Glory for Traitors

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Summary

AU. COMPLETE.

When the sword was ready to remove Ned Stark's head, someone stopped his execution and changed the entire course of the story all of us known. In a twist of fate, the Lord of Winterfell is allowed to live and goes to the Wall to swear his vows to the Night's Watch.

Meanwhile, while Sansa becomes Joffrey's queen, enemies start to stir at court. A conspiracy to place a crown upon the head of a ruler many had forgot or presumed dead. Blood is spilled, regicide is committed and fingers are pointed, but who is guilty... and who is not? The intrigues also reach the North, as Robb Stark and Arya Stark go against each other when a move is made that divide their family.

Across the Narrow Sea, Daenerys Targaryen seeks help to tame her dragons, just before Jon Snow - finally aware of his true parentage - arrives to the Dragon Queen court to tell her about the enemies rising Beyond the Wall.

In the end, all characters left alive converge in a great war that lights the truth of an ancient enemy, and that made them decide which path to take.

A fanfic that explores what would have happened if Ned Stark had survived, bringing to it twists, intrigue, drama and a lot of action.

Notes

Hello guys! :) Thank you for reading this. I'm looking forward to read your comments and
know if I should or no continue this fanfiction. It is the first time that I'm writing in English - I'm portuguese - and I'm a little nervous with what I have done with the Prologue. If you like it, I would really, really, really, appreciate your feedback. Thank you.
Prologue

PROLOGUE

“I am Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Hand of the King,” he said more loudly, his voice carrying across the plaza, “and I come before you to confess my treason in the sight of gods and men.”

All of his time at King’s Landing had come to this. He had tried but in the end had failed. And even now, hearing himself saying those words – a cost he had to pay to save his daughter’s life – he actually felt like a traitor.

He has betraying the realm by letting a bastard sit on the Iron Throne.

“I betrayed the faith of my king and the trust of my friend, Robert,” he lied. “I swore to defend and protect his children, yet before his blood was cold, I plotted to depose and murder his son and seize the throne for myself.” I failed you, my friend, he said to himself. “Let the High Septon and Baelor the Beloved and the Seven bear witness to the truth of what I say: Joffrey Baratheon is the one true heir to the Iron Throne, and by the grace of all the gods, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.”

The first stone came sailing out of the crowd. This is how they will remember me.

Blood, warm and slick, ran down his face from a deep gash across his forehead. More stones followed. One struck the goldcloak to his left. In the pulpit where the king stood beside his mother and Sansa, two of the kingsguard stepped to protect the royal family with their shields.

Only when the crowd calmed down did the High Septon knelt before Joffrey and his mother. Eddard didn’t look at the priest.

“As we sin, so do we suffer,” intoned the fat septon, in a deep swelling voice. “This man has confessed his crimes in the sight of gods and men, here in this holy place. The gods are just, yet Blessed Baelor taught us that they are also merciful. What shall be done with this traitor, Your Grace?”

A thousand voices were screaming.


His eyes darted off toward the pulpit. Not looking for the boy king, but for Sansa. There she was, smiling. She almost looked happy. As if she didn’t know that everyone she knew and trusted were slaughtered. Her septa included. Even her friend, Jeyne Poole, and her father Vayon, must be dead by now. No, she couldn’t have known that. She kept on smiling as if everything was perfect. And there was no sign of Arya. He refused to believe that his little wild girl, so much like Lyanna, had died in the bloodshed at the Tower of the Hand.

In his mind he kept imagining the girl lost in the city, running from the guards in red and gold, that little sword of her right at her waist.
When Joffrey waved to greet the crowd, Eddard did not resist and looked to the boy. The sight of Robert’s crown lying in Joffrey’s golden hair made him sick.

“My mother bids me Lord Eddard take the black, and Lady Sansa begged mercy for her father.” The bastard smiled. “But they have soft hearts of women. So long as I am your king, treason shall never go unpunished.” Screams started again. “Ser Ilyn, bring me his head!”

Even before he could understand what those words meant, Eddard sought Sansa in the chaos. The smile had disappeared on the girl’s lips. All the confidence was gone. Her childhood dreams crushed. Eddard could not hear her among the screams that filled the plaza but the movement of her lips was clear enough. Joffrey, please. Stop. Stop it! But the boy was not listening. With a dangerous glint in his eyes, the king was actually ignoring everyone.

The Queen was whispering something in his ear, speaking quickly, her brow furrowed with worry. Lord Varys was near too, a grave look on his face. At that moment, Eddard knew it was the end. *When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die*, had said the Queen to him. He should have known that keeping is life, as Varys had promised, was another lie.

Ser Ilyn approached with his boots gleaming dark. Ice, the valyrian greatsword that was in his family for generations, was at his hands. *They are beheading me with my own sword*, he realized. And that was not the most hurtful thought that crossed his mind at the moment: it was the fact that Ice would probably never reach the hands of the future Lord of Winterfell.

*Oh, Robb.* His heir, ravaging through the Riverlands, caught up in the mess started by the Lannisters. He only could hope that the boy would make peace with the Throne. Cat would advise him to do so, even if she wanted revenge more than anyone else. How could she support his decision to go to war? He was only fourteen years old. She would never allow him.

*They are still children, all of them.*

What would happen to Arya? Most likely the gold cloaks would find her. She would be confined to a cell next to Sansa and both of them used to negotiate peace with Robb. And what would the younger boys think? He almost could see the despair in Bran and Rickon’s eyes, believing their father was beheaded like a traitor. *And there is Jon, of course. He will never forgive me.* Since Varys had told him that the crown would allow him to take the black, he had found little consolation in that idea: at least he would see the boy. He could even tell him about his mother since Robert was now dead.

But not anymore. Eddard was going to die and take the truth to the grave.

So lost in his last thoughts, he didn’t noticed that the crowd had grew silent. Ser Ilyn was right next to him, the smoky blade of Ice gleaming at the sun. Gulping, he looked over his shoulder.

Something was happening in the pulpit.

The Queen was definitely not happy. Her blond hair was disheveled and she had an unusual glint in her eyes. *Fear.* Digging her nails into Joffrey’s arm, she kept whispering something to him. Varys was right behind her, more pale than usual. After listening, the king answered aggressively. For a second or two, Eddard thought that he might actually strike his mother with a slap. What would that look like at eyes of the city? But the Queen apparently knew how to control her son.

“Ser Ilyn, hold.” Cersei ordered, her eyes still locked in Joffrey’s. The executioner stirred up right in front of Eddard, ready to swing the sword. Someone in the crowd protested, yelling “Kill him and be done with it!”, but no one else encouraged that thought. All of them were still looking at Cersei
Lannister.

The queen made then a gesture to Lord Varys and the eunuch stepped up and showed something to
the king. A little bit of parchment. Whatever it said, it was enough to change Joffrey’s mind. With his
face contorted with anger, the king yelled for the entire plaza to hear.

“Ser Ilyn, your services will be not necessary after all. As my mother just reminded me, sometimes
showing mercy to a criminal is a worse punishment than death. And shedding blood so early in my
reign is not a good omen for the future.” The boy didn’t meant one word. His eyes fell on Eddard
one last time, full with something more than hate. Madness. “Someone take then traitor back to the
Blacks Cells. He is leaving for the Wall tomorrow.”

At that moment, Sansa fainted right beside de Queen, taken by all the emotions of the day. Sandor
Clegane, with his recent white cloak, caught her before she hit the ground.

By then, two guards had already grabbed a surprised Eddard Stark by the shoulders.

He had escaped death by a whisker.

Ned Stark waited in the dark.

He knew someone would come for him soon. Maybe Varys, again masked as Rugen the Gaoler.
Grand Maester Pycelle was also a possibility. The old man liked to poke his nose where he was not
needed. And even the wicked Littlefinger could make an appearance to gloat over him.

But who he really needed to see was Sansa before leaving to the North. The girl would soon be
living all alone in a den of lions. And she has to find Arya, he thought. He knew the girls couldn’t
stand each other lately but they were sisters. As long as they were at each other side, they would not
be alone. If Sansa’s marriage could not be prevented, than the girl would need someone strong
beside her. What better choice than a Stark who can actually use a sword? But she will not marry
that monster. A part of him still believed that the boy king would call off the wedding.

Later that day, when a guard brought him some bread and water, Ned realized for the first time how
lucky he was to be alive. He saw everything with different eyes now, as if he had in fact reborn. The
moldy bread tasted like one of Old Nan’s pies and the spoiled water better than any Dorne wine he
ever tried. He was alive, bound to go to the Wall, but alive. He had to believe that something waited
for him in the future. He could still make something of his life beside Jon and Benjen. Maybe in time
he could even receive leave from the Lord Commander to visit Winterfell for a night or two.

No, Castle Black will be my home soon. Not Winterfell, he remembered.

It would not be easy to adjust to that new life. Not that he was disturbed by the fact that he was no
longer Lord of Winterfell. In truth, he believed Robb would do a good work ruling the North. The
Umbers, the Karstarks, the Mormonts, the Boltons and all the other Houses would stand beside him.
Not to mention Catelyn and Maester Luwin’s, always ready to give him guidance. No, what was
bugging him was the vows he had to make to the Night’s Watch. Taking the black implied leaving
behind his family. How could he do that knowing that all of them were not so far from him?

But all of us are alive, he said to himself. That is all that matters.
A light flicked outside his cell, making him blink. Covering his eyes with his hand, Ned looked at the door as it opened. On the other side appeared a guard holding a torch and, right behind him, the Queen herself. The red dress she was wearing at Baelor’s had given way to a grey one. Still managing to maintain a regal look, Cersei Lannister was clutching a handkerchief under her nose to keep away the smell of piss and feces.

