How hypocritical of you, dearest mother. We children of yours are all bastards ourselves, after all.

Yet the table was set for eight rather than seven. After a few minutes of uncomfortable small talk, Maester Creylen presented himself at the top of the stairs, his chain clanking around his neck as he
bowed. “My lords, my ladies… I fear that I bring bad tidings of His Grace. The king has taken to bed with illness, and is regretfully unable to attend to his family tonight.”

Her mother made to rise, but Myrcella caught her arm under the table and spoke first. “Do you have details of His Grace’s illness, maester? Is it related to his wound at the Tumblestone, mayhaps?”

“Nothing of the sort, my lady.” Creylen smiled thinly. “It came on very suddenly, which makes me think that it is an ailment of some stress or other.”

Ser Kevan’s face was impassive, Myrcella noted. _An ailment of some stress or other_… something about those words did not sit right with her.

“I do not trust that man,” the Queen Regent said when the maester was gone. “I’ll… send Qyburn to see to Tommen on the morrow, if he is not too busy with other matters.”

Qyburn – the queen’s maester, as they called him – had shut himself up in an isolated tower of Casterly Rock ever since Myrcella’s arrival, only rarely presenting himself in the castle proper for meals and to make water. Her mother’s guardsmen watched the bottom of the tower day and night, but she had heard other courtiers reporting screaming coming from the maester’s turret, and the sounds of something big moving about.

Ser Kevan nodded. “As you will… on the morrow, though, and not before.”

The servants brought out a rich onion broth to start, with shallots and cream, and thyme to season it. Next came trout baked in clay, and salmon with a saffron-and-butter sauce. The Rock sat above a natural harbour, so they had fish almost every day here. Myrcella tended to be fond of seafood, but this did not quite taste right to her. _I have changed the court, aye, but this is Ser Kevan’s household. Ser Kevan’s maester, Ser Kevan’s cooks, Ser Kevan’s servants and spies._
Scene 9 – Something, Something, Betrothal Ceremony

Instead of just pretending to betroth Tommen to Eleyna Westerling, Myrcella actually goes through with it, so there’s a big ceremony and a feast that comes afterwards. Other versions of this plot include Tywin Frey’s marriage to Eleyna (scrapped – Ty Frey ended up staying in Riverrun). Also, I stole the descriptions of the throne room and the food almost word-for-word when I wrote Sansa and Willas’s wedding in Sansa III, The Wolf and the Rose.

But this is one of my favourite scenes: it’s nice to see the young Lannisters and the Westerlings interacting.

MYRCELLA

“How did you find the ceremony, Tyg?” The elaborate proceedings had taken place in the sept, but had not involved the exchange of vows and there had been very little contribution on the part of the betrothed pair. The whole thing had been one of Mother’s better ideas, making such a public announcement before the court.

“It was very… uh… spectacular, my lady. Like you.”

They could hear the feast before they saw it. Music was playing loud enough to wake the dead in the crypts below, fiddles and lutes and harps, underscored by chatter and murmured conversation. A squadron of Lannister guardsmen parted to let them pass into the Great Hall.

They had spared no expense here. A king’s betrothal feast was a great occasion, of course, but this seemed more elaborate than Tommen’s wedding to the little rose back in King’s Landing. Red and gold banners hung from every wall, the lion of Lannister in gold, against fields of crimson and carmine and burgundy, every sort of red there was. The huge windows of the Great Hall were upon, letting in the smells of the sea air and seaweed and seashells like those on the Westerling sigil.

She went down between the benches, walking across a crimson carpet edged with golden thread. There must have been three or four thousand men on the lower floor in all, maybe more, most of the garrison of Casterly Rock. The conversation all merged into one endless chattering as she walked between them, men talking about wives and wine, battles and whores, horses and harvests. They ate finely for common soldiers; beef-and-bacon stew with loaves of hot bread, loin of pork with apple sauce, steak-and-kidney pie, cornmeal and oatmeal and cream-of-wheat with orange jam and even a few blackberries, blue smelly cheese and orange nutty cheese and brown smoky cheese, with cheap-smelling summerwine and brown ale to wash it all down. Some made glances in her direction, but most were too engrossed in their meals, contented to ignore the princess in their midst.

At the top of the first dais were musicians and fiddlers. There were about twenty drummers across three bands, with two harps and fifty lutes between them, and they all seemed to be playing different songs: the first group ‘the Bear and the Maiden Fair’, the second ‘Six Maids in a Pool’, and the third a strangely joyful renditions of ‘the Rains of Castamere.’ Between them landed knights, Lannister captains, and smallholders sat eating finer fare than the men below, somehow convinced that they had the finest seats in the feast. Some nodded to Myrcella as she went past, and one cadaverous knight went down on one knee and praised her grace.

She walked right past them, up the steps and through the carved archway of two lions mating, past the great screen that had been erected to keep the lords from the common folk, and emerged in the
greatest of great halls. Murals and tapestries beyond counting hung on the walls, and the stained glass windows telling the stories of Lann the Clever and Gerold the Golden – and Tywin the Magnificent, the greatest lord of recent years. On the walls were Lannister banners yet again, but they were joined by the sigils of other Westermen; House Westerling’s seven seashells, of course; but also Lord Lydden’s badger, the brindled boar of Crakehall, Marbrand’s burning tree; the banners of Sarwyck and Yarwyck, Greenfield and Sarsfield, Plum and Peckledon and Payne, Banefort, Hamell, Hetherspoon, Jast, Brax, Drox, Falwell, Farman, Myatt, Swyft, Serrett, Prester, Lorch and Kenning and Vikary. Myrcella watched as Tyg went off to join his kin beneath the green-and-white banners of House Sarsfield, while she continued with only Ser Arys for an escort, up to her seat at the high table.

Tommen stood to greet her. He looked very fair today, she could not deny it, in a doublet of rose and gold chequy slashed with crimson, with dagged sleeves, over a tunic of dark cream with silver thread. His crown was solid Lannister gold, glowing as a sun would, the points studded with onyx and red rubies, and beneath that his white-blond curls were freshly washed and newly-trimmed.

“Cella,” he said, smiling. From the flush of his face it was clear that he was quite drunk. *Intentionally,* Myrcella assumed.

She waved her brother away and turned to look at Lady Eleyna, who looked half-afraid, shrunken into her chair. “You look very beautiful today, my lady,” she said. It was half true; the Westerling girl wore a gown of rich cream velvet, with silver lace, and there was a necklace about her throat in the form of a silver seashell. “And this is turning out to be quite the celebration.”

“Yes,” said Lord Rollam, to the bride’s left. “Quite.” He gazed emptily towards her. “Oh, you look very beautiful, Princess Myrcella.”

Seating the siblings of the prospective bride and groom in places of such high honour in place of those of greater peerage - the Queen Mother or the Lord Regent, for example – ought to have caused some form of controversy, but that seemed all but non-existent here. Her mother, a step below, was talking with Lady Westerling, and Ser Kevan was in discussion with his lady wife. It seemed almost surreal, but there was a sense of genuine happiness in the hall. *No plots, no plans.* It unsettled her more than just a little.

The betrothed persons at the high table were making awkward glances at one another when they thought the other was not looking. Tommen was blushing and smiling at the same time, while Eleyna stared away down the hall, entirely impassive.

“The wine… is… good…” Myrcella said brokenly.

Eleyna gave her a strange look. “Yes,” she said slowly, “it is. Arbor gold, I think. We never used to —” Then she stopped, as though fearing that she had said too much.

“We never used to drink Arbor gold,” Rollam explained. “Father said that he was saving it… that there wasn’t enough.” He coloured and looked down, ashamed.

*They didn’t have enough money,* Myrcella realised. Until Tywin Lannister had rewarded them, the Westerlings had been effectively impoverished for the past few decades. *Strange, how much betraying your king for a bag of Lannister gold can give you. From highborn beggars to consorts of the West.* She was grateful for their loyalty, yes, but she did find herself wondering from time to time if she had made a mistake here.

*Well,* she thought, smiling the tiniest fraction, *the betrothal is only temporary, after all.* “Let us drink to the future, then,” she proclaimed, holding up her cup. The other three echoed her toast.
A merciful break in the awkwardness when Pidge the fool rode up to the high table on his donkey to pass Ser Harys Swyft a huge silver egg, that erupted into a spray of brightly coloured plumage when the knight touched it. Green and yellow feathers were fluttering through his hair. Myrcella thought it a mere trick, but when she looked again a peacock appeared to have taken flight and nested in the rafters of the hall.

“That’s going to be dropping birdshit for days,” she muttered, eliciting laughs from the Westerlings and her brother.

Tommen sniggered. “They should have made it a rooster, not a peacock. Like the one on his shield—”

“I think the joke, dear brother, is that the rooster is more apt for Ser Harys.” For Swyft sounded half like a chicken himself as he flapped to get rid of the feathers in his hair and the golden streamers covering him from head to toe.

“He looks like Joff after he crawled through that gorse bush to find his soldier,” Myrcella added.

Tommen smiled. “Scratches all down his face and everything.”

“Not to mention the large amount of shit on his shoes. Well, I did warn him not to touch my dolls.”

“I could see you doing the same today,” he said. “You haven’t changed much since you were five.”

It was a lie. “Nor you,” she replied. “You’re still my little brother, sweet and stupid as ever. When I saw you with your cats—”

“Cats?” Eleyna inquired.

Tommen shrugged and looked away from her. “It’s nothing,” he said quietly. “It doesn’t—”

Myrcella smiled teasingly at him. “Why are you lying to your betrothed, little brother? Ser Pounce is as much a part of your life as any of your other family. Frankly, I’m surprised you didn’t take him to war with you.”

“Fine.” He threw his hands up. “Ser Pounce is a cat, my lady,” he said. “Well, my cat. Only he was a kitten back then, when Mother bought him for me. I mean, you probably don’t care, but…”

“We had castle cats once,” said Eleyna. “They were pests, yes - Mother wanted to kill them - but that didn’t stop us from searching in the cellars. They had their own little den down there. It was very—”

“Oh, yes,” Tommen said brightly, his voice oddly high with elation. “They can be pests, I know, like the bad cat in King’s Landing. He used to steal from Dorcas the serving wench when she brought milk for Ser Pounce. And sometimes the bad cat—” He coughed suddenly. “I mean, the black cat. I mean… I-I’m thinking about getting a lion. A cub. Maybe. Because it’s like a cat, I suppose.”

Myrcella caught Eleyna’s smile. “Not so fearsome after all,” she said.

“Well, a lion would be—”

*I didn’t mean that lion,* she thought. It had surprised her when Eleyna brought news of her worries regarding her brother – so much so that she had almost forgotten which brother she was marrying off.
Scene 10 – The Parable of Mommen and Tyrcella

Myrcella mopes about with the royal seal and complains about how she never has any responsibility (all implied, but that’s basically what’s happening). Tommen then makes an accidental meta-joke about *Game of Thrones*, and Kevan comes to report about Stannis’s advance through the mountains. (He does this a lot).

**TOMMEN**

Tommens held out his hand. “Pen,” he muttered quietly. The quill was raven-feather, with golden decoration, and the ink was red as his blood.

Myrcella handed it over obediently. “You don’t have to sign all of them now, you know.”

He shrugged. “I might as well; I’ll have to sign them at some point anyway, won’t I? I don’t see why I should waste any time deliberating over it.” That sounded kingly; he was pleased with that.

“Very efficient, Your Grace,” she muttered under her breath.

“Don’t call me ‘Your Grace’.” Tommen gave her a half-irritated look, but he was smiling despite himself.

“My Grace,” she said, inclining her head with a slight bow. “Will you be needing any more wine? Other refreshments, mayhaps?”

He did not look up from the parchment. “No. I don’t need anything. You can go.”

“And yet I am choosing to stay, brother.” Myrcella crossed to the window and flung back the curtains, filling the room with light. Somewhere on the floor, Ser Pounce yowled and scurried across the chamber to go and hide in some dark corner. She rose onto her tiptoes and glanced out. “It’s a beautiful day,” she said, “and you shouldn’t be locked up in here.”

Tommens covered his eyes with one hand and squinted down at the parchment. “Neither should you, Cella. I’m not stopping you from going.” He smiled. “Are you afraid that I’m going to mess it up once you’re gone. It’s signing warrants and stamping seals; it’s hardly difficult.”

“Do you even know what you’re signing?”

He squinted down at it. “Arrests for the writers of a rather… distressing play that they’re showing in Lannisport, it seems. About us.” He had to smile at that. “Apparently they need two actors to play each of us.”

Myrcella smiled wryly. “Probably because we’re so incredibly complex.”

He laid the pen down on the table. “Did you ever think we’d end up here? At the point where they start making… satire… about our own lives?”
“Fancy word, little brother.”

“Probably because I’m so incredibly complex.” Smiling, Tommen sipped from the wine-cup on his desk. “There’s only four, no, five left. Then I’ve got to go and have lessons with Maester Creylen—”

The doors burst open, and Ser Arys Oakheart came inside the room, bowing. “Your Graces, the Lord Regent.”

Tommens stood and hurriedly rearranged the papers on his desk, shoving ink and pen to one side. “Ser Kevan.”

He did not look in a good mood today. The Lord Regent wore black from head to toe, as was his wont, with silver buttons on his outer coat and a silver lion’s head as his belt clasp. “Stannis,” he said shortly, throwing a scroll down upon the desk. It was sealed with pink wax, stamped with the sigil of House Piper of Pinkmaiden – a naked maiden, which Tommen found rather awkward to break open.

“Er,” he began, unravelling it, “Lord Stannis has—”

“He has started to march,” said Ser Kevan. “I have not even read the damned thing, but that seems obvious. We can assume that Pinkmaiden is under siege, or will be rather soon, and the same can be said for Wayfarer’s Rest.”

“Can we stop them?” Tommen asked.

“But in the Riverlands,” Ser Kevan paced across the room. “I thought we had more time, enough to rally our bannermen to Casterly Rock to give us the opportunity to appease them all, but it would seem not. We must start forming up our armies at the Tooth and Deep Den?”

“Stannis can only invade along one route,” Myrcella said, “he may try both, but we will be able to hold him off if he only comes at half strength.”

“The mountains are our best defense,” Tommen agreed. “Give commands to Ser Flement and Ser Addam—”

“I have already done so, Your Grace,” said Ser Kevan. “But it is good that you are learning how to delegate your power.”

Power is power. And not all kings wear crowns. Kevan Lannister certainly proved that; he was not his brother, but he was king in all but name, at least within the Westerlands. “—Something your brother never learned,” the Regent finished.

“Yes,” Myrcella said after a pause. “Joffrey was… prone to… lapses.”