“Your Grace, pardoned me if I don’t bow.” He said, when she stopped right in front of him. He tugged the chains so they could rattle. “I’m not in a good place to do so.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Lord Stark.” She replied, looking around with disgust in her eyes. Ned smirked in the shadows. Why had she come down all the way from Maegor’s Holdfast? Why hadn’t she sent one of her lackeys?

“I suppose you know why I’m here.” She continued, as if reading his mind. Even from his place in the wet and soiled ground Eddard could feel the smell of roses coming from her. Clearly nervous, the guard stood in the corridor, holding the torch and waiting orders.

“I confess I don’t, Your Grace.” He insisted. “But now that you are here, I have a plea to make. You have to concede this last merciful act before I make my way to the North. Let me see my daughter.”

“So they have found Arya.

Even though Cersei was enjoying herself, she didn’t make him suffer for long.

“Your savage daughter was found at Flea Bottom this afternoon by one of Vary’s little birds. It seems the girl was with a man of the Night’s Watch. Yoren, I think he name was. Apparently the fool was trying to smuggle her out of the city with other men bound to go to the Wall. I suppose he would try to sell the girl to your wife as soon as he reached Riverrun. But the City Watch stopped him in time. The girl is safe and sound in the Red Keep and the man beheaded for treason only an hour ago.”

“It seems the king has already forgotten that nonsense about not shedding blood.

“How is Arya?” He managed to ask.

“Strong enough to kick one of my guards and attempt an escape.” She said, with more disdain than worry. “You have a true little wolf there, Lord Stark. I have to give you that.”

Yes, that sounds like Arya.

“A wolf that would do better in the North, don’t you agree?”

The chains rattled in the dark as Ned moved, lifting his head to look at the Queen. Was she being honest or just cruel?

He clenched his hands. How much could a man take?

“Yes, I agree.” He knew that the Queen wanted to hear those words. Make him beg for his daughter.

After making the handkerchief disappear gracefully into one of the sleeves of her dress, the Cersei clasped her hands and looked at him seriously.

“The girl can go home.” Surprisingly, she seemed honest. “But only if you help the Crown first.”
The game continues.

“I’m in chains, Your Grace. I think I will not be able to do much for the Crown.”

“Oh, but you can.” Replied Cersei, once again with a calm voice. “My father says some wars can be won with quills and ravens instead of swords and spears. I think we can work together to prove that, don’t you think?”

“You want me to write to my son.” He realized, before understanding that it could not be just that.

“Sometimes our children need some guidance.” She said, clearly referring to her quarrel with Joffrey at the steps of the Great Sept. “My son, for instance, doesn’t know yet how to rule this kingdom and…”

“He doesn’t know how to play the game of thrones”, Ned interrupted, bolder than he expected to be. “The same game that can only end in death or victory, as you once told me.”

It sounds like I’m threatening the King.

“Are you trying to say that you want to die, Lord Stark?” Cersei asked, coldly. “I saved your life today. Don’t make me regret that decision.”

“You saved your son’s life.” Eddard corrected her. “If I were beheaded, your son would have brought civil war to Westeros. The fury of the Starks, of the Tullys and maybe of the Arryns. In less than a year, Joffrey would have be king of a broken kingdom… This if he managed to keep the Iron Throne until then. You know that. And that’s why you are here. You need me to secure the realm for your son. Your father his losing against in the Riverlands. The bloodshed has no end in sight.”

Even in the shadows, he could see the smirk on Cersei’s lips.

“Looks like you have learned a thing or other about this game.” She didn’t give him time to answer. “And yes, you are right. Your son is at this moment marching to King’s Landing. I don’t know what he hopes to achieve by raiding our walls and causing mayhem in the Riverlands… But that is now unnecessary. You’ve confessed your crime and will soon take the black. No one else has to die. You can convince your son to lay down his weapons, swear his loyalty to my son and return to that freezing place you call home. As a gesture of good will, the King will take Lady Sansa as his wife and will allow Lady Arya to go home.”

The king will take Sansa as his wife.

“Your son still wants to marry Sansa?” He gulped before continuing. “The daughter of a traitor?”

“He appreciates the girl, Lord Stark.” Replied Cersei, although she didn’t truly believe that. “And Robert wanted this marriage to happen. Baratheons and Stark united at last.”

Robert was a fool.

“My wife will want to take home both our daughters.” Yes, Catelyn would want that. “I think I could convince Robb to agree to this marriage but it would help if Sansa could return to Winterfell for a year or two. We need to mend our wounds as a family.”

He almost forgot that he wouldn’t be at Winterfell with them. He would not guide Robb in the hard times, would not embrace Sansa every time she cried in fear of the loveless marriage she was bound to, would not watch Arya ever again in her dance lessons, Bran recovering from his fall, Rickon growing to get as tall as him. And there was also Cat. The thought of her in the glass gardens caused
him so much pain. A southern lady frozen in an eternal winter. The tears prickled in his eyes. She
didn’t deserve that.

He bowed his head to hide any sign of weakness.

“Take Sansa back to the North? Joffrey will never allow it.” Cersei replied after considering the
matter for a few seconds. “Sansa has to remain in King’s Landing.”

Not only to marry Joffrey and become Queen, but to make sure that Robb behaves. That was the true
purpose of that marriage. There was nothing to be done. Sansa had to pay for all her family with a
crown in her head. Whatever he said now would not change that. If that couldn’t be avoided, he
could at least try to do one last thing for his elder daughter.

“I understand.” He said, remembering how Theon Greyjoy was still a hostage at his care for the
crimes committed by his father. “And eventually Robb will understand too. But for this to work out,
you have to meet his terms.”

“And what terms do you have in mind?”

“First of all, the Iron Throne has to handle this mess in the Riverlands with justice. I know that my
wife should not have taken the Imp as prisoner. That was a mistake. But it was not her who started
pillaging all those villages in the Trident. You know who it was.”

Gregor Clegane.

“Robb and the River lords will demand justice.” Ned continued. “And the Iron Throne had to give
them that to restore peace to the Seven Kingdoms. Real justice.”

“I will do my best to make that work, Lord Stark.” Cersei was clearly not comfortable with that.
Even if they didn’t acknowledge it, they both knew that her father was the master mind behind the
attacks. Would Joffrey really punish his grandfather? It would never happen but at least Eddard had
to try. “I will make sure that the culprits receive what they deserve once your son and my father put
down their swords.”

Promises for Cersei Lannister were only words but for now it would be enough. He had more
important demands in mind.

“If my daughter is to be Queen, she will need her mother’s support.” Ned continued. It would be a
relief both for Sansa and Catelyn. He was depriving the other children from their mother, but they
were all safe behind the walls of Winterfell. Sansa wasn’t.

“Lady Catelyn will be welcomed at court. I think Lord Baelish will be pleased to see her.”

No, he will not. He would make sure Catelyn knew the part Littlefinger played in his downfall.

“My son will also send an escort with my wife.” Eddard continued, looking the Queen in the eye. He
almost could hear the Umbers, the Karstarks and the Mormonts fighting each other for a place in the
Queensguard. “Those men shall later be installed at court to grant protect to their future queen.”

Cersei didn’t like that. Warriors from the North roaming through the Red Keep? That was certainly
hard to swallow.

“There is no need for that. The Kingsguard will protect Sansa…”

They will not protect her from the wicked mind of your son.
“Robb will not rest until he knows that his sister and mother are guarded by his best men, Your Grace. Would you rest if your brother was at the hands of your enemy?”

Somehow, the Queen seemed disturbed by that answer. She stood silent for a few seconds and when she spoke her voice trembled.

“Has Lord Vayrs paid you a visit earlier today?”

“I’m afraid not.” That was an odd question. More strange than that was the fear glinting again at Cersei’s eyes.

“My brother is currently a hostage of your son.” Cersei revealed, making an effort to keep her voice strong. “Lord Varys received a message right before you were taken to the Great Sept. It seems there was a battle three nights ago, in a place called the Whispering Wood. Your son’s army defeated the troops of my father and it seems that they have captured Jaime.”

So she is not doing this for the realm, he finally understood. The queen was not acting out of mercy or thinking about power moves. She has saved me to save her brother.

“You have nothing to fear.” Ned assured in a blink of an eye. “I will write to Robb when given a chance and make sure the Kingslayer is treated honorably. And you can have your bother back very soon, I promise. But only if you agree with all the terms I proposed.”

He considered insisting on calling off Sansa’s wedding but Cersei would not go so far to save his brother. Giving out Sansa was too dangerous for the crown. They needed a hostage of their own to secure peace.

“I will present your terms to my son.” She answered, without a shred of shame. Her incestuous relationship was condemned by God and men but there she was, proudly assuming her love for the man with whom she had shared a womb. “And you will write to your son. I have arranged a small room for you in the Red Keep. You will be there during an hour and find anything you need to write do the Young Wolf. Then, at dawn, you will make your way to the North. Lady Arya will accompany you until Winterfell.”

“Very well, Your Grace.”

He still hated that woman and how vicious she had played to destroy Robert’s legacy. But a part of him admired her. She reminded him of Catelyn. Maybe a little more cruel than her, but deep down acting only out of love for her family.

“There is nothing more to say, Lord Stark. I wish you safe travels.”

When she turned to leave, Ned stretched an arm to catch the hem of her dress. Annoyed, Cersei turned to look at him one last time.

“You were wrong, Your Grace. There is a middle ground in this bloody game after all.”

The queen actually laughed hearing those words.

“No, there isn’t.” She looked at him from top to bottom, his clothes stained and all covered in piss and shit. “You don’t need to die to be dead.”
Hey guys. First of all, thank you all for the positive comments, follows and favs I received in the last two days. I was really not expecting such impact. But guess what? That kept me motivated to write this even faster. I can’t promise new chapters so often but I will try to do my best. For now, I can assure you that I’m excited and that I have a plan for at least fifteen chapters.

Talking about planning… When I wrote the Prologue, I knew that this story needed a time jump. I want to go directly to the intrigues. Writing about how Ned adapted to his new life on the Wall or how Sansa suffered at Joffrey’s hands would have kept me from going to where I really want to go with this story. As you will see right below, action takes now place six years after Ned’s confession and sentence. Some of the events that happened between A Clash of Kings and a A Dance with Dragons happened the same way in this alternative universe, but with some slightly changes that I’ll explain in due time.
At last, any grammar corrections are welcome, since I’m currently working on my English. I hope you enjoy this chapter as much as I liked to write it.

Queen Sansa Baratheon shivered in her black fur.

After five years of spring, the winter had finally come. A soft cloak of snow covered King’s Landing like it usually happened at Winterfell in the coldest day of summer. Winterfell. Could she still call it home after all those years? Looking through the window of her litter, she saw the gloomy towers of the Red Keep in the distance. That was her home now, right on top of Aegon’s Hill. Those high towers which once had made her believe in the Old Nan’s tales.

Now, when she looked to the castle from afar, she could only see spears dripping blood.

“Why did he smell so bad?” Edwyle asked, curious as usual. He had his eyes locked on the small wooden deer that Lord Tyrion had just given him.

Sansa closed the curtains of the litter and managed to bring a smile to her lips.

“Because, my little prince, that’s what happens when you die.”
“But Mother I don’t want to smell bad when I die!” The child protested, pouting. The toy slipped through his fingers, falling to the floor.

The litter advanced restlessly through the city. Snow was falling softly all around them as if the Gods were wiping ice in mourning for the late Hand. The bells kept on tolling, reminding the city that it was a sad day.

“What a silly thing to say, Ed. You won’t be dead for many years.” Sansa replied, leaning to catch the toy.

Pain stabbed her in the legs, making her wince. The throbbing was getting worse, she realized. She was eager for her chamber, her mother’s touch and a glass of mulled wine. That would certainly help.

She quickly returned the wooden deer to the Prince’s hands.

Looking at him Sansa sometimes wondered how she had and Joffrey were able to make something so perfect. It had certainly not been easy for her. That long year trying to get pregnant would haunt her until forever. At that time, she still believed she could make Joffrey happy. Every day trying to convince him she was not her father. But soon she found out that Joffrey relished pain. Not in himself, but in others. By the look in his face, it was obvious that he felt something like pleasure watching others suffering, screaming, pleading for mercy. That’s why ser Meryn Trant had to beat her every time the king wanted to bed her. There, closed in the king’s quarters, even her Queensguard couldn’t do anything for her. But was a necessary price to get pregnant. It was the only way for Joffrey to get an erection and get inside her.

Instead of withering in agony, losing her mind and becoming a sad broken Queen with no purpose, she was making an effort to be the opposite. It was certainly not easy. Her mother helped her, as did her Queensguard. At the city, she knew there were those who already called her the Wolf Queen. Even being a minority, there was out there at least one person calling her something that wasn’t her other alias: the Turncoat Queen.

The Wolf Queen didn’t believe in love and all those fairy tales. She was aware that her marriage was based upon a treaty to buy Robb’s peace. There was nothing more than that. And how could she love, or even respect a husband that treated her like a brood mare to fuck and beat at his convenience? That’s why, even though her mother disapproved, she allowed Joffrey to have his whores. At least they were paid to be beaten.

Fortunately, since Edwyle’s birth the king had started visiting her bed less often. During the last year he started coming to her once in a month to fulfill his husbandly duty. They saw each other at court and were good faking their happiness during banquets, tournaments and audiences at the throne room. But that was it. The king didn’t even have an interest in his son. He didn’t know how Edwyle’s lessons were going with Maester Ulmar or how talented he was riding horses. The Prince, however, didn’t seem to mind. In fact, Sansa suspected her son was afraid of the man he had to call father.

Edwyle smiled teasingly to his mother, realizing he was being watched.

Her mother, Lady Catelyn, believed she was protecting the boy too much. But was she really? She didn’t want the future king of the Seven Kingdoms to grow up with his head full of illusions or to be a monster like his father. She had to make sure that wouldn’t happen. Everything in her reign could fail, but not her son.

“Will the bells keep tolling during the night, Mother? I think I will have trouble sleeping if they do.”
Sansa shook her head.

“Only until your great-grandfather body leaves the city.”

They had been at the Great Sept since morning beside the Dowager Queen and all the other Lannisters. Joffrey, she had noted, hadn’t appeared to pay a last tribute to his grandfather. That certainly wouldn’t look good for him. Even Cersei seemed not happy with his absence. After all, Tywin Lannister – rotting at the sept since last week – was the reason why the king was still in the throne.

The victory at Blackwater six years ago was now nothing more than a distant memory. Edwyle would only know about it through Maester Ulmar’s lessons and Joffrey’s lies. The king insisted on telling how he had cut a big red smile on Stannis lips. The bit that he only did that himself because someone had found the pretender’s body floating at the river Joffrey always left out of the story.

But in the dark nights, if she closed her eyes, Sansa could still see the green flames dancing in the bay, the ships engulfed in fire and the burning banner of Stannis Baratheon actually burning. At first, when she had seen the flames from Maegor’s, she thought that the battle was lost. After all, didn’t Stannis have a red priestess with him? A woman who could control flames and murder with shadows? However, it seemed the woman was not with the pretender’s fleet. The Imp, who she had learned to cherish after all those years, had come with the genial idea of using wildfire. That had been enough to detain Stannis until an army of Lannisters, Tyrells and Starks soldiers appeared at the gates to put an end to the rebellion.

That was the last time that she had seen Robb. She wrote to him once in a while, asking about Bran and Rickon and his Frey wife, but the cold answers she received were proof enough that her brother, even after all those years, hadn’t accept what had come of her. Not that he felt betrayed to see her sister sharing a bed with a monster, but because he had been forced to leave her at Joffrey’s claws.

Making peace with the Iron Throne had not been easy. She had learned only two years ago, by the lips of Cersei herself, that further conflict had been avoided thanks to a secret treaty she had made with her father in the Black Cells. According to the Dowager Queen, the war could have gone on if Robb and Joffrey had not agreed to the terms arranged by Ned. What would be of them then?

At last, the litter stopped at the Red Keep’s gate.

“Would you like to ditch your lessons today, Edwyle?” The queen asked, looking at her son. He was more Lannister than Stark. Lannister, yes. Long was the time when she believed that Joffrey had a drip of Baratheon blood in his veins. Edwyle hair was gold, the very same color of all the other Lannisters. His eyes, however, were not the cold green of the king’s but the same vivid blue as hers. With almost four years old, he was a little plump, with large cheeks and a crooked smile, as a child should be at his age. “I have lemon cakes and grandmother Cat can tell you again a story about her uncle the Blackfish.”

The prince didn’t need to hear more to be convinced.

After descending from the litter, she gave her hand to the child and made her way through the corridors. The keep was unusually silent, since a great number of nobles were still gathering at the Great Sept. She had returned earlier to the castle, excusing herself saying that the Prince was tired when in fact was she the one dying of exhaustion.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Ser Wendel Manderly, one of her guards, following at a distance, his hand on the hilt of the great sword at his waist. Ser Balon Swann of the Kingsguard kept him company.
Her chambers at Maegor’s Holdfast stood between Joffrey’s and Edwyle’s. At the moment the royal apartments were inhabited by her mother, who slept in a small bedroom, and young Prince Tommen, who was often out of the city. The Dowager Queen had recently changed to chambers next to the White Sword Tower. *How convenient.* Once in a while they received honorable guests, usually Lannister relatives like uncle Kevan and his wife, that were installed in one the vacant rooms.

A guard standing in the corridor opened the door to her chambers. She was received immediately by one of her handmaids, a distant cousin of the Lannisters, Jeyne Westerling.

“Your Grace”, greeted the girl, helping her undress the black fur. The chamber was warm thanks to a fire burning in the fireplace. The windows were closed and fogged, the snow building up on the ledge. “How was the ceremony?”

_Tedious, crowded and smelly._

“Sad.” She answered instead, with a half-smile.

“Lord Tywin was a great man.” Replied Jeyne, very gently.

“Indeed he was.” Sansa had to be careful around Jeyne. The girl was one of Cersei’s spies. “Where is Lady Catelyn?”

Jeyne, who was now helping the prince undress his coat, made a curious face.

“Your Lady Mother is in the solar, Your Grace.” She replied, quickly. A smile was brewing behind her lips. “Lady Olenna Tyrell is keeping her company.”

Sansa’s surprise was reflected in her eyes even before she could control her emotions. Lady Olenna had arrived from Highgarden to meet with her granddaughter a week ago but had not yet paid a visit to the Queen. The old woman had also not come to the Great Sept to pay her tributes to Tywin Lannister. What could she want now? *Drip some venom, I suppose,* thought Sansa. The Tyrell matriarch could at least have chosen a more appropriate occasion.

“Very well.” She replied, gravely. “Edwyle, my dear, you’ll have to wait with Jeyne in your chambers. She will bring all the lemon cakes you want.”

The prince sniffed and again pouted like a little child.

“Why can’t I came? I want my story!”

“I know a couple of stories, Your Grace.” Jeyne intervened, giving her hand to the prince.

Sansa frowned hearing those words. What kind of tales had Jeyne in mind? But she didn’t waste her time arguing. Kissing the prince goodbye, she stepped towards the solar. Left and Right, the guards who usually accompanied Lady Olenna everywhere she went, stood outside the doors with Robett Glover. The three of them bowed seeing her coming.

The solar was a gloomy place, especially now that winter had come. It was a round room, with a great fireplace and a wide window facing the river. All the walls were bared except one from which hung a tapestry with the king’s sigil. At the center, stood a table were Sansa usually dined with Edwyle, her mother and important guests. At the moment, it was filled with fruit, lemon cakes, tea and a mug of mulled wine.