An interesting way to put it, Tommen thought, but he would sooner not object. The less he heard about Joffrey, the better.
Scene 12 – The Square of the Hypotenuse

Tommens learns about the square of the hypotenuse for the first time, which is slightly surreal, and possibly slightly disconcerting given his age and many years of one-to-one tuition, though I’m not familiar with how much geometry is taught in Westeros. Then Kevan comes in and ruins it all by shouting about the Golden Tooth.

**TOMMEN**

“No, Your Grace.” Maester Creylen sighed. “The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the other two sides.”

“And when would I ever need to know that?” Tommen snapped at him.

The maester gave a pained sigh and set his quill down beside the book. “You need mathematics for the books and the ledgers, Your Grace. At best you have all the calculative skill of a boy of eleven or twelve, which might suffice for a knight’s son at your age, but not for the King of the Rock and the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.”

*Two, Tommen thought, not seven. Three if you count the Vale, maester, but you’re supposed to be teaching me, not the other way round. Even if I was doing the ledgers, the square of the hypotenuse does not matter,* he said.

But Maester Creylen heard him. “Perhaps not,” he said, bringing his quill down suddenly with a loud *crack* like that of a whip. “But it is better that you learn it now rather than never. As king, you are expected to know things, so that you do not become renowned as a fool or an idiot. You *sound* educated, aye, and you look it, but if you cannot back it up—”

“You are one of the most boring men I’ve ever met.”

“And you are lying, Your Grace.” Creylen did not even bat an eyelid. “Maesters fascinate you a great deal more than you would care to mention. It is *shameful* that you went without a tutor in the capital for half a year, and—”

“I had Lord Tywin.”

“Lord Tywin was not a maester.” The old man ran his fingers through the soft white beard that grew on his chin. “His brother Gerion went to the Citadel for a time, but he became bored before he could win even a single link to his name.”

“How did you know that I was lying?”

The old man tapped his temple knowingly. “I know more about you than you know about yourself, Your Grace.”

A heavy knock sounded at the door. Eager to be away from Creylen’s dreadful table, Tommen hurried across the maester’s solar and flung open the door.

“Your Grace.” Ser Kevan Lannister stepped inside, followed by copper-haired Ser Addam Marbrand
in his gleaming bronze armour and Ser Ormund Payne, who wore his cloak of purple and white chequy. “I hope we are not disturbing anything over-important.”

“Only the small matter of the king’s education,” Maester Creylen called from his chair. “How will he ever learn anything, Ser Kevan, if you keep interrupting us every five minutes? I almost get the boy to learn and then you and your men come barging in—”

“Oh, shut up, old man,” Ser Kevan snapped. “I gave you an hour to teach the king, but you know full well that the message cannot wait.”

“His Grace would tell you that the Rock was impermeable rather than impregnable, and that heptagons have six sides,” Creylen grumbled, gathering up his things into a battered old knapsack. “And wait outside until you are bid to enter, Kevan, or have you learned nothing of politeness in the last sixty years?” He barged his way past the knights in the doorway and made his dignified way down the stairs.

Ser Kevan muttered a curse at Creylen’s retreating back, then turned back to Tommen. “Your Grace,” he said, bowing. “We have had a raven from Ser Flement Brax, in the western mountains. As of this morning, Stannis Baratheon has crossed into our lands. Wayfarer’s Rest has fallen.”

Scene 11 – A King Must Be Vague

Tommen eats porridge and does vague kingly things before his battle with Stannis, sometime around Tommen III, Honor, not Honors. Technically two different scenes, but I’ve put them together for you here. They don’t really add anything to his character, or make sense on their own. Basically, I just thought ‘these would be good ways to start a Tommen chapter’. They weren’t.

TOMMEN

The Companions met in the king’s tent as night was falling, coming alone or in groups of two or three, and once six of them arrived together, nodding to their commander as they came inside. Lorent Marbrand brought two huge kegs of ale, and Tymond Vance came with three bottles of a full-bodied red he had bought from a Dornish peddler that morning. They cooked a suckling pig over the firepit, with the Swyft twins turning the meat over the fire.

Tommen stood by the door, greeting each of them by name and counting on his fingers. One
hundred eighteen, one hundred nineteen, one hundred twenty. When he had finally reached one hundred and forty-one he turned back and wandered into the tent with the rest of them, and found himself a seat by the firepit. Robert Crakehall came and took the seat to his left, Rollam Westerling to his right, the latter biting his nails all the while.

After a moment to compose himself, Tommen made to stand up and call them all to attention, but the Boar got there first. “Shut up, all of you,” he roared, in a voice even louder than he was. “Our little golden king would make his speech!”

Tommen turned red with embarrassment. Little Golden King was a moniker that Crakehall had given him on the road to Sarsfield, a nonsense name that had somehow managed to stick. And now everyone knew about it. Not that there was actually anything he could do, but still... “Companions,” he said quietly, then in his king voice, “Companions. On the morrow, we face our first real test. Stannis Baratheon will fall upon our camp sooner rather than later, and we must be ready.”

“Are we ready?” Crakehall shouted from his side.

“Aye!” came the resounding call.

He lost his composure then, and spent a while grasping for words. “Y-yes. We are. And you will be the king’s foremost knights, my brave... friends, good... companions.” He cleared his throat. “Will you fight with me?”

“Aye!” It was less universal this time, but the Boar shouted five times as loud as anyone else, so that nearly made up for it.

“I would say drink and be merry, but we have a battle tomorrow and... so... try not to get too... er... merry.” They had stopped listening to him anyway by then, so he sat down on his bench and let them get on with it.

“You’re a shit talker, you know.” Crakehall elbowed him in the side. “Aren’t you Lannisters supposed to be good at the sort of thing.”

“Better than me,” Tommen muttered. He was immediately beginning to wish that he hadn’t bothered with this; sleep would do more for him than a prolonged celebration, but here he was. After a while watching the feasting continue, he stepped outside the tent and went to look out over the world that stretched before him. Stannis’s camp on the lower ridge had gone dark, and snow was beginning to fall over the world, the flakes spiralling down slowly and settling among the short grass. The sun had disappeared behind the mountains, and the only lights came from those inside the tents and the torches carried by the sentries atop the guard towers. They had been at Sarsfield for nearly three weeks – knowing that Stannis would be forced to attack them and not the other way round, so there had been time to erect reasonable palisade fortifications and to dig a trench around the camp to stop siege machines and cavalry from getting through. There was a stream in front of the outpost as well, which would act as a sort of makeshift moat, though its effectiveness remained to be seen. Better too many defences than too few, Tommen thought. At Ser Addam’s suggestion he had set them to helping to dig the ditches.

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Warhorns blared out all around them. Tommen stirred the porridge around the bowl aimlessly, resisting the overwhelming urge to be sick. Looking across the table, he could see that Tymond Vance and Rollam had a similar outlook on things, but the Boar of Crakehall was on his second bowl, and he had already finished half of the bacon.
Another horn sound blared through the darkness. “Stannis wants to make music rather than battle,” said the Boar. Tommen gave a nervous snort and dropped the spoon back inside the bowl, then bit one of his nails loudly. It tasted much better than the porridge ever would, but he knew that he could sustain himself on fingernails, so he picked the bowl back up, took two spoonfuls, gagged on the second, then choked it down and shoved the damned thing away from him.

Rollam looked at him with worried eyes. “Your Grace?”

“I’m fine,” Tommen managed. He stood up and backed away from the table, then knelt down beside his bed and withdrew a gauntlet of lobstered steel. You will not need them, Ser Addam had said. As king, you would be better served inspiring our men at the back instead of fighting in the thick of battle where no one can see you. Those were Ser Kevan’s words, but they came from the Marbrand knight’s mouth. In all honesty, Tommen was glad that he had decided to forego insisting on playing a part in the battle. The Tumblestone had been the most terrifying experience of his life, and only a fit of insanity would make him want to go through with it again.

He placed the gauntlet back under the bed, stood up and sat down beside the mirror. He had trimmed his hair again before leaving, so that he could more easily wear the helmet that he would never need. A king must be seen, apparently, rather than just being some person in a helmet. Tommen would have disagreed with that. People remembered King Robert’s famous antlered helm from the Trident and told stories of his greatness, even if the man himself had been little more than a drunk at the end.

Still, those were memories from another time. Here they were fighting against Baratheon banners rather than under them. Stannis had sent Tommen a letter three days past, a somewhat brusque thing for a somewhat brusque man. Bastard, it read. Surrender to me now and I may not burn you alive. That was what Stannis’s red witch did to his enemies, what he would probably have done to most of the Lannisters in King’s Landing had he been victorious at the Blackwater. I may not burn you alive. A quick death, by the headsman’s axe, and I will see no further retribution against the Lannisters save from your parents. It had been strangely satisfying to watch the letter burn instead, to watch Stannis’s false words crackle and hiss as the flames swallowed them up.

The fact that they were fighting against Stannis meant that anything bearing the Baratheon sigil had been discarded or destroyed, including Tommen’s breastplate. They had melted it down for iron in Casterly Rock and forged the new one at Sarsfield, with two lions wrought in black against a field of silver, and lions edging the borders.

“Are you finished yet?” the Boar asked. “We can’t spend the whole day staring in the bloody mirror. There’s a battle to fight.”

“True,” said Tommen. “Very true.” He felt like retching up all over again. “Come on, then.”

The others had not finished breakfast either, but they were too relieved to care. Tommen withdrew Lawbringer from its scabbard, turning the crossguard in its hand. I should have kept it as Widow’s Wail, part of him thought, people would be afraid of Widow’s Wail. But Widow’s Wail was Joffrey’s sword, and the less he thought about Joff, the better.

From outside the tent came the stampeding sound of hooves. They were encamped upon a hill east of Sarsfield castle, in a position overlooking the Roseroad. At Ser Addam’s suggestion, Tommen had set the Companions to helping to dig defence ditches in front of the lines; said ditches were now filled with spikes to prevent the passage of the enemy cavalry, and men-at-arms manned the watchtowers in the gaps between the makeshift trenches. The slope was steep as well, and Stannis’s men would have enough trouble climbing it, or so they hoped.

Lannister tents were dotted all over the ridge. Some were vast, like the command tent further up the
hillside, with smaller tents ringing them like children. Others clung to rocks or hid in the shadow of
trees, big enough for only one man. The men who lived in those were hedge knights and sellswords,
men who had no true place in the Lannister army. They milled from place to place, dressed in a
motley combination of armour. Pages and squires lugging heavy wayns and carrying sundry pieces
of armour chased their masters all over the place, many of them almost being trampled underfoot.
Soldiers were hastily grilling sausages and bacon over firepits, joking and laughing with one another.
For no particular reason, a herd of goats were being conducted into several pens behind a vast
cooking tent. When Tommen asked why, Ser Arys Oakheart only looked at him with a knowing
smile and said, “Either that’s our lunch, or Ser Addam means to release the beasts into Stannis’s
ranks.”

Amidst the clamour, the king went mostly unnoticed. A few knights went to their knees, shouting,
“Hail to Your Grace,” or “Seven blessings upon Your Grace,” but for the most part they reached
the command tent unhindered.

Scene 12 – The Most Boring POV Character There Ever Was

Despite the title for this scene, I’m sort of sad that it was cut – there wasn’t enough here to make up
an actual chapter, or to justify its point in the story, but here’s your belated update on the Iron Isles.

And honestly, Damphair wasn’t that bad to write.

Also: nuncle.

THE DAMPHAIR

On the horizon, thunder and lightning warred against a backdrop of grey sky. The storm wind was
growing. Waves bubbled black and foamy against the grey rocks below, sending up vast, noisy
clouds of salt and spray. But the castle did not so much as shake. Ten Towers had stood here on the
edge of the island for hundreds of years, and it would stand for hundreds more.

The castle was called Ten Towers because it was just that: an arrangement of ten strange towers
across a wide bay, linked by curtain walls and covered walkways. Not a patch on Pyke, of course,
but Aeron Greyjoy could not deny that it was imposing. The Widow’s Tower was a twisting and tall
spire, stark and ugly against the darkening clouds above. The Screaming Tower sat out to sea, its
lower levels completely abandoned, the only sound the eerie whistling of the wind as it howled
through the gaps in the stonework. And here, high up in the stout Book Tower, the walls were near
eight feet thick, the mortared black stone strong as iron.

The prophet turned away and went inside. The tower room was stupidly vast, the walls stacked with
tall bookshelves that reached almost to the ceiling above, torch sconces casting pools of shadow
upon the black stone floor. There were two other men inside the Book Tower, and Aeron Greyjoy
despised them both in equal measure.

The maester was the first one to speak. “Winter has come, so says the word of the Citadel.”

Aeron spat. “Only the God has the power to define the seasons, fool. The grey sheep do not.”

Maester Karlen was surprisingly resilient, though. “The ‘grey sheep’ have predicted the seasons for over a thousand years,” he said mildly. “I see no reason why their prediction should be incorrect.”

“The grey sheep can go bugger themselves for all I care,” said Aeron Greyjoy, striding towards Maester Karlen. He was a tall man, and imposing enough to make smaller men fear for their safety should they cross him, but this maester somehow held his ground. Damn Harlaw for never teaching this one his place, the prophet thought.

Rodrik the Reader stood up from his chair, with a slight smile of bemusement on his fat face. “Peace now, Damphair,” he said, and turned to the maester. “The ravens are getting unruly in the rookery, Karlen. Go see to them, if you would.”

Maester Karlen gave a stupid little bow. “My lord.” He went.

Rodrik Harlaw sat back down behind his desk. His wet cloak was hung over the back of his chair, and his windswept grey hair flapped in the idle wind that came through the half-open door to the tower balcony. Lord Harlaw pursed his lips. “After all these years, I must confess that I still do not understand why you are so opposed to the pursuit of knowledge, Damphair.”

“And I have no intentions of telling you,” Aeron Greyjoy said tersely.

“You father was an educated man,” said Harlaw, a twinkle of amusement remaining in his grey eyes. “He was a Greyjoy of Pyke, yes, and a reaver at heart, but he understood that there is always a time for wisdom.”

“And now he’s dead,” the prophet said bluntly. “Along with the rest of them. And yet here I remain, the last living scion of Quellon Greyjoy’s brood.”

Lord Harlaw gave that a moment’s pause. Aeron could see the fat wormy words forming on his fat wormy lips. “Theon and Asha may still live,” the old lord said. “We know that she was taken at Deepwood Motte, but Stannis Baratheon knows the importance of—”

“You’ll not speak to me of Stannis Baratheon.” The prophet still remembered the battle at Fair Isle, the way his brother’s ships had been torn apart by the enemy fleet and scattered to the four winds, the burning of his longship up above, and Euron’s smiling through it all as Aeron Damphair plunged beneath the freezing waters of the Sunset Sea. Driftwood had carried him back to the Iron Isles, and there he had seen the truth of the Drowned God’s power, but holiness and goodliness could not rid a man of hatred.