It seemed Lady Olenna was doing all the talking. The woman must be almost as old as Old Nan but had the mind of a young warrior. She had even survived her son, who died the previous year with a
disease in his bowels. Wearing a long coat with flowery patterns and wool scarfs all over her neck and head, the Queen of Thornes seemed a little ball of blue and green cloth.

Lady Catelyn sat with her back to the window, nodding her head while listening to Olenna. She was evidently tired, still recovering from the cold she had caught last month. That was the reason why she had not come to the Great Sept. Maester Ulmar didn't want her to leave the castle for a while. Her hair, now with a few traces of silver, was tied up in a braid that fell behind her back. As usual, she wore black to mourn the husband who was now bound to serve the kingdom until his last days.

“And last time we heard about Loras we learnt that he had joined mercenaries in Essos! Can you believe it? I don’t know what happened to the boy! The Knight of Flowers serving as a sellsword. Ah! It’s embarrassing.” The words kept coming out of Lady Olenna’s mouth. The old woman was completely unaware that the Queen was now standing at the door.

It was Catelyn who first saw Sansa.

“Your Grace.” She got up, her head inclined in reverence. Even now it was strange seeing her mother being so deferent. But, as Lady Stark kept reminding her, it was of paramour importance to show respect to the Queen every time a strange was in the room. No matter if it was one of her handmaids or her own mother.

The Queen of Thornes took her time getting up. When she did, her lips curled in a wicked smile. Her eyes, with a certain hunger, evaluated Sansa’s breasts and waist.

“Motherhood has not yet taken a burden on you.”

Lady Catelyn opened her eyes, caught by surprise with that inappropriate comment. Sansa, however, knew best. After dealing with Olenna Tyrell in the last few years she now understood her strategy: cause distress, a little bit of embarrassment and then use the weakness to get what she wanted. Instead of falling in that trap like a wolf pup, the Queen smiled with amusement.

“It’s good to see you again, Lady Olenna.”

The three of them knew it was a lie, especially now that the Tyrells and Starks were at an awkward situation.

When King Renly was murdered by some kind of blood magic performed by Stannis’ sorceress, the Tyrells sought an alliance with the Iron Throne. To seal the deal, Renly’s widow, Lady Margaery, was promised to Tommen and move to court. But since the boy was only eight years old at the time, it was agreed that they would wait a few years to perform the ceremony. In the meanwhile, the Tyrells swore that Margaery was still a maid, that Renly had never consummated their marriage and that the late pretender actually preferred the company of men.

But Lady Margaery wasn’t a maid anymore. That rose had ready been plucked from the bush. It was known in all Seven Kingdoms that the Tyrell girl was sleeping with Joffrey. They didn’t even make an effort to hide their liaison, strolling at times at Maegor’s Holdfast right in front of Sansa. Varys reported that they had also a hideout right outside the city where they sometimes met during whole weeks. She was not disturbed by that. Long were the days when she would cry because her husband was not loyal.

As she kept on saying to her mother, she was Queen, no matter how Lady Margaery whored herself up to Joffrey’s lap. Soon the affair will be over. Now that Tommen was fourteen years old, he would wed the Tyrell whore. The wedding would take place in a few months and then the happy couple would leave to Tommen’s new seat at Storm’s End. That game from the Tyrells would then end.
“What brings you here, Lady Olenna?” She asked, after a boring conversation about how the cold winds were damaging the harvests in the Reach and affecting their economy.

“Family affairs, Your Grace.” The Queen of Thrones answered before taking a small bite of lemon cake. She was slowly chewing, keeping Sansa waiting.

Knowing that Olenna was teasing her daughter purposely, Catelyn advanced to explain what the old woman meant with those words.

“Lady Olenna is looking for a bride.”

Sansa nodded. A bride? She was no expecting that.

“I see.” She said, without betraying her curiosity.

“My grandson Willas is still unmarried.” Olenna explained with her mouth at last empty. “And that fool who married my son does anything to find a suitable marriage to the boy! Stupid Hightower! Can you believe that she passes her days crying in a corner, missing her husband as if he was a great man? All of us know he was a fool… a fool with really bad bowels! He died shitting himself! How can she miss for that?”

Sansa couldn’t hold a smile.

“So then it was fallen on you the burden of finding a match for Willas, is it?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.” Olenna confirmed, blinking her eyes. “That’s why I’m here, Your Grace. I believe the time has come to bond our Houses. An alliance between House Stark and Tyrell could be useful in the long winter that is upon us. I hear that you have good wool in the North and Gods knows how we will need it. The Reach will freeze this winter, believe me. In exchange, we could negotiate a good price for vegetables, sprouts and all that crap we plant in our lands.”

*That would be useful to Robb.* The North was going through hard times. Besides the terrible news of the Greyjoy’s rebellion on the west coast, there were strange rumors coming from the Wall. Crops to help support the winter would be more than welcome.

However, when Sansa exchanged a glance with her mother, she realized how near she was of prickling her finger in one of Olenna’s thorns. There was something else behind this proposal. For starters, how would Joffrey and the Lannisters see that alliance? *They would think we were plotting something. The king’s wife and mistress side by side against him.* Yes, her mother should be thinking the same.

“That is a generous offer, Lady Olenna.” Sansa started, carefully. Olenna nodded with her friendly smile back on her lips. “But I’m afraid I can’t make a marriage arrangement on behalf of House Stark. My brother, however…”

“Nonsense”, said Olenna, making a quick gesture with her hand. “You can marry off whoever you want in your family. It’s one of the perks of being queen.”

*Now she is making a child out of me,* thought Sansa feeling frustration boil in her chest.

“I know what *I* can do, Lady Olenna.” She replied, losing her nerve. Beneath the table her mother’s hand clutched her knee, reminding her of who she was. *The Wolf Queen and all that.* “But I wouldn’t feel comfortable interfering with my brother’s plans. And besides, who from our family could marry your grandson? I only have a sister and she is promised to one of Lord Frey’s grandsons.”
And even that Frey has to wait. Arya was not ready for marriage, if she would ever be. According to a letter mother had received a few months ago, her sister was travelling in the Narrow Sea with Bran, Rickon and that strange friend of hers that now worked at Winterfell as a blacksmith.

“Walder Frey?” Olenna mocked, with a laugh. “I thought the man was dead.”

Oh, he is very much alive, just like you.

“Well, you can break that stupid deal your brother made with him.”

Catelyn stirred in her chair.

“I made that stupid deal, Lady Olenna. Can you be more respectful…”?

“A stupid deal it was. Two marriages for a bridge you only used once? It seems to me it was a very poor bargain for the Starks. And, after all, the new Lady of Winterfell is a Frey. Old Walder doesn’t need to reinforce his alliance with the Starks.”

“At the time it looked like a fair price!” Catelyn argued, definitely losing her patience. Her cheeks were now getting red. “Because of that bloody bridge we caught the Kingslayer at the Whispering Wood!”

“Yes, you did. But then you delivered him to his sister.”

She talks like that was an error. Sansa’s eyes flickered toward her mother. This conversation was getting out of hand.

“Enough!” She ordered, slamming a hand in the table. A fork rattled loudly and an apple fell from the fruit bowl, rolling along the tabletop. The two women fell silent, looking challenging to one another. “Lady Olenna, I’m not breaking ties with Houses that once helped us in times of need. I’m sorry, but there will be no Stark match with House Tyrell in the near future. If you want, you can write to my brother. I’m sure he can find a bride from a good northern family that is willing to marry your grandson. It’s all I can offer.”

Lady Olenna sniffled, the smile gone. Caressing her wrinkled throat with her index finger, she reflected for a few moments, considering. Then she shook her head and got up of her chair.

“It appears this was a loss of time. What a pity.” She mumbled, almost in a whisper. “I must return to my bedchamber, Your Grace. I suppose my granddaughter must have arrived from her ride with the His Majesty by now. Will you excuse me?”

But before Sansa could answer, the old lady was already marching up out of the solar.

“Oh.” The old crone stopped at the door and turned her head. “Give my regards to your sister when you see her again.”

After a few seconds, the door closed and mother and daughter were finally alone.

“What did she meant with that?” Catelyn asked immediately.

Sansa shrugged, tired.

“Nothing, I suppose. She must be losing her mind.”

“Maybe she is.” Catelyn answered with doubt. “But Sansa, I don’t like this. An alliance with the North? It doesn’t make sense.”
The queen grabbed a jug of wine and poured herself a glass.

“Don’t fret, mother. I’m not worried.”

“You should be. She may be an old woman but she is clever and she is playing with you. The way she spoke about how we released the Kingslayer to make peace with the Throne… It made me think she actually wished that Robb hadn’t stopped until every Lannister was dead.”

“Lady Olenna is old, Mother. She truly didn’t know how serious her words were.”

“What if she knew, Sansa? What if the Tyrells are conspiring against the Throne and wants us at their side? A marriage with a Stark… Well, it looks suspicious to me.” Catelyn gulped, fear and something else glinting in her eyes. “You should denounce her.”

“Mother, you sound like a mad woman again.” Sansa replied slightly irritated. She balanced her glass between her fingers, knowing that her mother was now rigid as she ever was when Sansa spoke to her that way. “What would the Tyrells gain with a rebellion against Joffrey? They don’t need that. They are already thriving. Besides, if they are plotting something now is just who they will try to elect as Hand of the King. And I have, in fact, surprisingly news about that. Garlan Tyrell is in the city, paying his tribute to the Lannisters at the Great Sept.”

“Garlan?” Catelyn asked, after a few moments of silence. “When did he arrive?”

“A few hours ago with a small party of Tyrell men.” Sansa said, smiling. “This proves that we were wrong. Lady Margaery will try to convince Joffrey to make Garlan his Hand instead of Willas. And if the rumors are right, the Lord of Highgarden takes after his father as a fool. Willas would have been a threat, but Garlan we can manage.”