Have my niece and nephew if you will, Stannis Baratheon, the prophet thought. I’ll have your eyes and I’ll feed them to the crabs.

Harlaw kept droning on. “…then you are showing great arrogance and ignorance, Damphair. House Greyjoy is finished now - unless you should suddenly decide that you desire children. If the rumours of Theon’s… condition… are true, then he is a lost cause, but Asha—”

Damphair set his mouth in a firm line. “No woman may sit the Seastone Chair.”

“There was a time before the Greyjoys ruled in the Iron Islands. Men might have said ‘no Greyjoy
may sit the Seastone Chair,’ but the common men dared to challenge that, and—”

“Dynasties rise and fall. That is the way of the world. That is the will of the God.”

Harlaw still looked pleased with himself, smiling as he spoke. “Then a hundred years from now, men will speak of Aeron Damphair as the man who let his house go to waste, because he was too blind to recognise that sometimes we must make hard choices.”

“You dare to call me a fool?”

“I said no such thing, Damphair. I merely implied it.”

_Damn the man._ Aeron Greyjoy curled his fingers into angry fists, but did not more than that. It would not do to bear his anger here; with any luck, the Drowned God would come down upon Harlaw with the rage of a thousand storms and sink the whole damned island beneath the waves. “You would have me gather before the ironborn assembly, and tell them that they are to accept a woman as their queen, one who is in the North as a captive as we speak? Are you mad?”

“Perhaps.” Lord Harlaw smiled. “Perhaps I am just an old man, grown too old for sense. But if you take the Seastone Chair for Asha, then you may have a chance to rule on it as Regent for yourself. An opportunity for you to spread the Drowned God’s religion from the highest seat in the land… and isn’t that what you have always wanted, Damphair? Recognition and power, whether as a drunkard or a prophet? You are many things, aye, but I do not believe that you are a fool, not truly.”

_He is right_, Aeron knew. _More than that, I wanted someone to have me as theirs._ He had never known a woman truly – not in the way of a whore, he had taken plenty of those when he was young – but in the way of a lover, the thing that Balon had shared with his wife Lady Alannys, before she had gone mad with grief and retreated to this damp, dark castle on Harlaw.

“The last kingsmoot started a precedent,” he grunted. “The lords will expect me to call them forth to Old Wyk to hear their claims.”

“How very fair of you.” Lord Harlaw nodded to his bookshelf. “There are tomes in there about the law of the Seven Kingdoms, pages and pages thick—”

“We are not in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“As I was about to remind you, until you interrupted me. Aye, you are right. We are ironborn, and we make our own law, Damphair. Take the Seastone Chair in your niece’s name – in _our_ niece’s name – and none shall be able to stand before us. Greyjoy and Harlaw, we can raise more men and more longships than all the other islands combined, and with the support of Gorold Goodbrother, we —”

Aeron glared at him. Most men wilted before the Damphair’s gaze. Rodrik the Reader was not one of them, yet the look silenced him all the same. “Your plan will do us little good,” said Aeron. “Not while Asha is in chains in some damp dungeon beneath Winterfell, ringed on all sides by the greenlanders. What do you propose we do? Pay a ransom for the bitch? The gold price? Men would mock us till we were in our graves and long after that.”

Not long now, Damphair, a voice told him. Not long until you are returned to the sea as well.

“Asha is the kraken’s daughter,” Harlaw said. “Of that I am certain. But her mother was a Harlaw, and her grandfather, and her grandfather’s father too, and she does not lack for wits either.” He reached into a drawer beneath his desk, rummaging for a moment, then withdraw a parchment carefully and passed it across the table.
Aeron Damphair glanced down at it. “For how long have you have had this?” he asked calmly, his voice more measured than he had expected. Inside he was fuming.

“Come and see,” said Rodrik the Reader.

_Dear nuncle_, it read:

_I write to you from Winterfell, in the company of Stannis Baratheon, whose banners fly over the castle walls now. You need not worry yourself, for I have been well kept by these southerners, though the Northmen are less fond of me, I confess, though of course that is to be expected._

_I have fifteen men with me, Tris Botley, Qarl the Maid and your cousin Eerl among them. And we have Theon as well, alive and well. It was the bastard Ramsay Snow who held my brother captive, and I mean to hunt for him, once Stannis has given me freedom of the North, where I am to remain as guest. Doubtless there are some who would see the Bastard cut down as well._

_Stannis wants to give me the Iron Islands, and it seems that I will take him up on this offer, in return for the ships to take back my birthright. I will have to make some pledges, of course, but we had expected no less._

_Until the next time, fare well,_

_Your niece, Asha_

“These are not Asha’s words,” said Aeron Greyjoy.

Harlaw nodded. “No doubt they were dictated to her. But there is some small truth—”

“The girl means to kneel to Stannis Baratheon.”

“To save her life, Damphair. Surely—”

“The girl means to _kneel_ to Stannis Baratheon. No woman may sit the Seastone Chair, I said… perhaps I was wrong to discount Asha on account of her gentle sex. That being said, I cannot excuse her of the other matter. _We Do Not Sow_, our words say. And in much the same way, we do not bow either. The way I see it, the girl wishes to glean something from Stannis Baratheon akin to his blessing, mercy, and the like.”

“You’re right,” Lord Harlaw said heavily, gritting his teeth. “I was a fool to think that I could get through to you, Aeron Damphair. I suppose you won’t be staying the night, as to you, storming off to sleep in some cave down by the salty shore would seem a much better option, no?”

It was a challenge, and one that Aeron Greyjoy rose to in earnest. “You presume correctly, for once. I will say no fond farewells to your hospitality, Reader.” He spat, turned round, his grey cloak flapping behind him in the form of a huge grey crow.

“You can try and raise Asha to the Seastone Chair, if you mean to go any further with this foolishness… but I warn you, the godly men will rally behind me, and you shall have no success—”

“Oh, aye,” said Harlaw mockingly, “but you tried to stop Euron as well, and I daresay you found little success with that.” The prophet slammed the door behind him and descended the stair, first
through the upper levels of Harlaw’s tower, then out onto the wooden staircase that wound round the lower levels of the bastion. The wind flapped at him angrily, a bitter stinging chill that tasted of salt and snow on the tip of his tongue.

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**Scene 13 – HBO Stole The Hardhome Budget**

HBO stole the Hardhome budget to make CGI direwolves and several hundred real masks for the Hall of Faces, so we’re left with this scene from Val’s POV before all the money ran out.

But that’s OK, since the best horror is the unseen sort. Or so they say.

**VAL**

The faith of the old gods did not say much about any sort of hell, but if there was one, Val was certain that it would look something like this.

“The gate’s breaking!” someone screamed, as if they did not know that already. All you had to do was look, and you could see the great wooden gates shaking in their frames, like to come loose at any second. Val pitied the wildlings standing uncertainly just inside it, those likely to be slaughtered when the thing inevitably came flying off of its hinges and splattered man and wight alike.

Val stood there, oddly graceful as she watched, gripping her spear firmly in a frozen grip. *Hell,* she thought bitterly. Then someone was screaming at her and she turned to see Dolorous Edd, frost in his beard, tugging at her arm desperately. “Come on!” he was shouting, or something like that. The sound of the wind made it impossible to tell.

But she obeyed him all the same, and let him drag her between the ruined buildings, jumping over ruined walls and ducking through fallen doorframes, back across the frozen settlement to the hearthfire. As they went Val was certain that she could hear the gate falling to earth with a heavy *thud.* The ground shook beneath her flying feet.

“Where’s Wun Wun?” she all but screamed.

Edd stared at her as though she had gone mad. “Loose, I hope!” Val was not so certain; she could hear no giants roaring. But she had no time to go looking for them; half of Hardhome was already overrun, and she doubted that the other half would last much longer. *Time to make our flight,* Tormund Giantsbane had said in the longhall that morning. They had sharpened their spears, prepared their arrows, made careful plans for the escape routes… but not one of them had expected that the wights would come for them first. In hindsight, that had been a terrible mistake on their part, though Val supposed that wildlings would fight much the same whether there was a plan or not. The free folk were not all too fond of taking orders, especially from a sour old goat like Ser Alliser Thorne.

If only Lord Snow were here…

Lord Snow was *not* here, though, Val reminded herself. Lord Snow was *dead,* and it was not
impossible that he was one of the wights attempting to breach the camp perimeter even now.

Random Facts:

- At 353,000 words, before the uploading of this chapter, *The Sunset Kingdoms* is currently 86% of the length of *A Coat of Gold*.
- If it were a book in the *ASOIAF* series, it would be about 921 pages long, between *A Clash of Kings* and *A Dance with Dragons*.
- The longest chapter so far in *The Sunset Kingdoms* is *Myrcella III, Hear Me Roar*, at 8662 words. *Myrcella V, The Climb* places second with 8223 words, and *Sansa III, The Wolf and the Rose* is third with 7943 words.
- The shortest chapters are *Davos V, My Gods Against Yours* (2834 words), the *Prologue* (2857 words), and *Sansa I, The Roseroad* (2864 words).
- Sansa has the most POV chapters so far, at 8 (as of chapter 73). She also has the most POV chapters in the fic overall.
- The first chapter I wrote was *Sansa I*, which was written as Sansa’s ending chapter for *A Coat of Gold*, but moved back to *The Sunset Kingdoms*.
- *Daenerys VI, Book of the Stranger*, was the hardest chapter to write, and also one of the worst (in my opinion).
- When I [Ctrl+F] the entire work in the AO3 page, the name Jon occurs 678 times; Jaime 375 times; Tyrion 487 times; Daenerys 123 times (note: does not include Dany, Daenerys+Dany=482 times; Sansa 560 times).
- I consider House Targaryen to be the primary house in *The Sunset Kingdoms*, following the Lannisters in *A Coat of Gold*.

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon:

Chapter 74 - Jaime - “The Ghost of Harrenhal” - January 1, 2017
Chapter 75 - Sansa
Chapter 76 - Daenerys
Chapter 77 - Bran
Chapter 78 - Jon - “Battle of the Bastards”
SUPPLEMENTARY: Deleted Scenes, Odds and Ends: Part Two

Chapter Notes

A compilation of various scenes and filler that were deleted from THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, Chapters 74-119, prior to uploading, for numerous story-related reasons.

As such, all of these scenes should be considered (largely) NON-CANON within the fic, and nothing you read here means anything in the context of the actual story.

These scenes are unedited, so spelling and grammar errors, continuity issues, etc. are expected.

Scene 1 - At Aegon's Court (vaguely canon)

This scene takes place somewhere between Daenerys VII, "Winged Shadows", and Arianne III, "The Lady In Waiting". It shows the first day of Aegon and Daenerys's joint court. Though it has some interesting character scenes, I did not think it was necessary, as it showed plot developments which could be easily inferred. The only element of particular interest is Lem Lemoncloak (Ser Richard Lonmouth)'s accession to the Kingsguard.

ARIANNE

The throne room was an ocean of silks and furs and sparkling stones: rubies, amethysts, sapphires, and everything in between. Neither Aegon nor Daenerys sat the Iron Throne today; instead they placed themselves equally on the second step of the throne, with their loyal councillors seated below them.

The court was in raucous anticipation of the first joint session the king and queen had held in several moons. Courtiers jostled and pushed against the ropes and the royal guards, desperate to make their way to the front. Between them and the throne proper stood half a dozen royal guardsmen in Aegon’s colours, and half a dozen in Daenerys’s. The only White Swords present today were Ser Barristan Selmy, representing the queen and Ser Rolly Duckfield, for the king.

A herald blew his trumpets, quietening the rabble. Lord Jon Connington marched to the middle of the stage with all the stiff formality of a man headed to the executioner’s block. “My lords, my ladies,” he said solemnly. “We shall begin with matters of business decided by the joint council. First, the council calls forth Lord Willas Tyrell, of Highgarden, and Prince Oberyn Martell, of Sunspear, to confirm their oath of fealty to the King and Queen on the Iron Throne in the sight of gods and men.”

Willas and Oberyn walked out from the front of the crowd, both splendidly garbed in silks and fabrics in their respective house colours. Willas knelt first. “In the sight of this court, I swear the
unending loyalty of House Tyrell of Highgarden to King Aegon and Queen Daenerys, of House Targaryen of Dragonstone, now and always. You shall have meat at my hearth and mead at my table, and you shall always have the support of my swords in any wars you call me to, and the fealty of all the swords in the Reach.”

Words, words, just words, thought Arianne. And they all knew it. Oberyn had his own performance too. “I hereby swear the loyalty of my brother, Prince Doran Nymeros Martell, and all of his subjects, to the Iron Throne. I swear it by earth and water. By bronze and iron. By ice and fire.”

The two lords straightened up and moved back into their places. Oberyn had told Arianne that she should swear the oath, not him, but she had another part to play in this ceremony, and she could not be both representative of Dorne and queen-to-be.


A man in a threadbare yellow cloak stepped out and knelt before the Iron Throne. Arianne recognised him vaguely from Aegon’s camp; he’d been one of the guards at his tent.

“King Aegon wishes to recognise the honour and loyalty of his father’s friend, Ser Richard Lonmouth, who was Prince Rhaegar’s squire. King Aegon wishes to name Ser Richard to the Kingsguard as its Lord Commander, so that he might council His Grace in matters of state just as Ser Barristan Selmy serves Queen Daenerys. Does the small council consent to this?”

“It does,” said Grand Maester Gormon.

“Then it shall be done.”

For the first time that morning, King Aegon rose from his seat and descended the steps, where he took the white cloak of a Kingsguard from the steward. Ser Richard Lonmouth knelt to accept his burden, and rose as a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard, stepping into line beside Ser Barristan Selmy, who regarded his new counterpart warily.

Next the council called upon Myles Rosby, a handsome young man of some twenty years, to confirm him in his inheritance as lord of Rosby. Then came the lords Buckler, Cafferren, Meadows, Celtigar and Lady Selmy, the regent of Harvest Hall, to be formally pardoned for their support of House Lannister and welcomed back into the king’s peace. Next the Hand called upon Lord Selwyn of Tarth, and conferred upon him the title of acting lord admiral of the royal fleet, a title he would share with Lord Paxter Redwyne, of the Arbor. Arianne noted that only Lord Connington was making these pronouncements; Ser Barristan Selmy, the Queen’s Hand, said nothing.

Ser Rolland Storm, the Bastard of Nightsong, knelt before the Iron Throne to be named lord of his father’s seat. Lord Erron Hightower received dispensation to marry a daughter of Lord Randyll Tarly, whose wife and daughters were guests of Highgarden, and the promise of half a million golden dragons to aid with the rebuilding of Oldtown, in return for trade concessions between the Hightowers and the Iron Throne. Ser Harry Strickland of the Golden Company became Lord Harry Strickland of Gallowsgrey, since House Trant had been extincted. King Aegon announced that he would be sending men to rebuild Summerhall, Aegon the Fifth’s summer palace, and granted a royal charter to Maidenpool, granting it permission to call itself a city. The latter was awarded to Lord William Mooton, who had come down from Harrenhal as an envoy of Edmure Tully and Petyr Baelish.

“We have word from Margaery Tyrell that a reunion with the West is not far away,” said Lord Connington. “And once we retake the Iron Isles, the Seven Kingdoms will be reunited. But, of course, there are other bonds to be made, to strengthen our current alliances.”
It is my turn, Arianne knew. Lord Connington called her name. She stepped out from the crowd and curtseyed at the foot of the Iron Throne. “Your Graces,” she said, “an agreement was made in writing between my uncle Prince Oberyn and the Lord Hand shortly before the Siege of King’s Landing. This agreement entailed—”

“—that you should be my wife,” Aegon had stood up now, and was coming down the steps. The whole hall held its breath, even though all of them knew what was coming. “But it is my duty to ask you, not for you to ask me. So I ask: Princess Arianne Martell, will you be my wedded wife?”

“I will.” What else was she to say?

And her part was done, easy as that. Lord Connington went on, “Of course, such a union must be sealed in the sight of gods and men,” he said. “They shall wed two days hence, in the royal sept. To the king, and his queen-to-be!”

Arianne scarcely heard them cheering, or what Aegon was whispering her ear. Instead she watched Queen Daenerys, and the frown that refused to leave her stern face, and the distaste in her bright purple eyes.

A king and a queen cannot share the Iron Throne, her uncle Oberyn had said. Two queens cannot share it either, thought Arianne. The last time two queens were at odds like this was during the Dance of the Dragons.

Scene 2 - Tyrion, Penny and Numbers at the Arsenal (vaguely canon)

Tyrion - thinking that Numbers is his uncle Gerion's son - prepares for the battle against Tormo Fregar's Braavosi fleet shortly before Tyrion IX, "The Sky on Fire". This scene has an interesting reminiscence on Gerion Lannister, but I didn't think it was particularly interesting, as we've seen a hundred battles like this already. Tyrion also has some nice lines opposite Salladhor Saan and Justin Massey, which I wanted to get into "The Sky on Fire", but couldn't find the time. If I'd wanted to make more out of the Battle of Braavos, I might have kept this in, but in the end that battle was too similar to Blackwater from A CLASH OF KINGS to be a proper spectacle for my readers.

The fight sequence at the end is strictly non-canon, but it was meant to account for Numbers's injuries and eventually feature Bronn. In the end, though, I thought it would be more exciting to set this battle aboard the Brightfish. S07E02 of the show has showed us just how effective full-blown sea battles can be, and captures the tone I was going for with "The Sky on Fire".

TYRION

Tyrion Lannister, garbed in black leather and silver steel, crouched atop a merlon on the highest fortification of the Arsenal, gazing out over the black ships bobbing in the lagoon below. The Braavosi would be loading them with nitre and powder and resin even now. The night smelled of sulfur and phosphor, those ingredients that were seldom seen in Westerosi warfare yet were weapons of choice in battles of the Disputed Lands and the Free Cities, and of rain, sweet and cold as it ran down into his beard.
Numbers – or Gerion, as he preferred that name – carried the torch. Behind them, the big Norvoshi guardsman, Kolan, gazed with lover’s eyes at the honed edge of his longaxe. “My lord,” said Numbers. “It’s nearly time.”

“I know. Give me a moment.” A pause. “Can you see black sails out there, or is it my imagination?”

“I… can’t see anything, my lord,” Numbers reported.

“Oh, good. I must be going mad.”

“Sometimes my eyes aren’t that good, my lord.”

*Your green eyes. Your Lannister green eyes.* “No. Your eyes are younger than mine, and far less likely to lie. Forgive me. Life has left me with a habit of seeing enemies in every shadow.”

A horn blared then, calling out the hour. The rolling beat of drums increased, percussion from the ramparts, percussion in the sky, percussion in their hearts. *Boom doom boom doom boom,* they went.

Tyrion wondered how many battles you had to fight to be considered a veteran. More than he had, for certain. More than Numbers, who had spent half his youth in the Golden Company? More than Kolan, to whom fighting came as easy as breathing? He might have asked, but the Norvoshi was not much of a talker. *How many battles? Enough that killing a man no longer seems like a dismal waste of life?* If it was so, he was past that already. The world was full of pointless killing.

“We should go down,” he decided.

The commanders had assembled in the great hall, a wide stone room on a middle floor of the fortress, with views out to sea through huge windows, its balconies spilling over with scorpions and mangonels and the other beasts of war. On their way they descended through guardrooms full of nervous, pallid faces and retched-up fish stew, through armouries claustrophobically crammed with shell plate and pikes and the scraping of whetstones, through workshops ceilinged by damp sweat and soot and greasy ballista strings.

All these men busy preparing for war, and yet the command room was calm, the tables set as they would have been for supper. Tyrion was unsure whether to find that admirable or despicable as he glanced around looking for Salladhor Saan. “Down there, my lord,” Numbers pointed. The Lysene pirate was busy having a noisy argument with Justin Massey. *So much for the spirit of unity.* Out on the water, the trumpets burst into rude, interrupting noise.

“Are your ships out on the water?” Tyrion asked Salladhor Saan.

“Aye. And ready for burning. I have so many beautiful memories of them, Imp, yet I am giving them all up for your sake.”

“You are giving them up for the sake of two million golden dragons.”

“Their sentimental value far exceeds that.” Saan sucked in his breath. “I want three.”

“You may have whatever you want.” *I am not intending on giving you it, though.* Salladhor Saan was a known pirate, after all, and he could hardly go chasing Tyrion into King’s Landing to get his gold. *A Lannister always pays his debts. When they are worth paying.*

Tyrion turned to Justin Massey. “And you, ser?”
“What?”

“I thought you would be setting us an example with your bravery tonight, rather than sitting in the command room.”

“My duties are no concern of yours, Imp.”

Life would be so much easier if men like you admitted to your cowardice, Massey. “I will remind you that we are on the same side, Ser Justin. If you are keeping your intentions from me, I might start to feel, hmm, suspicious.”

“Do not threaten me.” Massey turned on his heel and stalked away.

Salladhor Saan sighed. “That one is prickly at the best of times.”

“Oh, I know. A shame, really. If it weren’t for his pride, he’d make quite a good knight.”

Saan raised an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

“Meaning I’d be quite happy to have him at my side. Now, I am hardly a suitable judge for such a thing… for obvious reasons, but I know an untrustworthy man when I see him, and I would not name Ser Justin as such.”

Saan flashed a big white grin. “Would you call me untrustworthy?”

“Oh, without a doubt. Why, you are not unlike myself.”

“I hope you are not intending to cheat me, Imp?”

Oh, not deliberately.

“If I was, do you think I would tell you?”

“You might, if you were the fool that your raiment suggests.” He jerked a thumb at Tyrion’s armour.

It was a fair point. “I should have followed your example, my lord. Wear silk and fur instead of leather and chainmail, and they may yet spare me.”

“Come,” said Saan, smirking. “Your council is beginning.”

Moredo Prestayn and Qarro Volentin would lead the defense of the palace and the Arsenal, as expected. They talked about scorpions with fire-bolts in their mouths and mangonels throwing pots of boiling pitch and pincer formations and envelopments and a whole host of things Tyrion did not really understand – how could you use a pincer formation to attack a fleet? – or pay attention to.

Since they did not need him for anything, he supposed he could choose his duty. He found Numbers as the men were streaming out. “Come on,” he said, “we’re going to find Penny.” What else was there for him to do?

Penny was supposed to be cowering with the women and children, but they had set aside a special place for dwarfs, an abandoned wine cellar in the bowels of the garrison, Tyrion learned from somebody’s mousy-faced squire. When Numbers pushed on the door the girl sat up suddenly, startled within the triangle of lantern light. “Who’s there?” she called out.

“Only us.” Tyrion stepped down softly onto the top step. “I told you to stay with the others—”

“The others.” Penny sniffled. “They’re not like me. And they hate me, I’ve told you.”
Tyrion did not doubt that. Folk were only too happy to let a dwarf caper on tables for them, but they
did not keep such company. “Well,” he said. “You can stay with us. We’re going to watch. You’ll
have a better view than any of them.”

Penny sniffled again and followed them out into the light. She had red rings around her eyes from
crying, Tyrion saw, but he was wary of asking why lest she start crying again. So he said nothing as
he led her down the hall into the chamber that Numbers had found for them.

The room had been an armory of sorts, once, but the defenders had long ago abandoned these damp
lower levels in favour of ones higher in the fortress. The air was thick and grey and fusty. A few
pieces of the old decoration had been left behind: old, overstuffed chairs, worn-out and faded rugs,
an ugly candelabra.

Tyrion seated himself beneath the grimy window and rubbed dirt from the glass. They still had a
decent view of the lagoon from here. They would not miss the fire when it started.

Numbers brought wine for them.

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“I remember him well,” Tyrion said. “Fondly. He was always my favourite uncle. I think I might
well have been his favourite nephew, if only to spite my lord father. Uncle Gerion was never too
concerned with what Father thought, even though he was his liege lord. My aunt Genna said
something to that effect, once: Uncle Kevan was Tywin’s loyal shadow, and he will always be in
that position, never higher. Tygett tried to escape that shadow, but he failed dismally, and succumbed
only to anger. Gerion laughed at the games they played. He told jokes and stories and remained an
adventurer at heart. Oh, he had some loyalty to his family, and a great deal of gratitude towards it for
the opportunities it had given him, but nothing more than that. And he certainly did not have my
father’s reverence for his legacy.”

“He might have,” said Numbers. “He left me. Perhaps he didn’t want to go home with the shame of a
bastard son.”

That was odd, Tyrion thought. Especially since Uncle Gerion had a bastard daughter at the Rock,
Joy Hill, who was openly acknowledged as his. “Perhaps he did not know of you,” he said. “Uncle
Gerion was not married. He had no one to appease other than Tywin Lannister, and he was none too
concerned with that.” Tyrion peered across the table. “You have his eyes, you know.”

“Which eye?” asked Penny.

“What?”

“Which eye?” She jerked a stubby thumb towards Numbers. “His eyes are different colours. One of
them is really green. The other is more… blue, sort of.”

Tyrion leaned across to look, but Numbers turned his head away. “It’s just a strange thing, that’s all.
Another strange thing about me.”

“It’s magic,” said Penny stupidly, “that’s what it is. You’ve got magic eyes.” She reached out for
Numbers’s hand, and squeezed it.
Tyrion drained his wine cup. “It’s rather dim and dark down here,” he said. “I think I’m going to go up to the ramparts. Stretch my legs a little.” He turned and waddled away without waiting for an answer. His armour jangled as he climbed the stars, mocking him with a gentle, childlike sound.

Tyrion found a part of the ramparts with only a couple of archers standing guard, arrows nocked to their bows. It was a starry night, moreso than usual. Once he had known the names of all the stars and constellations: the Shadowcat and the Sword of the Morning, the Ice Dragon and the King’s Crown. But it was the Ghost that was out tonight, pale, faraway stars drifting across his vision; he wondered if that was a good omen. The stars are the same, he thought. The Free Cities and the Seven Kingdoms are apart in cultures and languages and people, but the stars are the same. And if there are gods up there watching over us too, they weigh all our fates with the same scales. A Lannister always pays his debts, but he cannot pay his way out of the seventh Hell. As Father surely learned. As I may soon learn myself.

The drums started up. Below him, Tyrion heard the sound of shouting and knew that it was time. All along the ramparts and up in the towers, archers nocked flaming arrows to their bows, and the strings and pulleys of ballistae and catapults were made ready. War is a language we can all speak. They shout “nock, draw, loose” in different tongues, but the flight of an arrow always means the same.

The drums stopped. The arrows burst free of their bows and flew like unbound birds into the night sky. They fell screaming upon the enemy armada and Salladhor Saan’s fleet of black wooden ships, and the ropes that bound them together. And burned.

It was the Blackwater come again. And there you have your fire, Salladhor Saan, thought Tyrion. Burning brightly as ever. The flames consumed it all. The lagoon was aflame, blowing black and green smoke into the night. He had no way of knowing how many ships were burning, but he could smell them from here. My bloody victory once again. The fighting would no doubt continue among the burning wreckage, but Tyrion did not plan on seeing it. Let them burn, he willed, as he turned away from the ramparts. Burn them all.

He met Numbers and Penny on the stairs. “We saw the fire,” said Penny. She had put on Numbers’s halfhelm. It covered her eyes and nose entirely. “Is that it? Is it over?”

Tyrion lucked into her big, stupid, innocent eyes. “No. It’s not over. That won’t get rid of all of them. Half, if we’re lucky. The rest, we’ll have to fight.”

“We?” Penny squeaked.

“Well, not you. As for me… my skills are passable. If they get over the walls somehow, I’d like to be ready for them.”

“I have your helm, my lord.” Numbers passed it over.

“And my axe,” said Tyrion. He took that as well, and weighed it in his hand. “We want to be on a ship. One of those that hasn’t burned yet.”

“They’ll be down below, my lord,” said Numbers. “I’ll see—”

He never finished that sentence. There was a great and calamitous cracking noise from below, and Tyrion was thrown sideways, against the castle wall; when he stood up again his head was ringing, and his arm was numb where his shoulder had been crushed. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain, blinking back tears, and somehow found his feet again. When he glanced around, he saw that the stairs above them were on fire, and dust and smoke were seeping down through the broken holes in the walls. He had been thrown clear of the wreckage, but everything around them was fallen
beams and collapsed tapestries. It was only then that he realised the entire tower-top was gone. Just
gone. They were at the very top now, and the neat ramparts had vanished to bits of jagged grey
stone.

Numbers helped him to find his feet. Meanwhile, Penny sat curled up beneath a fallen canvas,
chewing her thumb and muttering, “it came from below, it came from below, it came from below,”
like a prayer.

“P-Penny.” Tyrion coughed out soot. His axe was gone, and with it all pretensions he might have
had of being a warrior. Stupid dwarf. “Penny, we have to go.”

She rocked on her heels. “I’m s-s-scared, my lord. I’m…”

He pulled on her arm. “Penny, we have to get to a ship.”