“He is a Tyrell anyway. It would be best for you if there were no roses at the Hand’s tower.” Catelyn started rubbing her forehead. “You have to make a clever move.”

Who could she suggest to Joffrey, considering that he was willing to hear her? Her husband would never consider a northerner to the position. Or a Lord sworn to House Tully. Anyone coming beyond the Crownlands was suspicious at his eyes.

“I think I will cast my support for Kevan Lannister.” She replied after a few seconds. Catelyn was not surprised. “Cersei will want her uncle as Hand. We would do better supporting the Lannisters. And I truly think Joffrey would choose his uncle above a scented lord from the Reach. Besides, for a change we could actually strength our relationship with Cersei. I believe she mistrusts the Tyrells as much as we do.”

Catelyn laid her warm hand on Sansa’s shoulder.

“Yes, I think it’s the right move.” Her eyes locked again on Sansa’s. “But promise me you will look out after the Tyrells. Ask Lord Varys for some insight…”

“Soon, Mother.” She promised, not actually listening to her anymore.

Since Margaery’s affair with Joffrey, Catelyn had grown obsessed with theories about conspiracy. She insisted that Sansa should make Joffrey put a stop to the affair before he fathered a bastard son. Lady Catelyn had even insisted that Sansa must get pregnant again to show her value as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and assure another heir to the crown. She said those words with a heavy heart, knowing what Sansa had suffered to conceive the Edwyle but she also feared for her daughter’s future.
“Can you rub my feet, Mother?”

Catelyn smiled.

“Are you having cramps again?”

Sansa nodded. Without hesitating, Catelyn got up and knelt at her daughter’s feet. Gently, she helped the Queen taking her boots off and undress her long wool stockings. As if she was a talented healer, she then began massaging Sansa’s feet. The Wolf Queen was in that moment no more than a girl, moaning with relief as the pain in her legs slowly started to disappear.

“You will show soon, Sansa.” Catelyn’s voice was soft and tender while looking up to her daughter’s face. “A few more weeks and the court will notice that you are expecting again. You may have even less time if one of your handmaids notices that your moonblood is not coming.”

“Yes, I know.” She replied. “I will dine with Joffrey in a day or two to tell him about the child. I think he might be in a good mood after receiving the news and willing to hear me about the Hand.”

Sansa moaned again with relief. The cramps in her feet and legs were apparently a problem that affected every Tully woman during pregnancy.

At that moment, someone knocked at the door startling both of them. Sansa kicked her boots and stockings under the table and covered her bared feet with the hem of her black dress. Catelyn, in the meanwhile, recomposed herself and washed her hands in a basin that stood next to a window.

“Who is it?” Asked Sansa, hoping it was not another Tyrell.

Robett Glover peeped into the solar.

“Your Grace, I’m sorry to disturb you but ser Manderly caught a man trying to sneak into the keep through the kitchens. The man is armed and claims to be your relative, even though he refuses to give his name. Should I send him away or would you like to take a look at him? I personally don’t recognize him but he was northern blood in him.”

Catelyn was curious.

“A relative?” She asked, advancing toward the door with a quick step. “Let me see this man.”

Without saying another word, Catelyn and ser Robett Glover left Sansa alone. The queen used those few minutes to put on her boots again. Who could be that mysterious relative out of her door? She groaned, tired and without patience to receive. The day had been long and the weeks ahead would be longer. Only the Gods knew how she would quickly trade King’s Landing for her peaceful and silent room at Winterfell. Instead, she would have to change her dress to dine with the Lannisters. A last dinner to mourn Tywin Lannister would be held at the hall later and her presence, being the Queen, was expected.

Winterfell.

Lately she kept thinking of her home and how Edwyle would like to run among the weirwood, to climb the steps of the Broken Tower and ride in the woods with his uncles. Her hands fell to her lap and her fingers softly caressed her growing belly. There was a reason why the baby was still a secret. Even Lady Catelyn didn’t know why, believing that she was saving to use the news at the right moment. Truth was that there was a small possibility that the child was not from the king. She had considered until last week taking a potion or a tea to make the child go, but she couldn’t do it.
She wanted that child, even if it was dangerous to give birth to a bastard.

Her daydream ended when the door opened to let Lady Catelyn in followed by a tall slim man dressed in a black coat. She didn’t recognize the man at a first glance. Maybe it is a distant cousin begging for a favour. But then, when she saw the beaming smile in her mother’s lips and the tears sliding down her face, Sansa knew she must have missed something.

Again her eyes darted towards the mysterious figure. There was definitely something familiar in that face. It reminded her of an animal. Beneath the black cloak, she noted, the man was wearing black leather pants, boots high enough to reach the knee and a wool shirt. No sigil in sight. A very thin sword, the thinner sword she had ever seen, hung from the belt at his waist.

Sansa gasped realizing who the man was.

It was not a man.

It was Arya Horseface.

“How… How can you possibly be here?” She asked, getting off her chair. She didn’t smile as her mother. Keeping her hands clasped near her breast, she didn’t even advance to hug her. Instead, she unconsciously tried to look like a Queen. Last time they had seen each other, Arya and father were leaving to North with an escort of Lannister men. Sansa was a stupid girl then, waving goodbye with a smile at the patio.

Sansa wanted to show her sister she was not that girl any longer.

“Are you surprised, sister?” She shook her head to get rid of the snowflakes melting in her hair. That was why she looked like a man, realized Sansa. Arya’s hair was cut short as if she had shaved her head recently. With a feline smile in her lips, her sister fell on her knee. “Shall I call you Your Grace and all that crap?”

A mixture of defiance and mockery sparkled in Arya’s eyes. Sansa was taken by surprise with that remark. Fortunately, Catelyn intervened before things got awkward.

“Arya, please sit next to the fire. You are shivering.” Catelyn demanded, adopting her best motherly voice. “Sansa, dear, can you pour us some wine?”

An arrogant thought passed the Queen’s mind even while she moved to obey her mother’s request. Sitting in a chair next to the fire, Arya was stretching her hands above the flames. Gladly, she accepted the glass Sansa brought and drank all the wine in three long gulps.

How ladylike.

“I thought you were with your brothers on that reckless errand on the Narrow Sea.” Catelyn started. Tears of happiness for seeing her child were still glinting in her eyes. Her hands were on Arya’s knees, as if to make sure the girl stayed.

Something stirred inside Sansa for a moment. She bit back her lip realizing that she was actually feeling jealous. How could she feel that? Mother and daughter hadn’t seen each other for six years. That devotion in Catelyn’s eyes was more than natural. Gulping, she turned to a window. Sansa didn’t see herself as some selfish and arrogant Queen. At least she hadn’t until that moment.

She wasn’t used to share her mother. That was it. During all her time at King’s Landing, she had relied on Catelyn to become the Queen she was today. Arya returning to their lives so suddenly was like a punch in the stomach.
“I was with my brothers.” Arya confirmed with a crooked smile. “We left Pentos a fortnight ago or so. We stayed there a bit longer than expected because Bran refused to leave before finding a eunuch who could read the future or some shit like that…”

“I would thank you not to use that kind of language in here.” Sansa interrupted, coldly, sipping her wine. Arya flashed an annoyed look in her direction before continuing.

“Then we found a vessel that took us to Claw Isle… Or is it Crab Isle? Well, the name doesn’t really matter. I parted my way with the boys there. Rickon, Bran and ser Rodrik Cassel found a ship bound to White Harbor. And yes, Mother, their ship will not get far from the shore. The sea is getting increasingly dangerous to travel.”

Catelyn seemed concerned all the same.

“And why on seven hells are you here?” She asked sternly. Sansa rolled her eyes. Now even her mother was swearing like a fishwife. “Your brother will not be happy when he learns that you have disrespected his orders.”

“He is used to it by now.” She mocked, rubbing her hands.

“You haven’t answered mother’s question.” Sansa interjected. She was starting to grow curious. Why was Arya really here? If she remembered correctly, King’s Landing was the place she most hated in the world.

Once again, Arya looked at Sansa with mockery.

“I’m here to help a friend finish some businesses.” She replied, assuming a stern face that made her so much like father.

“Robert’s bastard?” Catelyn asked, without making an effort to hide her disappointment.

It seemed that somehow her sister was now friend of the boy father had investigated before being arrested. This boy, that somehow had accompanied Arya and father’s party to the North, had the intention of taking the black. However, he had got second thoughts reaching Winterfell and finding there a position as blacksmith. It seemed Robb knew who he truly was, but his true parentage was kept secret. Otherwise, Joffrey would soon have the bastard’s head.

“Yes, the bastard.” Arya replied, ignoring her mother’s judgement. “He has businesses in the city and I’m here to accompany him. We got aboard a little merchant vessel that docked here three days ago. But don’t worry, mother. We will soon make our way back to Winterfell.”

“Three days ago? And only now you came visit your mother?” Catelyn was astonished.

See, Mother, that is your lovely daughter, said Sansa to herself.

“Well, I wanted to see you earlier, mother… But no one knows I’m in the city and I wanted to keep it that way, if possible. So I waited for the right moment to sneak in the keep. And what better time could I find than the funeral of Tywin fucking Lannister…?”

“Arya, have some manners!” Catelyn reprehended, finally showing her disapproval.

Sansa, however, made a gesture to stop her mother.

“And where have you been hiding all this time?”
Her sister shrugged again.

“I’m installed in a very nice inn at Flea Bottom. I bet you would like that place, Your Grace.”

Sansa dismissed the provocation quickly.

“I see you are still a fool, Arya. You think you are here by chance? The holdfast is one the safest places in Westeros. Someone let you pass on purpose.”

“Chance? I had a plan, Sansa.” For the first time, Arya seemed angry. “A knight I met at the inn yesterday helped me into the kitchens. I think he was Tyrell. He had a fancy rose on his armor.”

Catelyn now understood Sansa’s reaction. Gripping Arya’s hands between hers, she looked to her eldest daughter.

*And give my regards to your sister when you see her again*, the words of Lady Olenna echoed in her head. That couldn’t have been a coincidence. A marriage proposal for Arya right before the girl turned up at her chamber. Tyrell’s knights helping her into the keep.

The Queen of Thorns had known Arya was in the city.

*And she has made a fool of me and make sure I knew she was behind all this.* Sneaking Arya in was supposed to look like a Tyrell gift? Could that marriage alliance real mean that the Reach was rising against the Throne and wanted the Starks at their side? Otherwise, what could Olenna possible gain by mocking directly the Queen? She was not a stupid woman.

“Sansa, will you now take me seriously?” Catelyn asked. Arya furrowed her brows, oblivious to what was happening before her.

“Yes, Mother.” Sansa retorted, looking through the window. The funeral procession was now on his way to the Lion Gate. A black mass of people coloring the white streets. “We must find out what the Tyrells are up to.”
This one was hard. I've been working on this chapter since Sunday and wanted to have it published by Tuesday but it was impossible. I had to plan, research, write, rewrite… And I deleted accidentally the file! But today I finally managed to finish it and I’m satisfied with the result. I hope you enjoy this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it. Again, I apologize for any spelling errors you may find. And, once again thank you for all your comments and favorites! Oh, and guess what: next chapter we’ll meet Eddard! ;)

A month and a half ago, when word arrived that Torrhen’s Square had been taken by Euron Greyjoy, Robb had found it hard to believe. How could the Crow’s Eye forces have invaded the North without them knowing? Maester Luwin’s message also told that the attack must have happened two months ago since the messenger had been lost on his way to Winterfell. Later, more reports reached the Nighfort saying the same and at last Helman Tallhart came from Queensgate to urge him to march south.

“We left the North unprotected, my lord.” Tallhart had yelled at the Nightfort’s hall. He was already prepared to leave the Wall and who could judge him? He wanted to retrieve his home and learn what had happened to his family. “But we should have seen it coming. The ironmen would obviously take advantage of us while we fight the wildings. I know we are doing the right thing being here, my lord, don’t misunderstand me… But how can we protect ourselves if when we are being attacked from two fronts?”

And the true threat is yet to come, Robb wanted to say, but he instead kept the thoughts to himself. For now that was a truth only known by the Night’s Watch and shared like rumors and ghost stories. He had to know more about what Jon and father had told him before he could tell his advisers and bannermens about the dead men rising.

I have to see them with my own eyes.

“We’ll take back your home and kill Euron Greyjoy, ser Helman.” Robb had assured, shaking those thoughts out of his mind.

He had to deal with more important threats at the moment and, even though he longed for his father's guidance, he had to rule alone. Eddard Stark was a few leagues away, back at Castle Black, dealing with worse matters. And I’m the Warden of the North now. It was precisely hearing those words in his head that he knew he had to ride to Torrhen’s Square. Show how the North was strong and how their Lord would defend them anytime they needed him. He had to show strength, especially now that the winter had come. And a change of scenery for a month or two would only do him good.

“Tomorrow we’ll ride south.”
And so they had left the Nightfort, taking with them an army of a hundred men. According to the messenger, that would be enough to lay siege around the castle. Meanwhile, the Nightfort would be left to the care of Roose Bolton. Grey Wind would also stay. His direwolf could sense when there were wildlings climbing the Wall and besides, he was able to fight them himself. So yes, he would be more useful staying in the Nightfort.

So during a week they marched untiringly along the snowy roads towards the Wolfswood and then, following the tree lines, deep into the forest. Surprisingly, when the towers of Torrhen’s Square finally appeared on the horizon, they found out that someone was already mounting siege around the castle. Not northern men, though. The banners hoisted around the encampment near the lake had a kraken on them.

*The krakens had come to fight the crow,* Robb realized with a smile. That meant seeing Theon again. Six years ago, when he had returned from the Riverlands and assumed his place as Lord of Winterfell, Robb had let Theon return to the Iron Islands. However, a year or so later Balon Greyjoy was killed and tensions emerged on the Iron Islands. After a kingsmoot, Balon’s children were put aside and the ironmen acclaimed Euron Greyjoy, also known as Crow’s Eye, as their lord.

And so the Iron Succession War had started.

Theon and Asha, contesting their uncle’s right to rule, had rallied an army of supporters, robbed some ships and started acting as pirates to sabotage Euron’s plans. Battles at high sea were constantly reported. News circulated about how more than half of the Iron Fleet at the hands of Victarion had sunk. Meanwhile, ships with cargo bound to the Iron Islands were also raided causing famine and death among the people. Those had definitely been rough years to the ironmen.

“Theon!” Robb had called, seeing his friend coming out a tent.

Theon greeted him with a cocky smile. He was still handsome and the years among the ironmen had given him a more savage look. One of his ears was pierced, for his example, and he had grown a beard.

“I suspected you would come yourself. What the fuck were you doing freezing your ass on the Wall?”

Robb told him then about the wildlings attacks. He was not surprised to see Theon smirk, as if wildlings weren’t in fact a real threat. Later they dined and his friend told him all he knew about the events that had happened at Torrhen’s Square.

It seemed that just a month or two ago, Euron and Victarion had sailed to the Blazewater Bay with forty ships knowing their nephews were far on the Reach dealing with some merchants. They had then gone up through the Saltspear until their ships reached the lake by Torrhen’s Square. And then they attacked and the castle fell within an hour. Only after that did Euron’s men picked their axes to start cut down trees from the Wolfswood.

*Timber.*

That was the reason behind the invasion. Not pillage, murder or rape like the ironmen had done many times before. No, Euron wanted timber to rebuild his fleet. But then a twist had turned the game: Victarion had left with all the timber, ships and the majority of the army. Euron had been left behind with a small garrison that was no defending the castle. What had happened and why Victarion had betrayed Euron was still a mystery.

Following the rumors, Theon and Asha had sailed their ships to Blazewater trying to intercept their
uncle Victarion. But they had arrived too late. So they sailed to Torrhen’s Square to fight Euron, who still was Lord of the Iron Islands. After trying unsuccessfully to storm the walls, they mounted siege.

And here they were.

“Now is only a matter of time until Euron surrenders.” Theon had said, confidently.

But time passed and Euron resisted. In fact, he seemed to be doing his best. Eight archers were constantly on the battlements, ready to fire arrows if anyone came near the gates. Besides those men they didn’t see anyone else. The castle, being of solid rock and having high walls, was difficult to breach. So they continued to wait, their eyes constantly at Torrhen’s Square, waiting for something to change.

“He has provisions to endure at least one more year.” Tallhart told them during the third week of the siege. Robb had already sent a messenger asking for reinforcements. If Euron did not accept the defeat in two weeks, they would have to attack the castle. “But he is not prepared for the cold. He’ll surrender.”

“I hope you are right.” Asha Greyjoy replied, growing impatient.

Theon’s sister had been an agreeable surprise.

Robb had heard about her and how she commanded her own ship Black Wind. And she didn’t look bad. She was a lean and long legged woman, with black hair cut short, wind-chafed skin and strong hands. That was why Robb welcomed her into his bed when she started looking for a way to pass the time. Only then did Robb understand how he longed for a woman’s touch after spending those cold nights at the Nightfort alone. Asha, being tempered with iron and salt, knew how to make him feel alive and forget the Wall for a few hours.

Theon, obviously, had laughed when he had realized his best friend was sleeping with his sister.

“I see you finally don’t care about all that crap your father used to say.” Theon said, teasingly. “You’ve grown up.”

Robb was used to sleep with other women for a few years now. However, his men never dared to comment his deviations, much less with Theon’s audacity. Hearing those words coming from his friend’s lips made him feel a slightly guilty for his actions. Yes, father had always taught him about honor and how one day he should be loyal to his wife, but Robb couldn’t heed those words any longer. He simply couldn’t.

Five years married to Marissa Frey and he always felt something crumble inside him whenever he thought of her. They didn’t love each other like father still loved mother. They never would. Yes, it was a better arrangement than the one Sansa had to endure, but nonetheless it was a burden. How his wife wept every time he entered her, how she passed her days by the fire, shivering with cold and how she couldn’t tolerate his brothers or Arya’s lack of womanly decency, as she called it. And up until now she had not even been able to give him an heir.

“It’s hard to explain.” Robb said. He hated to talk about Marissa.

“Fear not, Robb.” Theon winked. “I’m glad for you. If she wasn’t my sister, I would fuck her too.”

Finally, at the end of the fourth week, the siege of Torrhen’s Square came to an unexpected end when someone in the castle opened the gates.
Ready to fight, Robb had personally led an army into the castle. But a fight was not waiting for them inside, only chaos, death and destruction. Dozens of men were dead in the courtyard buried underneath a cloak of snow. The blood was still fresh. It seemed a fight had broken between Euron’s men: the ones who wanted to continue the siege and the ones who wanted to end it. The survivors didn’t offer resistance. In fact, they put aside their swords to surrender willingly.

“Where is my uncle?” Theon demanded, after accepting the soldiers’ surrender.

Theon was acting surprisingly well, Robb noted gladly, letting his friend decide the fate of his uncle’s soldiers. Asha, on the other hand, seemed uneasy and Robb knew why. As soon as the Iron Succession War was over, Balon’s heirs would return to the Iron Islands and confront another kingsmoot. Which of them would take the Seastone Chair? Robb couldn’t actually know. A few years ago Asha had the best chance, but now that Theon had proved himself fighting against his uncles he was a strong contender.

“Euron is on the watchtower.” One of the men replied, taking a step towards them. “He has not come out since Victarion left.

Theon grinned, a victorious smile already settling on his lips.

“Let’s find the old Crow then.”