She pulled back. “I c-c-can’t, I, I—”

Tyrion slapped her. Not hard, but certainly hard enough to make her look up, her eyes wide with
more shock than fear. That was good. At least she was alert now. “Get up,” Tyrion all but growled.
A huge chunk of stonemasonry crashed down a few yards to his left. “Get up, Penny, before I hit
you again.”

She got up. “W-what’s going on?”

“We’re under attack, that’s what.”

“B-but you said—”

He hit her again, but gentler this time. “Nevermind what I said. I was wrong. We’re—” The floor
seemed likely to crumble beneath them. “—we need to get to the ships.” He took one arm; Numbers
took the other, wincing in pain at his wrenched shoulder, and together they pulled Penny along.
The stairway down was half-collapsed, but they managed to inch their way to the next landing by
staying close to the wall. Tyrion was sweating profusely in his armour; the flames beneath them were
getting higher.

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Scene 3 - Aboard the Brightfish (NOT canon)

In this version, the Brightfish manages to escape the Battle of Braavos with Tyrion, Penny and
Numbers on board, but is caught up in a storm shortly thereafter. The first portion of this scene
shows Tyrion interacting with some of the crewmen on board. The second half shows the storm at
the ship, and Tyrion and Penny being parted from Gerion - and also from Arya Stark, masquerading
as "Cat of the Canals". I also thought this was a much more emotional way of revealing Tyrion's
suspicions about Gerion being his son, even if Tyrion singing to reassure Penny pushes the
boundaries of his character. Ultimately, this scene was meant to be the crux of Tyrion's arc. I will
admit that it is actually one of my favourite scenes in the entire story.

So why was it cut? Well, the ending of this scene necessitates Tyrion to meet Varys. Timelines then
get royally screwed up, meaning that "The Dance of Dragons" never takes place, and has to split into
two separate battles - one in King's Landing where Dany rushes to the Dragonpit and is nearly
blown to pieces, and subsequently flees to Dragonstone. The second battle has Aegon's men
invading Dragonstone. Tyrion's role in the storyline is to act as an envoy; it concludes with the
Dragonhorn breaking and Tyrion escaping on Viserion. However, this idea requires several leaps in logic that could be defined as "jumping the shark". For example, Dany has to refrain from using her dragons on Aegon's fleet at any time, Varys has to abandon all his plans in King's Landing to pick up Tyrion in the middle of a storm, and Numbers and Arya have to somehow survive being thrown overboard - Arya's journey to the Riverlands is a big enough leap of logic as it is. Ultimately, this could have been rectified by having it take place during the battle of King's Landing, but it would have required about 4 more chapters to tell that story, and that isn't what I wanted.

TYRION

The *Brightfish* was ten days out from Braavos when the storm came upon them. Tyrion Lannister had never seen a more turbulent night in his life. The boat keened and wailed and screeched, spinning left and right across the black waves. Thrice he was violently sick, and he spent the rest of the night lying on his bed amid the sacks of hemp or holding back Penny’s hair while she vomited into a bucket of her own. For the rest of the night the two dwarves rolled together in darkness, barely able to hold their sickness in.

His cousin Gerion, meanwhile, dozed quite contentedly through most of it, proving himself his father’s son in that. Lord Tywin Lannister had been known to say that his brother could sleep through a war, though it had not been meant as a compliment. Part of Tyrion wanted to drag the lad down from his hammock. See? he wanted to scream. See what it is like for the rest of us? But he did not. There was no reason to add any more to the misery.

By the time the storm finally died down, it was dawn again, and after spending the better part of an hour shuffling about on his makeshift pillows Tyrion realised that he would not sleep one wink. He climbed to his feet, changed his sour-smelling garb for some slightly less sour-smelling clothes, and waddled out of the cabin, stepping carefully over Penny's sleeping form. The dwarf girl was smiling in her sleep, he was pleased to see. Let her dream naïve, sweet dreams, and leave me to worry about the nightmares of the world.

Below decks most of the men were asleep in their hammocks, or trying to sleep, but in the galley Tyrion found about two dozen of the crewmen opening up two barrels of ale. Only then did he realised how parched his throat was. “Mind if I have a drop?” he asked.

“Little lord.” Tummyrot was one of the more friendly crewmen, and happy to oblige him. “If you sing and dance for us, might be I’ll let you have more than just a drop.”

“I’m not in the mood for singing and dancing,” Tyrion said. Of a night he was known to regale the sailors with songs and stories, usually once he’d had far too much to drink. “But I think Penny will be much more obliging, once she wakes.”

“Just how obliging is your little wife?”

Tyrion had long since tired of telling them that Penny was not his wife; it hardly seemed worth the effort. “Very obliging,” he muttered meaninglessly.

“Oh, I bet she is,” said a man called Rew. “Mind if I raise a cup to the Halfman’s lady?”

“Raise all the cups you like. She’ll be only too happy to hear it.” Poor, sweet, stupid, love-blinded
Penny. Sometimes Tyrion wanted to kiss her; other times he wanted to kill her. For now, though, he only wanted to let her sleep. “Have you seen Ser Justin about?” he asked the crew.

“Nearly broke his damn fool neck running about last night,” said Tummyrot. “More trouble than he’s worth.”

Tyrion smiled. “If you mutiny against him, I won’t make any objections.”

“His knights will, though. And some of them are good men, friends, even. Wouldn’t want to have to kill them all.”

“Well,” said Tyrion. “In a mutiny, I’d side with you over them. I reckon that’s a smart choice.”

Tall, bony Sleet cast a fleety look in his direction. “What are you saying, Halfman?”

“Nothing that you need to tell Ser Justin about, my friend. But remember this: I always pay my debts. In case you ever doubted that.” He tapped his tankard against the table. “So, can I expect to find Massey in his cabin?”

“Most like,” said Tummyrot. “He’s probably still sleeping off the storm.” He said that as if it were a mark of true cowardice.

Tyrion snorted. “Can you blame him?”

“Little lord, you can be excused, for a little storm must seem like a great big one to you. But that was little more than a baby compared to what’s coming, and I’m going to laugh at Ser Justin if he runs from babies.”

“That… that was little?” Tyrion gave a hollow, sarcastic laugh. “Seven hells. I may need another drop of ale.” He hopped down from the bench and over to Tummyrot and his barrel. “How big is the coming storm going to be?” Tyrion asked as the big man poured for him. “Should I wear two pairs of smallclothes tonight? Should I spend all day praying to the Seven?”

“Do as you want,” said Sleet. “It won’t help you, or any of us. Someone’s going overboard tonight.”

His watery eyes gleamed as he looked at Tyrion. “Seven have mercy on them.”

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Then the Brightfish slammed violently sideways and he was thrown back into the rail, knocking the wind out of him. Black rain battered his cheek like the side of a knife and someone was screaming, and he was sliding down the wet decks on his arse, and stumbling back up to his feet, tripping over line and tackle. “Move!” shouted Ser Justin Massey, crashing into him, bundling him up in one arm as they turned and sprinted towards the door.

Shadows flitted past him, one by one, tall, short… dwarf-sized. “Penny!” Tyrion screamed out over the howling wind. “Penny, take my arm, take my fucking arm, damn you!” By some miracle she managed to grasp at it and Tyrion locked his sodden fingers around her wrist and together they crashed down the stairs, tumbling over and over, and finally coming to rest in a bed of pickled herring.

“Tyrion,” she moaned, “everything smells of vinegar.”
“Well,” Tyrion said, his stubby nose pressed among the herring. “I think I’ve found the reason for that.” He took a breath—

—and the Brightfish careered suddenly to port. Penny crashed into him, her fist striking him hard on the jaw, knocking them both down all over again. A lantern fell from the ceiling and smashed in a pool of glass and oil. Tyrion threw up, tumbled over, and found himself dragged backwards, over splintering boards, through a door, and onto the pile of sacks that composed his makeshift bed. “My lord,” he heard Numbers – no, Gerion, his name is Gerion, he’s my uncle’s son – say. “Are you… you’re bleeding.”

Tyrion felt for a wetness on his face, dripping blood from his cut. “So I am,” he said quietly. “So I am.” He did not really care. We’re all going to die tonight anyway, so what does it matter. There were four of them down here in the dark; him, Penny, Numbers, and Cat. Her presence surprised him. I will have good company in hell, at least, thought the dwarf. The Braavosi girl was quite amusing when she wanted to be. Tyrion watched her now, her skittish face pale in the low light. She stared back at him and said nothing.

Penny began to sob, holding Tyrion’s leg tight as a limpet. “I… I’m sorry,” she sniffled. “It’s… it’s just… I don’t want to die.” Her throat bobbed feebly. “I don’t want—”

Somehow he ended up stroking her hair, whispering that it would be fine, lying to her; meanwhile the wind wailed like a widow in mourning, and the smells of salt and sour vinegar mingled in the cramped hold. “You… you should try and sleep. You should try… I… I’ll…”

“I’ll sing you a song,” Cat said quietly. She crawled forwards silently, not even a creak of the boards betraying her movement. “I’ll sing…” And she sang ‘Meggett Was A Merry Maid’ and ‘Milady’s Supper’, songs that were hardly appropriate for this sort of time, but she changed their melodies and rhythms to suit. When it was done Penny was almost asleep, but her eyes still gazed into Tyrion’s. The moment wore on, long and painful, those big brown eyes beseeching him, imploring him. The boards moaned and wailed, and even the shouts of the men above were lost. Tyrion let out a long breath. If this is my night… I will sing it one last time now, and hold my peace hereafter. In the end, it was no more difficult than opening his mouth:

“I loved a maid as fair as summer,
with sunlight in her hair;

I loved a maid as red as autumn,
with sunset in her hair;

I loved a maid as white as winter,
with moonglow in her hair;

I loved a maid as green as springtime,
with sunrise in her hair.

I loved a maid of all the colours,
and forever loved her there;
And never have I loved another, none save for my maiden fair.

When he was finished, even the wind seemed to quieten, as though it somehow understood the significance of his sad song, of his memories with Tysha. Tyrion leaned back against Penny and closed his eyes.

“My lord,” he heard Cat say, very quietly. “I should... I should tell you something. Now, while I can. About who I am. Who I really am.”

“My lord,” he heard Gerion say, a little more loudly. “I think... I think...”

Cat continued. “You see, I’m not really... I...”

“I know that song,” Gerion said quickly. “That song you sung. My mother—”

Mother. And whatever Cat had been meaning to say was forgotten, just like that. Tyrion turned and looked exactly into Gerion’s eyes. Green. He is a Lannister, my uncle was his father, he is my cousin... but... He swallowed. “What about the song?”

Gerion shivered. “I’ve heard it before,” he admitted. “My mother... my mother used to sing—”

Then the mast burst.

A knife of wind cut through the hold, and the whole ship blew apart. Everywhere was splinters, splinters, splinters. Tyrion smashed into Penny hard, fingers grabbing at her, at any of her clothing he could get her hands on, screaming, pulling her into him, and they flew, back, away, under; Gerion and Cat were gone, gone, gone, the ship was filling with water and Penny was screaming again, and dark water closed over their heads. They were drowning, kicking, flailing into the waves, and then his fingers closed around something thick and sturdy, some piece of wreckage, some last hope. With Penny holding tight to him, Tyrion shoved himself upwards... and they came back into the world in the black night air, clinging to a heavy wooden board, bouncing up and down on the waves. Penny choked and spluttered and spat out seawater onto the deck. Their rescuer was a piece of the ship, to be sure, curved and about as large as a small rowboat. The ship is gone, Tyrion thought. And...

Numbers...

Penny had the same thought, eventually. “Where’s Numbers?” she asked, when she had caught her breath back. As though she had not heard Tyrion screaming the boy’s name into the black abyss of sea around them. As though she had not seen him beating the wooden deck or cursing the black storm with every word he knew. As though she had not heard the wailing wind that was the world’s only answer.

It was Penny who first noticed the light. The girl was not cheery, far from it, but when she came back telling him of the approaching ship, her eyes lit up for the first time in ages, and Tyrion wondered, for a time, if she might actually be beautiful, and he too lost in his sorrows to realise it. So he rose from his lonely hole in the ground, and stumbled out into the twilight to stand with her. “Isn’t it beautiful?” Penny murmured.
The light was green, glowing hotly through the mist. “It’s a rowboat from a ship,” she explained. “But it’s the future too, and it’s hope.” Penny found his stubby hand in hers, and squeezed it, and Tyrion found himself wanting to believe her. But when their saviour rose from between the two oarsmen on the rowboat and waved a familiar wave at him, and Tyrion recognised him, all hope of moving on quickly faded. Of course. Who else could find us so quickly?

Penny saw the worry on his face. “What is it?” she asked.

Tyrion watched as Varys stepped from the boat and into the shallows, and stood there, expectant, a shadow against the rising sun. “Oh, Penny,” he said. “I fear we have run into old friends again.”

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Scene 4 - Dany goes to the camp (NOT canon)

A short scene; Daenerys heads to Aegon's wedding, but instead of taking place at the Sept of Baelor, the ceremony is due to take place at his camp for some reason. On the way, she complains with Barristan and Daario Naharis.

Cut because it was unnecessary. Admittedly, Dany is one of those characters where most of her stuff ends up in the story, instead of being cut entirely.

DAENERYS

For once there was no snow, and no rain, and no wind. The clouds rolled in grey and early, but that was the worst of it. Otherwise the day was perfectly fine, or as fine as it would ever be.

High atop its rocky mount the Red Keep stood, faint through the misty haze that surrounded the rest of the city. Dany sat ahorse between Ser Barristan Selmy and Ser Jorah Mormont, following the stone road between the verdant boughs of the kingswood. One last look back, and then King’s Landing was gone into the mist.

The host was large, as a queen’s host must be, but not sprawling. Dany led the way herself, urging the silver onwards with a light kick of her heels and the squeeze of her thighs, her two knights flanking. Their horses were barded in the pale white silk of the Kingsguard, crinet and chamfron both. Ser Barristan himself carried the three-headed dragon banner of House Targaryen, scarlet against an inky field.

Further back came Daario Naharis’s Stormcrows and Brown Ben’s Second Sons; each captain had brought half his men out with him, leaving the remainder back in King’s Landing with their seconds. The Unsullied marched rank and file, separating the companies of sellswords, though Grey Worm lingered in the city. Then a complement of City Watch men in their golden cloaks and ringmail, surrounding the courtiers, among whom she counted the red priests Moqorro and Benerro, Grand Maester Gormon, Marwyn the Mage, Aurane Waters and some others.

Then there was a gap of a few hundred yards, behind which the Dothraki made their advance across the plain. There were only about a thousand of them altogether, but they churned up the grass so completely that they left the trail of ten thousand across the mossy land. Their noise was the thunder which beat in Dany’s ears, but as she crossed the ridge their sound was joined by another. Drums, she thought. And trumpets too.
They were not playing any particular song, but they were loud, so loud that their utter lack of harmony could almost be forgiven. “They sound like monkeys,” muttered Ser Jorah.

“Aye.” Ser Barristan frowned. “Mummer’s monkeys, every one of them.”

Dany remembered Quaithe’s warning only too well. Soon you will dance with mummers. They will wrap you in perfumed silks and drag you down, still hiding behind their masks and cowls and painted faces. And you must sing a song for them. And then there was what the Undying had said, about aummer’s dragon. Dany did not understand that, though. Hers were the only three dragons in the world, and none of them were false. They are as true as the sacrifice that birthed them into the world.

The loud hammering of hooves turned her head as Daario Naharis reined up atop the ridge in a cloud of mud and dust. He took one look over the edge, turned back grinning, and said, “And I thought it was going to be an intimate ceremony.”

Dany saw Ser Jorah’s hand curling around the hilt of his longsword. “Then you were wrong, Naharis.”

“Oh, am I? It looks to be a large gathering, indeed, but large gatherings can be so intimate, Jorah the Andal. There’s never any privacy at small gatherings.” Dany could have sworn that he winked at her then.

“Yes,” she said, “well, the size of the garrison cannot be denied. By my count, that is fifty thousand.” She pointed into the valley below, tents and tents and tents, canvasses of yellow and green and orange and everything in between.

Ser Barristan counted under his breath. “I’d say more than that, Your Grace.”

Dany was starting to wish she’d brought more men down from the city, if only to not seem so pitiful in the face of Aegon’s encamped host. But we cannot turn back now.

“The numbers do not matter to us. Only to our enemies.”

“And may they pale in the face of them,” Ser Barristan said.

It was time. “Ser Jorah,” Dany said, “take my banner and ride ahead.” Obediently, the knight took the standard from Ser Barristan, hoisted it high, and with a single jerk of the reins, continued down the hill. Daario Naharis lingered a moment, sneaking Dany a sly grin. “You may go too, captain,” she said uneasily.

“As it please my queen.” He went.

The silver made to follow him, but Dany hushed her and waited at the crest of the hill with Ser Barristan as the first of her courtiers made their way down. She nodded into the valley. “How many, then, do you think?”

“Seventy, eighty thousand.” The old knight always looked wary, but now more than usual. “Though it is impossible to say. The Golden Company have put their encampment in neat lines, but I cannot say the same for any of the others.” Dornish tents and Reachmen’s pavilions mingled in the centre of the canvas city. They had felled the kingswood to throw up wooden palisades, and trenches were dug in fits and starts, here and there and everywhere. Aegon’s army did not lack for siege engines and weaponry, either; Harry Strickland had his elephants, for a start, but Dany saw trebuchets and siege towers and ballistae too. “They remind me of the Yunkish army,” she said. “Camped outside their city.”
“That battle was won without undue bloodshed,” said Ser Barristan, “and anyhow… there is no battle to be fought, not here.”

I hope not, thought Dany, but the Iron Throne cannot be shared, and if what you have told me is true, Aegon and his allies do not mean to share it. And she knew that Ser Barristan Selmy was thinking the same thing.

By now the red priests had joined them on the ridge.

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**Scene 5 - Jaime Lannister vs. Fatherhood (vaguely canon)**

Originally, this was the start of Jaime VII, "In Vino Veritas,” but I thought it was unnecessary - the sort of stuff that could be worked out by implication, instead of having to be directly stated. However, this leads into Tommen's supper with Cersei, depicted in Scene 6.

The second part of this scene is more of Jaime and Tommen sparring, or at least preparations for that. Interestingly, though, it takes place at Highgarden instead of at Casterly Rock, for reasons of a different storyline. Steffon Marbrand is Jaime's squire at this point in time.

**JAIME**

King Tommen raised his pen; dipped, signed, and sealed. Dipped, signed and sealed. And again. It was like waiting for his father, Jaime thought. *I waited for him, I waited for my sister, and now I am waiting on my son. I am only a servant, their servant, now and always. “Lord Commander.” At last. “I did not hear you come in.”*

“I thought we might talk, Your Grace.”

“Did my mother send you?” The boy’s voice had too much skepticism for one of his young age. “You don’t have to do everything she says, you know. And besides, you’re the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, not the Queensguard.”

“The Kingsguard is sworn to protect the royal family, Your Grace. Say what you will about your mother, but she is a part of that.”

Tommens set down the pen, furrowing his brows. “And nothing more.”

“Her Grace is the Queen Regent—”

“I’m nearly a man grown,” said Tommen crossly. “I don’t need a Regent. I don’t want one.”

“As you say, Your Grace. Though I must ask: why are you telling me?”

The king did not answer. Instead he resumed the shuffling of his papers. Jaime had to wait for him to finish. “What does she want?”

He cleared his throat. “Her Grace was wondering if you would be willing to sup with her tonight. In her chambers. You may bring Lady Eleya, and I will be in attendance. And she has invited Princess Shireen, too.”

“Why?”
“I… I believe she wants to apologise.” Jaime had trouble believing that himself, but it was what Cersei had told him to say. “For her rude dismissal of you and your concerns yesternight.”

“I’ve already signed the agreements.” Tommen indicated his table. “She won’t make me change my mind, you know.”

“I know. But she never intended to say everything that she did. It was… hasty, she says. She just wants to make amends. And so do you, I think.”

The last part was a risky addition, but it appeared to have paid off. “I don’t hate her. And I don’t want her to go away. I… I’ll see what she has to say. Though I think Lady Margaery might want—”

“Lady Margaery won’t be leaving for another two days. You’ll have plenty of time to sup with her. And… if I may be so bold, Your Grace, the queen indicated that she means to allow your marriage with Lady Eleyna, if you still wish it. As amends.”

“As amends.” Tommen chewed on it. “Very well. I’ll see you tonight, then.” He stretched his arms tiredly.

Jaime frowned. “How long have you been up drafting these?”

“All night. Margaery comes and helps, sometimes. But there’s just so much of it. I thought it would just be stamping and signing, but I have to read everything through, and read it all again to make sure, and—”

“You should rest.”

“I have to finish it all sometime. There isn’t any reason to delay.”

“All the same, there may be a meeting of the small council tonight. You wouldn’t want to be too tired for that. You look quite pale, if you will forgive me saying so. Maybe you should go outside. Take a walk.”

“Will you spar with me, ser?”

Jaime waved his golden hand. “I am not what I used to be.”

“You used to be something, though. Mother always said you were the best swordsman in the Seven Kingdoms. And even Father admitted that you were very good.”

“Maybe some other time.” Jaime desperately wanted to, in fact. Wasn’t that something that fathers did with their sons, to teach them the way of the world? Strangely, he thought of Ned Stark. Did Stark teach the Young Wolf how to wield his first sword? How to fight his first battles? How to lead men into war? He glanced back at Tommen. I could do that. He is still young enough. I could be a father to him, if I was willing to tear him apart. He went through the door without looking back.

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Steffon had brought him salt beef, hard yellow cheese, and some grapes that were so bloated they looked like Joffrey’s face at his wedding feast. Jaime wolfed them down quickly and took a cup of wine, then set to continuing the Lord Commander’s report that Arys Oakheart had barely started. Since Aegon’s Conquest, one of the White Swords was supposed to chronicle the deeds of the Kingsguard, both good and bad, as they happened.

Usually this task fell to the most literate of the knights – Jonothor Darry and Barristan Selmy had
both written entries, but never the White Bull - not necessarily the Lord Commander, but Jaime did
not trust any of his fellows to write the truth. His writing was awful, and it would spoil the neatness
of the records entirely, but the Book of Records was in King’s Landing, so Jaime had nothing to live
up to. If he willed it, he could even set a precedent of the chronicles being written in a barely legible
scrawl. And why not? Poor chronicles for poorer brothers. It almost seemed like justice, but then
Jaime remembered that justice was something made up by children, idiots, and Ned Stark. He
wondered how Ser Barristan had chronicled his slaying of Aerys. With impeccable neatness, no
doubt.

That was more than could be said for the killing of the king. The steps of the Iron Throne had been
smeared with blood and guts and shit by the time the Kingslayer had finished his grisly work.

Servanne the realm is bloody work, Varys had once told him, with a wink that suggested he knew
exactly what Jaime was thinking. He wondered what had become of the eunuch since he had left
King’s Landing, then found himself wishing that he’d found time to shove a sword through Lord
Varys’s back as well. And Aegon as well. I might have done well to kill them both as they ran.
Kingslayer, eunuch-killer, child-murderer. That didn’t have the same ring to it, though.

Half an hour later, Jaime was finishing the painstakingly dull work when the door opened again. He
 glanced up, expecting Steffon, “Have you done as I – oh, Your Grace.”

Tommen stood alone in the doorway. He wore a red training aketon with two Lannister lions on the
breast and breeches. His face was flushed and his hair clung to his forehead. “Ser Jaime,” he said
heavily.

“My Grace,” Jaime said again. Since the king did not seem willing to explain himself, he took the
initiative. “Can I help you?” He put his pen down and sat back in his chair, half-expecting an angry
tirade.

“Are you busy?” asked Tommen. “I was hoping… hoping that we could spar, mayhaps?”

That did take Jaime aback. He had not sparred properly since he and Addam had parted ways at
Casterly Rock, and fighting the rest of the Kingsguard was a redundant exercise. It would not do to
show how deficient he had become with his left hand, and Jaime saw no point in a bout that he
would either definitely win or definitely lose. “I am a one-handed knight, Your Grace. I’d fight you,
but I fear that you’d win.”

“You’re a one-handed knight, yes,” said Tommen, “but before that, you were one of the greatest
knights in the Seven Kingdoms. I remember seeing you in the tourney of the Hand, back in King’s
Landing, during the melee. You knocked Ser Balon out, and both of the Redwynes, even though
they both went for you at the same time, and Ser Andar Royce—”

“And then Thoros of Myr cut me down with his stupid flaming sword, me and forty others. I am no
great knight, Your Grace.”

“But you were.” Tommen was insistent. “Even if I somehow beat you, there are things you can teach
me still, techniques and… I don’t know.” He almost seemed to be pleading, and there was no trace
of anger in his eyes from the days leading up to the siege.

“I sent Steffon back to his chambers; I can return him to—”

“I’ve fought Steffon a hundred times,” the king said. “He tends to win.”

Jaime sighed. “Fine.” With a bit of luck, I’ll knock him back down a peg or two. The gods know he
He walked with Tommen to the armoury and switched his white plate for white leather, then picked up blunted tourney swords and their padding. The boy seemed dismayed by that. *It’s not you whose safety I fear for, Your Grace.* When they were ready, Jaime led the way out into the vast yard, and found a space away from prying eyes in the shadow of an abandoned bastion tower. He would sooner that others were not privy to the Kingslayer’s defeat.

“Ready?” Jaime raised his own sword in salute. As always, the weight was awkward in his left hand. He found himself missing his right hand – but his golden hand, oddly, not his flesh one. It was a bloody inconvenience to do anything with, but they’d had some good times together, and it was infinitely preferable to the stump he’d been lugging around for days. Perhaps he’d see if one of the Highgarden smiths had some metal to work with.

His considerations stopped there, though, because Tommen was coming at him, advancing slowly and cautiously, then circling in a circle. He was not a huge target, but not a small one either; in fact, he was average-sized in almost every regard. Yet he left his flank open on one side, and Jaime spotted an opening. He made an experimental thrust, just to see how his foe would react. Tommen stepped aside and beat at Jaime’s blade, then feinted and went for the attack.

Jaime barely got his own sword up in time. The boy was on him, one, two, three, cutting left, then right, then right again, and his fourth attack, a savage downcut, sent him to one knee.

The Kingslayer had gone to his knees before, though. He deftly raised his blade to parry… and found it knocked clean out of his hands, with Tommen leaning over him, sword at his throat. He made a big, dumb grin, and Jaime found himself wanting his golden hand again, if only to smack it off the brat’s face. He accepted an arm up, and picked up his fallen sword.

“I did warn you, Your Grace. A one-handed man is no knight.”

“You were going easy,” Tommen said, disappointed. “You shouldn’t do that; I’m not eight.”

Jaime tossed the sword in his hand. “No,” he said, “you’re not.” And he attacked. The blade swathed through the air, but never found its mark, only the edge of Tommen’s sword. The boy twisted him around in a surprisingly skilful parry, then went for another lunge. Jaime blocked him this time, and stepped back, maintaining his distance.

For a moment they watched each other, circling. There was a hunger in the boy’s eyes, something that Jaime thought was strange given Tommen’s normally calm temperament. Then they turned to stone, and he came forwards swinging.

Jaime beat him back two paces, then found himself losing the ground he had gained. Tommen’s attack was relentless, he was a good swordsman, almost as good as Jaime had been at his age, but a lack of practice in his early years had left him with a few uncorrected weaknesses. He let Tommen press him back a little further, then brought his blade up suddenly and smashed the base into his foe’s shield arm, causing him to stagger. Jaime caught the opportunity and beat him down with three swift blows, almost losing the sword on the third, but it was enough.

“There’s no blade, it is a part of you, and in battle the sword must be you, and you must be it. I knocked your shield arm there, and that surprised you. You’re fast, but you don’t have the strength yet.”
Instead of sending him a letter, Ty Frey rides directly to Tommen, but instead encounters the small council and is forced to make his report to them. Ultimately this scene never made it in because it would necessitate Ty to travel to Casterly Rock, then back to Harrenhal to help rescue Myrcella, and then back across to the Rock, bringing Myrcella with him. Of course, if I’d had Ty stay with Davos and Shireen (he was Davos’s squire in Davos IV, “Kingsblood”), this scene might have been possible in some way. It would have been nice to reunite Tommen with an old friend from A Coat of Gold; one of the problems I had with TSK is how isolated the Casterly Rock plot was, even if it was my favourite storyline.

TOMMEN

“I am Queen Regent,” Cersei stated boldly. “The Hand of the King has agreed to it, and the small council.” She pointed at Lord Randyll Tarly.

“Well, then. In that case, the Hand of the King is sacked.” The words were out of his mouth before he could think on them. “Sacked. Ty, come with me. The rest of you, get out of my council chamber.” He turned on his heel and left them, Ty following. “Tell me everything,” the king said as they headed down the stairs.