Asha stopped him, holding his arm.

“We need him alive, Theon.” She whispered, loud enough for Robb to hear.

Theon’s brow furrowed.

“And why is that?”

“He might know where Victarion is.”

Theon assented without really hearing. His eyes were focused on the men thrashing down the watchtower’s door. When it fell, leaving the path open to the spiralled staircase, Theon advanced immediately, followed by Asha, Robb and Tallhart. An escort of five Greyjoy’s soldiers accompanied them for precaution.

As they climbed the steps, Robb stared at Theon again.

Soon he would need a strong ally at his side. Someone to help him protect the North from threats that were still to come, not a person willing to attack his lands while he was fighting on the Wall. Theon was his friend and a good fighter, but was he really fitted to rule? To handle the ironmen’s lust for plunder and rape? And did he grasp the tangles of power?

He would soon find out.

They found Euron atop the tower on Tallhart’s old chambers, without a guard to protect him and having as his only company a mysterious girl. He was lying on the bed, covered in furs but even so shivering. His long dark hair was spread on the pillow assuming the form of a kraken.

Suddenly, at the candle’s flickering light, Asha gasped and a maniac smile touched Theon’s lips.

Euron Greyjoy was called Crow’s Eye because he had lost his left eye long ago. Robb had heard that the wound was usually covered with a patch. But the patch was gone as it also was his right eye.
Someone had blinded Euron.

He was clearly sick, probably of infection. His eye socket was festered, completely infected. Burning with fever, his skin was marked with purple bruises as if someone had beaten him recently. Hearing footsteps, the man moved between the pillows.

“Who is there?” He asked with a raspy voice, the words leaving his throat painfully. “Girl, who is it? What’s happening?”

The girl, sitting in a chair by the bed’s side, looked at them with silence. She had a round, flat face, dusky skin, and eyes like molten gold. According to Asha’s spies at Pyke, she was a sorceress given as a gift by Victarion to Euron. To Robb, she seemed only a small, fragile girl, wrapped in a fur too large for her body and clutching a book to her chest as if that was enough to defend herself. It looked like she had been reading to Euron.

“It’s us uncle.”

Euron stopped moving recognizing Theon’s voice. A grim smile settled on his lips.

“So my last men have betrayed me, hum?” He muttered, with a sigh. “Well, are you proud, little Theon?”

“You have lost, uncle.” Theon said, excited, approaching the man on the bed. He and Asha were the only ones still wielding their swords, as if Euron was still a threat. Theon’s sword descended to rest on his uncle’s throat. “Do you surrender?”

At Robb’s side, Asha stirred, her hands gripping with force the handle of her sword.

“Surrender?” Euron spat. “I don’t know the meaning of that word.”

“Oh, I can show you what it means.” Theon interjected, his sword pressing against his uncle’s skin without piercing it.

Euron laughed again, as if he could joke his way out of this.

“Show me? No, I don’t think you can. I don’t have my eye anymore, do I?”

“Don’t play games with me.”

“You are proud of yourself, boy?” Euron asked, interrupting him. A condescending smile was on his mouth again. “If you are, you shouldn’t.”

“I shouldn’t?” Theon asked, mockingly. “Why, uncle? I’ve won and you’ve lost. It seems to me that I have plenty of reasons to be proud of myself.”

“You think you have won? Oh, no, nephew. You haven’t. We both lost to your uncle Victarion.” He said. “He did this to me, you see? And then he took my men, he took my ships and he left me here to rot. I tried to survive, to resist your bloody siege, and believe me: I would have resisted more time if my men had balls. But I didn’t and now you’ll kill me. But surrender? I will never surrender. Never. You making that stupid question only proves that you’re dead inside. Hollow. A shame to our house. You can have the Greyjoy name, and even my blood in your veins, but you don’t know what it is to pay the iron price. The Iron Islands will never reach glory in your hands. You’ll always be a little wolf pup. Your father knew that. Even your sister knows…”

Asha exchanged a glance with Robb.
“I’m not a wolf pup.” Theon answered viciously, losing the smirk on his lips. “I’m not a fucking wolf pup!”

Theon’s sword sank on Euron’s throat. The dusky girl screamed as a gush of warm blood spilled the soiled linen and the floor. Blood spattered also Theon’s face, streaming along his nose and towards his lips.

He failed, Robb thought bitterly, keeping his words to himself. To win that war the Greyjoys needed Euron to find Victarion. Now it was too late. With a gurgling noise, more blood flowed to the bed. The proclaimed Lord of the Iron Islands quivered one last time, his chuckle stopping and his only eye reflecting the flames burning in a fireplace.

“This is what you’ve bought with your iron, uncle.” Theon said, snatching the sword out of Euron’s throat, breaking a bone on the way.

He then took out his cock to piss on his uncle’s body.

And he fails again. There he was, the same immature boy who thought funny kicking the head of a beheaded man.

Robb was so lost in thought the he didn’t see Asha taking a step further.

“It seems you have done enough, brother.” With a swift gesture, she smashed the handle of her sword against Theon’s skull. With a smacking sound, he immediately fell to his knees, his cock still out of his trousers. He had lost his senses by the time he landed on the floor.

With an angry look in her eyes, Asha sheathed her sword.

“That was not necessary, Asha.” Robb said, instinctively.

But she was not listening to him. Ignoring the girl who was now crying, Asha sat on the bed at her uncle’s feet. Her eyes stared at the dead, mutilated man with something more than hatred. Pity.

“He shouldn’t have died this way.” She said, surprisingly. After all, that was the man who had killed her father, stolen her crown and rallied up the Iron Islands against her. But she respects him, Robb realized. Euron had also been brave enough to lead his own army and to die for a cause he believed without surrender. That was something Asha could respect.

“Shall we leave you alone for a while?” Robb asked, taking a step back. This was a family matter now and neither he nor Tallhart were Greyjoys.

“Yes, please.” She said, her lips becoming a thin line. She nodded towards the crying girl. “And take her, please. We’ll interrogate her later.”

And so they left the Greyjoys alone: one dead, one passed out in his own piss and the other deciding what do to next.

The next hours were passed trying to restore the castle to its former condition.

Every ironmen who had surrendered was taken to the castle cells, where Tallhart’s wife, daughter and brother were found sick but alive among some other inhabitants of Torrhen’s Square. Letting Helman take care of his family, Robb assumed then control of the castle.

He started giving orders to hoist down Euron’s banner – a red eye with a black pupil beneath a black iron crown supported by two crows – from the watchtower to be replaced by a flag with Tallhart’s
three green sentinel trees over a brown field. Afterwards, he ordered his men to pile up outside all the dead bodies they could find. By nightfall a great fire was burning in the courtyard, turning dead flesh into gray ashes.

"Fire." Jon had told him a while ago. "That's how we kill the wights. Nothing else stops them."

Robb shivered, watching the flames.

"My lord, a room was prepared for you in the keep." His squire, Hart Ashwood, appeared that moment. "A hot bath is waiting for you already."

"A hot bath?" Robb repeated, taking his eyes out of the fire. When was the last time he had taken a hot bath?

Giving a last command to his guards to make sure a feast was prepared in the great hall later, he left for his chambers. The room stood in the middle of the watchtower. The decoration was quite simple: a wide strong bed, a long brown carpet on the floor and a table with two chairs next to a fireplace. It was a palace compared to the wet and muddy tent where he had been sleeping in the last weeks.

As promised, a wooden tub filled with hot water was waiting for him, the steam making strange shapes in the cold air. Quickly getting out of his armor, he got into the tub, his muscles relaxing as soon as the warm water touched his skin.

"Seven hells, how I missed this." Robb whispered, closing his eyes and feeling all the dirt and soot leaving his skin.

From the start he had known that ruling the North would not be an easy task, but no one had prepared him for a winter with worse things than snow and wind.

Three years ago, the Night's Watch had called for help when the wildings started to march south. Following orders coming from the late King Beyond-the-Wall, the Free Folk had left their villages and was climbing the Wall. Since the Night's Watch had not enough men to garrison the hundred leagues between Shadow Tower and Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, Robb had had no other choice than to march with his bannermen to help Lord Commander Marsh defend the North. None of the other great houses of Westeros showed any kind of support or replied to the call of distress sent by the Night's Watch. Meanwhile, the king's only answer had been a single cart with prisoners found in the Black Cells.

Robb had received then control of an abandoned castle, the Nightfort, who he occupied with a garrison of two hundred men. From there, he protected the Wall both from the wildlings who tried to climb the ice structure or the ones who sometimes tried to breach the scary weirwood gate beneath the castle. But he had also fought on open field. For four times now he had gone beyond the Wall to combat armies of wildlings, giants and mammoths in long and bloody battles. He had even been at Castle Black at the greatest battle the Night's Watch had ever fought.

"We must take them all down, Lord Stark." Lord Commander had told him. And so Robb had obeyed without even considering what that meant: they were actually killing everyone. Rapists, robbers and warriors killed side by side with elder, women and children. As if being a wildling was in fact a crime they had chosen to commit.

Soon he found out that Jon and father didn't agree with that point of view. In fact, they believed the wildlings only wanted a home to live and survive the winter.

"You could give the wildlings the Gift lands, Robb." Eddard had said.
But Robb had not even considered that request. The northern lords would never forgive him if he let the wildlings pass freely to build a life in northern lands. And what would Joffrey say? He would most certainly use that as an excuse to raise arms against him. But again, he remembered his father’s words about the dead men walking with icy blue eyes, how Jon had killed one of them and how a party of Lord Commander’s Mormont had been slaughtered beyond the Wall.

“Bowen Marsh is a fool if he believes that the dead men will never come near the Wall.” Eddard had said. “But one day they will come, Robb, and then it will be too late.”

Someone kicked the wooden door, making it open and clash against the wall.

Startled, Robb stood up in the tub, his hand clasping the hilt of the dagger he had left on the floor.