And so he did. Ty told him about how the wedding had seemingly been a success, but things had gone wrong when Lord Robert Arryn succumbed to poisoning the night before they were due to leave for the Vale. About how Myrcella had talked to him beforehand about how she might be threatened in the Vale, and how he had set out for Casterly Rock the same day he’d heard the news, and had nearly ridden his horse to death getting there. “You did well,” said Tommen. “Though I wish you had come straight to me.”

“I… I thought they would tell you. The man on the gate said he would tell you.”

*Then the man on the gate lied. Like everyone else.*

In his solar, Tommen sat Ty at the table and poured hippocras for them both. “I want you to go back, Ty,” he said, when his friend had taken a sip. “I think you do, too.”

“My mother’s still at Darry. If I don’t return, they might…”

“Fair enough. I want you to do the same. I can’t send an army, but I can send you to look out for Myrcella. I can’t send an army.” Tommen repeated it to himself to quell any doubts.

Ty nodded. “How are things with you? Here at the Rock?”

“I don’t know. Mother is being… well, you saw it tonight. I… I want to stop the war. With Stannis.” He didn’t know why he blurted it out then, but he did. “But I don’t know if I can. Or if I should.”

Ty chewed his lip. His eyes never left Tommen’s. And in that moment, he understood why a king should never be entirely without friends. Never entirely without honesty. “I was at the Tumblestone, the night when they all did,” said Ty. “I was there when they killed aunt Genna, and Lord Tywin, and all the rest. It was… murder. They caught me as I was running for the river. Knocked me down and hit me, with their hands, their swords, their… and they might have done more. They were trying to… to pull down my… my clothes… when someone else caught their eye instead. I was lucky that
Brynden Blackfish found me, of all people. He helped me up, clapped me in chains. I thought he was my saviour, but when I tried to thank him he gave me such a look full of hatred that I don’t know how he didn’t kill me then and there. Because… because…”

“Because we’d done the same to them at the Red Wedding,” Tommen finished emptily. He thought of Robb Stark. Robb, putting him and Bran and their stick swords to shame. Robb, grinning and laughing with his friends at jokes they could not understand. Robb defeating Joffrey in bout after bout of swords and barely able to keep himself from grinning at the prince’s expense. Did Robb ever want to make peace? And would Robb have wanted this war to go on for as long as it did?

Tommen looked around the room. The Lives of Four Kings was still open on his desk. I am not Daeron the Good, he decided, nor Daeron the Young Dragon, nor Baelor the Blessed, nor Aegon the Unworthy. Not Robert or Stannis or Mad King Aerys. I don’t know what I am, but I am a king, and I must do something.

“Willem,” he called to his squire outside the door. “Go and wake Lady Margaery, Ser Loras and Prince Quentyn. Then Rollam Westerling, Robert Crakehall and Lew Piper. And Addam Marbrand, Damion Lannister, and my uncle Kevan, if he will come. And Princess Shireen and Ser Davos,” he added as an afterthought. “Send them here. Bring food and wine.”

“Your Grace,” said Ty after his brother was gone. “What are you doing?”

“Ruling,” Tommen said. “I am finally ruling.” It seemed so easy now. So impossibly easy.

They came in one by one, or in pairs; the Tyrells and Prince Quentyn arrived as a trio and milled about the room, sharing pleasantries with the others he had invited. King Tommen sat beneath the dais, where everyone could see him. Princess Shireen and her companion Davos Seaworth were the last to arrive; from their clothes, they had not slept that night.

Tommen took a deep breath. If I go through with this, I am turning against my own mother, he thought. But if I deny a chance for peace, then I am going against everything I believe in. “My lords, my ladies,” he said. During the lull in the conversation his voice carried much further than he had expected. “I… I have gathered you here today to talk. To talk about… about…” The word was stuck in his throat. “About peace.”

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Scene 7 - A Lannister for Supper

One of my favourite deleted scenes. During the chapter "In Vino Veritas," Jaime tells Tommen that he should have supper with Cersei to help them reconcile. The ensuing supper takes place on the night of Margaery's poisoning. Initially, this chapter was meant to be from Tommen's perspective, starting with the sparring session, then moving on to this supper, and then to Margaery's poisoning. Unfortunately, the dialogue between Tommen and Loras after Margaery's poisoning was so bad that it ruined any sort of drama the chapter had, and it felt like a horribly paced mess with no real through-line, as it required a jump from Tommen being angry at Cersei to a conciliatory mood (therefore making his anger pointless), and then back to anger (therefore undermining the impact of their reconciliation). Basically, his emotions were all over the place, and it didn't work as well as "Hide and Seek". Additionally, this chapter would have required a follow-up chapter from Jaime's POV to make sense, but Jaime would have to go over events that we had already described - essentially, it would be a 4000 word chapter arriving at a conclusion we could have seen a mile away.

That being said, I do enjoy this scene on it's own, but I don't view it as canonical. It's based to some extent off scenes from Game of Thrones episodes 209, 507, 602 and 604.
He dressed for the evening in a doublet of dark blue velvet, and tan breeches with a lion on his belt buckle. Willem Frey picked up the crown, but Tommen waved him off. “I don’t need that anymore,” he said. “Though I would not object to full armour.”

“It is only supper,” Eleyna said from the chair by the window. “I can’t say I blame her, Tommen. You are her only son, after all.”

_I may be her only child now, if Myrcella is dead because of me._ “She will try to make me go back on my word. You know that. She’ll try and make me marry someone else.”

“Maybe she is sorry for what she did—”

“Do you really believe that?”

A pause. “Yes. She loves you. If she did not, she would not be so fervently opposed to you marrying me. We’ve had her differences, I know, but I do respect her position.” She put a hand under his chin. “Look happy. It will only be a couple of hours, and then you are back here with me.”

“I… but what about you?”

“I’ll finish the ledgers for you. You know I’m good at sums. And Ser Pounce will keep me company.” The cat mewed in her arms. “Besides, he is as good a replacement for you as any. You both mewl when I kiss you.”

Willem Frey coughed. “Should I… uh… go, Your Grace?”

“My lord.”

“What?”

“You can call me my lord. I’m not a king anymore.” The letters were signed and put away, and on the morrow the Tyrells would start out for King’s Landing with the news. And Lord Tommen Lannister would be alone, and free to do as he liked.

Ser Jaime led him to the Queen Regent’s chambers. “Have you found anyone new for the Kingsguard?” Tommen asked as they walked.

“No one good enough,” said his uncle. “I may have to start making some compromises.”

Outside his mother’s chambers, Ser Jaime stopped him again. “You will have to be gentle with her,” he said to Tommen. “The past few days have not been easy on her.”

_They have not been easy on any of us._ But he nodded quietly, and went inside.

Queen Cersei was waiting for him in her solar, rather than in her dining room. She went and kissed his cheeks. “You look very handsome tonight,” she said. “Lady Eleyna should count herself lucky, you know.”

“Oh. You look very lovely too, Mother.” It was true. Sometimes, in the midst of everything, Tommen forgot how beautiful his mother actually was. Her golden tresses were newly combed and
her green eyes were smiling at him. All his earliest memories were of Mother’s smiles. He felt his heart swell, and something compelled him to step back. “Mother,” he said. “I know that we’ve argued a lot recently. About Shireen and Margaery and Eleyna and nearly everything… I just… I just want to say that I’m sorry. And that I love you.”

Mother brought him back into her arms. Tommen felt seven all over again. “I don’t want you to ever doubt that I love you, too,” she said. “My sweet boy. Joffrey was always fiercer, I know that… and Myrcella, she was the cleverest—”

Was, Tommen noted, not is.

“But you are my sweet son. The best of me and the best of your father. I cannot change that.” She led him to the table. “I had them cook your favourites.” Roast capon with mulberries, chicken-and-leek pie, stuffed butter squash, plum pudding, poached pears.

For the first few minutes they ate in contented near-silence. Mother asked him trivialities: how his day had been, how his swordwork was coming along, how his studies were going. “Maester Creylen has been teaching me about debasement of coinage.”

“Gold and silver are fallible,” said Mother. “There are better ways to win a man’s allegiance. Make him feel valued, and he will worship you even if it costs you nothing at all. Take Mace Tyrell, for example. My lord father won his loyalty easily with a seat on the small council. That was enough to placate him.”

And I won his loyalty back by convincing him that I had more authority than Lord Tywin. And Uncle Tyrion kept his head, despite what everyone else wanted. How long have Mother and I been at odds? Did she mean what she said? Did I?

He had to find out. “You mentioned Eleyna,” Tommen said. “I… I suppose you might have heard the whispers?”

“You are almost a man. It is nothing unexpected. I trust you made certain that she was willing?”

“I… yes.”

“Good. Believe me: there is nothing worse in the world for a woman than to be forced by a man she does not love. And does she love you in return?”

“Yes.” He decided to test the waters. “But… she is a Westerling, even then. They… if I married someone else, like Lord Tarly’s daughter—”

“Love comes only very infrequently, Tommen. And even then, it is often inexplicable. Sometimes we let those opportunities pass us by… but then the choices we might have made haunt us for all our lives… suppose that Lady Eleyna married someone else, and one day you had to execute her husband for the good of the realm. But something might hold you back, even years and decades afterwards. My father married his own cousin because he loved her. And I…” She paused. “I would sooner have married Prince Rhaegar than your royal father. I don’t regret what happened, not now, but… I suppose I never really forgave Robert.

“If you love her, then you should marry. Oh, Lord Tarly will be displeased about it, but I never made any formal offers of betrothal, and I am certain he will understand. We will have to sup together sometime before you marry, though. The three of us, and your uncle Jaime.”

“I’d like that.”
“I have spoken with Lady Eleyna, before. She has a good heart. And good hips, which might be more important.” The last was said with a smile. “I trust someone has taught you about all that?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She sipped her wine. “I… you probably don’t remember, but I told you a story once, about a mother lion and her cub.” A pause. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I remember,” Tommen said. “The little cub was frightened. His mother said, ‘you are a lion, my son. You mustn’t be afraid.’” He nodded. “I was scared during the Battle of Lannisport. But then I remembered what you said. I was still scared, but…”

“Less scared than you might have been.”

“Yes.”

“Allow me to give you another lesson: I want you to know that nothing in this world matches a mother’s love. I want you to know that everything I have ever done, everything I do… it is for you, and always for you.” Her eyes hardened, and she squeezed her hands over his. “Don’t you ever forget that.”

The way she said it made him think that he never would. It was so entrancing that he began to feel uncomfortable. “Have you had any word back from Ser Lyle yet?” Strongboar had gone off in search of the ironborn raiders. Tommen wondered if they would meet Ser Davos Seaworth and Princess Shireen on the way. There was a letter from Shireen on his desk, written from a holdfast on the way to Ashemark. He would read it when he returned to his chambers.

“Nothing yet. But you need not be overly concerned.”

“If they are ironborn raiders like he said, I’ll have to fight them, won’t I?” It did not matter whether he was a king or not. The lord of Casterly Rock had a duty to defend his lands.

“Yes. You will, but you will have your ships to support you. Lord Farman tells me that three of them are nearly done. Not what I had been hoping for, but they will suffice, I hope. You’ll have to be brave, but I know you can do that.”

“Yes,” Tommen agreed. “I can.” *I was brave when I made my decision*, he thought. *That was brave.* “And I will. But I’ll do it as the lord of Casterly Rock, not as king.”

Mother stared down into her wine cup for some time. “It is getting late, my little lion,” she said. “I think you should go up to bed, now.”

“Yes, I should.” Tommen wished her goodnight, then turned and retreated back down the stairs, across the snowy yard, to his own chambers.

Eleyna sat waiting for him with Ser Pounce across her knees, quietly whimpering as she brushed his fur. “How was it?” she asked him.

Tommens sat on the chair beside her. “She seemed… understanding. But I don’t know how much of it was real, and how much was… she says we can get married, if we’d like. But…”

“But?”

“…but I think she was just saying that to be polite. Or maybe I’m being too wary.”
“There’s no such thing as being *too* wary,” said Eleyna. “But it’s important that you’re forgiving, too.”

“I know. It’s just… sometimes it’s hard. I can forgive her for that, maybe… but not for everything.” *Not for what Joffrey did, and that she did nothing to stop it.* “Not yet.”

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**Scene 8 - Sansa's Big Moment (NOT canon)**

This scene is the final conversation between Sansa and Littlefinger before he is hanged. In this version, LF was captured at Harrenhal instead of escaping and thrown in a cell. In a scene that is very heavily based off Sansa's conversation with Ramsay at the end of episode 609, "Battle of the Bastards", she tells him that his plans have failed. I think this scene would work very well in the TV medium, and I expect to see something similar if Sansa manages to overthrow Littlefinger during Season 7. However, in TSK, I had always planned for LF to meet his ends at the hand of Lady Stoneheart - poetic justice, you might say - so this had to be cut. So while this is a very empowering moment for Sansa, it is, sadly, not canon.

**SANSA**

“Have a care, my lady,” warned Lord Nestor. “Baelish is as dangerous as ever.”

“He is a man doomed to die. I doubt he will pose any threat.” With that she turned and went down the stairs. Brienne followed as far as the wooden door of the cell. Sansa turned the iron ring and pushed her way inside.

Lord Petyr was in the windowseat. He was still wearing all his lordly finery, as if that would allow him to cheat death somehow. “Sansa,” he said as she came in. “Sweet Sansa. It is so good of you to visit me on my last night in this world. Is there anything you would have of me, or are you just here to talk?”

“I came to hear you confess,” Sansa said.

“Is Lord Royce hanging outside, perchance? Ready to pounce on me should I confess and subject me to some even more horrific form of execution? Burning, mayhaps?”

“No. You will be hanged.”

“Hanged?” Petyr’s eyes widened a little. “I was told it was to be a beheading. Bronze Yohn promised me a good, quick, clean death.”

“He did not lie. He intended to give you a clean death. But someone changed his mind.”

“Learning from the best, eh, Sansa?” Petyr gave a hoarse little laugh. “But it is not the advice I would have given. I’d sooner give my foes a quick death and have it done with… hmm…”
tastefully.”

“I am not you. I never have been.”

Petyr sagged back into his seat. [REDACTED]

“What did you want from me?” She already knew, but she wanted to hear him say it.

Petyr’s face contorted into a snarl. “You know what I want, Sansa. And only the manacles that keep me chained to this wall are stopping me from getting it. I want you. I want to bite down on your breasts and pin you to the floor and feel you struggling beneath me. I want to spill my seed inside you, whether you want it or not. I want you, and mark my words, Sansa, I will have you. I am part of you, don’t you remember? All those kisses Alayne had from her father. The squeeze of the breast, the kiss on your cheek. I have put every piece in your life in motion. I killed your father. I made you what you are, and every action you take now will be done in memory of me. You are as much Sansa Baelish as you are Sansa Stark. [REDACTED] I have sacked the Vale and torn the Riverlands to shreds. I have turned these Seven Kingdoms to ashes, and the wars do not end here, oh no. Do you think Cersei Lannister will spare you after you imprisoned her niece? Do you think Daenerys Targaryen will let you go unscathed after she burns Aegon and all his armies? Do you think your precious father will just come back to life? Do you think you can ever forget me?”

“Oh, I will,” said Sansa. “Because I outsmarted you, Lord Petyr. Do you think it was merely chance that Sandor Clegane spoke up against you, that Myrcella called him to stand witness, that Robert was poisoned in his first place?”

“You did that—?”

“Oh, maybe I learned something from you. But I matured it on my own. I am Sansa Stark of Winterfell. And as for you, well... your words will disappear. Your house will disappear. Your name will disappear. All memory of you will disappear.” Then there was nothing more to be said. Sansa turned around and left him kneeling there in dark.

Nestor Royce was waiting for her at the top of the stairs. “Will you be staying for the trial, my lady?” he asked.

It was a tempting thought. But as much as she wanted to see justice done, there was something else she wanted more. “I am assured that you will do the right thing,” said Lady Sansa Stark. “But for myself, I am only going to consider the road ahead.”

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**Scene 9 - Melisandre arrives at the Wall (vaguely canon)**

Melisandre will have more POV chapters during THE HOUR OF THE NIGHTINGALE, but she was supposed to have another one during THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, or possibly two. You’ll recall that there was a long period between "The Red Woman" and "The Old Gods and the New" during which we never saw Melisandre. An Arya chapter implies that she visited the Brotherhood, meeting Thorsos of Myr and possibly Lady Stoneheart. Given that the Hound was also sent away to "hunt down outlaws" by Sansa during this period, it's possible that Mel could have come across Sandor Clegane at some point. Another idea was that she would encounter Brienne - in this version of the story, Brienne travels to White Harbor at one point.

Anyhow, this chapter shows Mel arriving at the Wall. You'll recognise some of the dialogue as being
from Jon X, "Kissed by Fire". Personally, I think the dialogue is a bit choppy, with some slightly cringey humour, but I left it in for you to look at. Samwell Tarly also appears very briefly at the end of this scene - until late in the plotting process, Sam was due to arrive back at the Wall before Melisandre, but I think it made more sense the other way round.

**MELISANDRE**

Melisandre saw the signal fires of Castle Black from a mile out. *Lord Snow has kept a nightfire burning*, Melisandre thought, relieved. *In that, at least, he is no fool*. The night must be kept at bay, lest the darkness descend and drown them all.

“The crow castle makes for a pretty sight,” said the big wildling called Tormund who’d invited himself to be her travelling companion, “less so the crows themselves.”

“And Lord Snow even less.”

“Oh, no… He’s a pretty sight, I’ll grant him that. Har! Half the girls are swooning over him ever since we got south; with that curly hair and that dark brooding look they always like. His member’s smaller for sure, though. Half the size o’mine, or less.”

“You’re a married man, though, I presume?”

“Oh, aye. Doanna’s me woman, not like any of the others I’ve met. Save for that bear, mayhaps. Back in those days, she was a real terror, an’ vicious. Now she makes soups an’ stews instead of bloody battle, and hats for the little children.”

Melisandre nodded politely. “In Asshai across the sea, many of the crones were great warriors once.” The southron lords of the Seven Kingdoms had a Crone and a Warrior, but Melisandre knew that those seven were but one, and all were named R’hllor, the Lord of Light. *My lamp and my light, my love and my truth.*

Tormund was still speaking. “There’s been talk that Lord Snow means to take a bedwarmer, but mark me words, the boy’s too damn honourable. I tell you, lady, that new law o’ his—”

“What new law?”

“There were some big ceremony about it yestermorn,” said the wildling, “making it so the crows can take a woman to bed as they please, to keep their spirits up, Lord Snow says.”

That does not bode well. There are always old fools who despise any change in traditions. “I would urge him to be wary. Men are afraid of change.”

Tormund grinned atop his garron. “Not this change.”

They were well clear of Mole’s Town now, and the lights of Castle Black bloomed more clearly. Torches and braziers burned in windows and along the wallwalks, glinting off the spiked metal caps of sentries swaddled in black. A stone wall with a narrow walk linked the towers and clustered buildings, with a gatehouse across the kingsroad. Makeshift cranes and crooked wooden scaffolds spoke of a yet-incompleted construction. “This was not here when I left,” Melisandre said.
“Lord Snow has been busy,” admitted Tormund. “He put Wun Wun and his giants to helping with these watchtowers and rebuilding the old towers. Course, Wun Wun didn’t do it for him, but ‘cos we promised him a barrel of wine for every hour’s work. Free folk, crows, Northmen, drunken giants, what’s not to love, lady?”

The things that lie on the other side of this Wall. Melisandre found her eyes moving involuntarily upwards, to where the Wall stood stark and unmoving against the night sky, moonlight and shadows flickering across the ice.

“Hark!” called down a voice from above the gate, “who goes there?”

“Tormund Giantsbane, you fool boy! Now open the bloody gate, and be quick about it!”

The guardsmen hastened to obey. Tormund turned to smirk at Melisandre. “Most of these lot never learn a thing. They’re scared of me, when they should be scared o’ what lies on the far side of the Wall, if anything.”

“And you, Tormund Giantsbane? Do you fear them?”

“Now, I—” The wildling had meant to speak with bluster, but he stopped himself. “If you’d seen them, you’d understand, woman.”

“Oh, but I do.” Melisandre urged her horse forward, through the gates and into Castle Black’s snow-dusted courtyard. “For all men fear the dark. And so the light must never be allowed to go out.” Her eyes flashed with fire.

Tormund sat watching her from atop his horse, his lips pressed tightly together. “They’ll fetch Lord Snow for you,” he said, jerking a thumb in the direction of the men up on the wallwalk. “Fare you well, woman.”

As she watched him go, Melisandre became curiously aware of a presence close by her. The wolf, she thought, turning slowly. Ghost, he calls it.

The wolf stalked towards her, two bright red eyes glowing like hot coals, hackles rising in the wind. His jaws came together in an angry, soundless snarl. You are no foe of mine, the red priestess told the beast, stretching out a hand towards his muzzle. Steam from the wolf’s breath misted in the cold black air. You go, now, serve your master, serve yourself. Serve the Lord.

Ghost stared at her a moment longer, then slunk back into the night, a pale shadow among the dark, and was gone. “You came perilous close there, my lady,” said a voice from the steps behind her, “he’s known to bite.”

“But not without reason. He is cautious… as cautious as the boy who raised him.”

“I am no boy,” said Jon Snow, “and Ghost is not some meek pet to be treated as such. He is a wolf, a wild animal with a mind of his own.”

Save for when you dream of him. Castle Black’s Lord Commander had clearly been woken from sleep, his hair tousled and scraggily, his boots hurriedly and poorly laced, his belt hanging half-loose. Were you dreaming of him just now, Lord Snow? Were his thoughts yours, and yours his, one heart, one flesh, one soul? “My lord.” She mounted the steps slowly, crunching snow underfoot.

The boy was inexperienced in hiding his suspicion of her. “I had not thought to see you again at Castle Black,” he said flintily.

“Nor had I, Lord Snow. I beg pardon for my brusqueness, but might we get inside and out of this
chill?” She was not fond of this standoffishness with which he had greeted her. “We would both be so much the better for it.” That was a lie; Melisandre scarcely felt the cold. All the same, she would be glad to get out of this flurry that was threatening to become a blizzard.

With a barely perceptible nod, Lord Snow turned and led her up the steps and along the walk to his chambers behind the armory. “I thought you would have moved into the King’s Tower,” Melisandre said as they walked.

“The King’s Tower is occupied by a score of Northmen and their retinues,” he told her, “the lords Umber, Karstark, Harclay and Wull, Flint and Mormont and Tallhart, among others.”

She wondered if he was making a point, listing his lord father’s bannermen. “Fine men all, I’m sure.”

Outside the door, Snow told his squire to mull some wine for them, and to bring whichever of his officers were awake at this late hour. “I must apologise for the state of my chambers, my lady. I have cleared Mormont’s damned raven out, thankfully, but it left something of a mess.”

Snow had been apologising for nothing, she saw; his chambers were no worse than any she’d known. Perhaps nervousness had led him to make such a statement, but it was impossible to read the emotions in his long grey face.

Melisandre moved at once to the hearth and sparked a fire in the grate, before returning to her seat behind Lord Snow’s desk. He watched her warily. “If I may ask, why have you come back to Castle Black? Did King Stannis send you…” For a moment, there was youthful hope in his voice, and she felt almost guilty for taking it away from him.

“I no longer concern myself with King Stannis’s wars,” she admitted. “The true war is here, at the Wall, though Stannis may be surprised to find that he is not safe from the Dark One’s servants in the west.”

“We had heard reports that Stannis is dead.”

“He is not dead.” Only doomed. “But neither is he is Azor Ahai.”

Lord Snow seemed oddly amused. “And the sword? Lightbringer?”

“A mummer’s trick, nothing more.”

“Maester Aemon noted that the sword produced light, as all the tales say, but no heat.”

“A wise man, and correct. I had hoped that the blade might ignite itself somehow, but the Lord never answered that prayer of mine.” But the fault was with Stannis, not with me; elsewise the flames would not have directed me to the Wall, and I would be wasted here.

“But why Castle Black?” Snow asked her. “Why not Volantis, or Qarth, or Asshai?”

“Do you want me gone so desperately?” she mocked him. “I have seen in the flames that this is the place where I need to be when the Long Night comes. And so here I am.” She glanced into the flames, as the kindling crackled quietly among the coals. “You may be interested to know that I visited your brother in my way up here.”

Once more a boyish gleam came into the lord commander’s eyes. “Bran?” Then his eyes hardened and became those of Lord Snow. “How did you… how was he?”

“Alive. Well. Happy, I suppose. The boy is far less morose than you, Lord Snow.” Though that is no
“Wyman Manderly is castellan in Winterfell,” Melisandre said, for want of something to fill the silence, “while your father’s man Hallis Mollen is captain of the guard. They have written a letter for you, as has your brother. The ravens will arrive soon, I am certain.”

Lord Snow acknowledged that with a bland nod. *He does not display his feelings easily, this lord commander.* He reminded her eerily of Stannis, and not in a good way. “Will you be wanting accomodations at the Wall, my lady?”

“If it please you. It has been a while since I last rested with a roof over my head; castles are seldom keen to welcome a priestess of R’hllor.”

“I can’t imagine why,” the boy commander said dryly. “The wildlings will not be keen to welcome you either. Most follow the old gods of the forest—”

“Fear not, Lord Snow. I will not burn your magic trees.” *As false as they are.*

“They have no love for the Lord of Light,” he warned her again.

“When the Others come, they – and you, I think – may sing a different song, *The fire that burns against the cold,* so say your vows. The Lord is of light, but also of fire.”

“If you provoke them—”

“They may try to kill me.” *And they would not be the first to try.* She remembered Ser Davos Seaworth, gazing down at the melted ruin of his charred sword.

Lord Snow’s eyes rose to meet hers, grey as the winter sky. In them Melisandre could see the flames of the hearth reflected, and the faint shadows within them. *Snow,* the kindling hissed, crackling with an ethereal voice. *Snow…* “You shall have rooms in the King’s Tower,” Snow said at last, “I cannot promise you guards of yet, but the knights Stannis gave us to help garrison the Wall remain at Icemark and Greyguard. I could have them recalled here, if it please you.”

A retinue of guardsmen would serve to keep her safe, and it would win her some sort of respect, perhaps, but men talked and men whispered and men spread rumours that were meant to be kept secret. “I would prefer it if you did not,” Melisandre said, “though some of them love the Lord more than their king, for certain, I doubt that this is true for all of them. And if they hear what I did to Selyse, they may have reason to lose their faith in me… and in the Lord…”

Snow frowned. “What did you do to Selyse?” He sounded like he did not really want to know.

“Burned her alive.” She saw no use in lying. “Not exactly what the Lord wanted of me, but it was either her or the princess Shireen, and I had made a promise that I intended to keep.” *Ser Davos Seaworth will be needed in the wars to come,* she knew; burning the girl alive would only have served to turn him against her. *And Shireen has king’s blood… when the time comes…*

“You burned her alive?” Lord Snow sounded completely bewildered, even though his face showed nothing. “That will win you no friends in Stannis’s camp.”

“I am not in Stannis’s camp,” Melisandre reminded him.

Snow pursed his lips, but his squire came through the door before he could reply, carrying a flagon of mulled wine and a tray with a loaf of bread, half a wheel of cheese and a bulb of roasted garlic. And with him came a fat boy swathed in so many furs that they threatened to swallow him whole.
Samwell Tarly, Melisandre remembered, the maester’s steward. “Edd’s on his way up to you, my lord,” he said, “Black Jack for the rangers, and Othell Yarwyck too.” Then his eyes focused on Melisandre, and it was as though he were noticing her for the first time. Perhaps he was. “Oh… oh, my lady. Sorry, my lady…”

“No matter.” She waved a hand. “You have not caused offence, Master Tarly.”
Chapter Notes

Author's Note (06/04/2017):

Hello, everybody. There will be a new chapter up tomorrow, an Arya chapter entitled "No One". But for now, I'd like to share some more of my deleted scenes, though this one isn't exactly deleted as much as it is adapted, and takes a different form.

The following is a script for 'Battle of the Bastards', not the TV show episode, but the script for the big battle that takes place north of the Wall and was adapted into the Jon chapter, 'Last of the Giants'. Originally this chapter was supposed to take place from several POVs, so this seemed to be an effective method of planning it, but eventually it turned out to be a mess, so I had to scale it back quite a bit and switch quite a few things around. But there are still parts which are recognisable as Jon VII, though obviously it takes a different medium.

Apologies for being a bit all-over-the-place with the formatting. Not entirely sure what I'm doing with (O.S.) and (V.O.) and everything, but hopefully its readable. There are probably a few spelling/grammatical mistakes in there too. I used Amazon Storywriter as my program for this. It's not exactly full-featured, but it's free, and that's all I need right now.

The following .pdf document contains FULL SPOILERS up to and including Chapter 80, 'Last of the Giants'. However, all events portrayed here should be considered non-canonical within the story.

The story continues...

**Knights of the Nightingale: Part Three of THE CHANGING OF SEASONS**

End Notes

Thanks for reading. Comments are, as always, very much appreciated, and please leave kudos if you enjoyed it. Don't forget to subscribe for reminders on updates.

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