It was Asha. Her angry eyes focused on Robb’s chest for a moment, descending afterwards to his shrivelled cock dripping water.

“These idiots did not want to let me in.” Asha said, pointing a thumb to two guards behind her in the corridor.

After tossing the dagger to the bed, Robb dismissed the guards with a gesture. By the time he was seated again, Asha had closed the door.

“Are you fine?” He asked, staring at her.

The thump of Asha’s boots falling to the floor echoed in the room.

“Yes.” She replied, although she was still angry. “Theon should not have let Euron get under his skin, but now we can’t do anything.”

“You still have the girl. She must know something.”

“Maybe.” Asha took out her leather pants. “But Euron would’ve given better answers.”

Finally managing to take out her shirt, Asha entered the tub, placing herself upon Robb. She did not have a body with curves and salient breasts like Marissa. Her body was like the one of a warrior, with wide arms and a defined stomach. Like a man’s body, he thought, feeling his dick hard.

“My brother has woken up and is not happy.” She said, dipping her hands into the water to grab Robb’s cock.

“We’ll deal with him later.” He replied, feeling Asha’s calloused hand squeezing his penis with force. Slowly, she began to move her hand up and down.

“We are sailing back to Blazewater Bay tomorrow, he and I…” She continued, as if nothing was happening underneath the water. The meaning behind those words was plain enough: that would probably be the last time they fucked. “What makes me question. Will you miss me, Lord Stark? Or are you excited to come back to your weasel of a wife?”

“Shut up.” Robb asked, tilting his head forward to bite her nipple. She gasped with pleasurable pain. “Don’t talk about her.”

“Keep doing that. Oh, yes…” His tongue was now softly licking her areola. “Yes, yes.”

Only after a minute or two did his fingers sought the darkness between her thighs. When they found what they wanted, they plunged into a sea where summer never ended. Asha moaned loudly, caught
by surprise, her hands releasing Robb’s cock for a moment.

“And to answer your question: yes, I’ll miss you… as much as you’ll miss me.” He whispered in Asha’s ear right before entering inside her.

Sometimes he wondered if she could be the ally he needed instead of Theon.

She could be a woman, but in certain ways she was more fitted to occupy the Seastone Chair than Theon. Having grown up in the Iron Islands, she knew her people and had their respect. Theon was still finding his way. Besides, Asha also seemed more calm and mature than her brother and well aware that every decision had to be made carefully to prevent serious repercussions.

“We should actually wash before the water gets too much cold.” Robb suggested a few minutes later. Her hard breasts were pressed against his hairy chest and her legs closed around his waist. However, even though they were keeping each other warm, the water was cooling down and they would be soon freezing.

“No.” She replied. “Fuck me one last time, Lord Stark.”

Robb laughed again, tickling her with his beard and then did as he was told.

Neither of them realized how happy they were.

The night was about half when they finally dressed. In the courtyard, the pyre with the dead was still burning, the flames casting shadows through the castle’s windows. Hearing voices from somewhere below stairs, they had followed the sounds until the hall. The feast was already ending.

Helman Tallhart had been generous enough to spare some of his winter’s provisions to keep Robb’s army satisfied. Fish, fresh bread and ale circulated among the Greyjoy and Stark’s soldiers seated at the long table. Someone had hung a Stark banner behind the dais where Helman and his family was seated together with Theon and two of his closest friends, Qarl the Maid and Denys Drumm.

Theon was definitely better. The concussion on his head couldn’t have hurt him so much since he was enjoying himself. A girl was in his lap, giggling while he whispered something in her ear. In the meantime, his hand was gently touching her breasts.

“We can’t lose time feasting.” Asha said, standing at Robb side. They hadn’t entered the hall, but were instead watching it from afar. “We must question the girl now. What do you think?”

“Yes.” He agreed. “Let’s question her now and have some time to rest afterwards. We’ll need our energy to get on our way tomorrow.”

His hands caressed her waist for a moment before she slapped his hand. Robb smiled, but didn’t comment.

“I’ll get Theon out here.” She said, preparing to walk toward the hall. “And get us some ale.”

He waited in the dark corridor for two or three minutes before the Greyjoy siblings came back. As Asha had said during their bath, Theon was not happy at all.

“Have you finished fucking my sister?” He asked, not joking that time.

“Yes, he did.” She replied for Robb. “And that’s none of your business.” She then grew more serious, a little scary even, with her voice harsh as Robb never had heard before. “Are you aware the damage you did today, Theon? You killed our uncle when I specifically told you we needed him
alive. Must I remind you a thousand times that this war is only over when all our uncles are dead? Euron could have told us about Victarion!"

Theon scoffed. To him, the only thing that mattered was the fact that he had killed their greatest enemy. It had been he who had actually plunged a sword in their uncle’s throat. No her, not Robb. He had done it. Now he expected to receive Asha’s admiration, not a reprimand like he was nothing more than a spoiled brat.

Robb looked at him, trying to break the awkwardness.

“We have a girl to question now. Shall we let the past in the past?”

“Yes.” Theon replied with ice in his voice. “Come with me. I asked Helman where the girl was being kept while you two were too busy fucking each other.”

Postponing that discussion for later, Robb and Asha followed Theon. She stood at Robb’s side all the way, staring at Theon as if she wanted to knock him out of his senses again.

In silence, they went through a spiral staircase to a small room above the kitchens. Three guards were standing outside the room’s door. A torch hanging from the wall made shadows dance on the floor.

“Only one of us must do the talking.” Robb suggested, while one the guards unlocked the door.

“I will.” Theon answered quickly, leaving no room for them to question his decision.

Once again, Asha fumbled, her hands clenching.

The room behind the door was not a cell, but a servant’s bedroom. There was a small fireplace to keep the cold out and two small beds, side by side. A small window, big enough to let a person pass, stood near the ceiling and faced the lake.

The girl was on the floor, sat between the beds with an empty bowl of soup at her feet. Her golden eyes looked up at them. She did not seem frightened. In fact, she seemed ready to meet them. Passing a hand through her hair, she stood up to greet them.

“What is your name, you little whore?” Theon asked, taking a step towards her.

When the girl looked up Robb thought he could see defiance in her eyes.

“This one name is Missandei.”

“This one?” Theon laughed. “You’ve a stupid way of speaking.”

“Thelon, you don’t have to treat her like that.” Robb intervened, slightly bothered. That was exactly the behavior he couldn’t stand on Theon or rely in times of need. The girl, even if she was a whore or a sorceress as the rumors said she was, was also a victim in all that business. She could only have thirteen or fourteen years. There was no need to treat her like a common whore.

The girl, however, didn’t seem to mind to be called a whore or being mocked by her way of speaking. She looked like she was used to worse things.

“I can treat her how I want.” Theon retorted loudly, his voice echoing through the room.

*He is trying to make a point, Robb thought. Prove that he is not a pup wolf.*

To Robb’s consternation, Theon grabbed the girl by the chin to make her look at him. She
whimpered, but her eyes stared wide open looking at him.

“Tell me, whore, where is my uncle Victarion?”

“This one doesn’t know.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“Master Victarion never spoke about where he was going with all those ships.”

“Liar!” Theon released her chin and struck her with a slap violent enough to make her fall in the floor.

*That’s enough.*

“For Gods’ sake, Theon, she is only a child!” Robb yelled, without even realizing he had taken a step forward. “You’ll not touch her again.”

Robb held his friend by the arm and pulled him out of the room. Theon tried to struggle, but since he had drunk at the feast and Robb was stronger than him, his attempt to escape failed. Reaching the corridor, Robb threw him against a wall. Right behind them Asha laughed, certainly amused. Startled, the guards came up, taken by surprise, ready to intervene if needed.

“You don’t have the right to do that!” Theon screamed, trying to get rid of Robb’s hold. “I never questioned your ways of doing things!”

It was true, but that didn’t justify Theon’s actions.

“We want answers from the girl and she is answering.” Robb replied, trying to maintain his reason. “You don’t have to beat her.”

“Stop defending my uncle’s whore!” Theon insisted, trying again to get rid of Robb’s grip. “What part of her being my prisoner you did not understand? She has important information related to the future of the Iron Islands and since I’ll be soon Lord, I can do with her as I please…”

*I can play that game too, Theon.*

“You’re not Lord of the Iron Islands and you’ll not be if you continue acting like this.” Robb said, still pushing Theon’s shoulders to make him stay against the wall. He could sense Asha and the guards behind him. “Besides, you are in my lands, in the castle of one of my bannermen and it is my word that prevails here. Do you understand?” He stopped for a few seconds. “Now be a man, Theon. If you try to behave like a man, soon you’ll be one.”

Theon shook his head.

“Fuck you, Robb.”

Robb pushed him even more against the wall.

“Wrong answer. You’ll apologize for that.”

He laughed as his fist struck Robb in the stomach, making him take a step back and release his hold on Theon. And then, while Robb was bending forward recovering from the pain in his belly, Theon turned and left, his steps echoing through the corridor.

“Don’t worry about him.” Asha said. Robb looked towards the spiral staircase from where Theon
had just disappeared. “He’s just a spoiled brat.”

“She’s just a spoiled brat.” He screamed with all the air in his lungs, hoping that his words were high enough for his friend to hear. The guards looked taken aback and Asha laughed before holding his arm to pull him back to the room.

Missandei was on the bed, the left side of her face getting swollen and red. Her golden eyes were incredibly calm, refusing to acknowledge the pain.

“My brother will not come back.” Asha assumed control now, as she had always wished. She sat on the other bed, right in front of the girl. “You have nothing to fear from me. I only want to ask you a few questions, try to understand what you may know that we don’t. Anything could be useful.”

The girl nodded.

“This one is more than willing to tell you what she knows.” The girl interrupted Asha with her steady voice. “But this one wants something in return.”

“What?” Asha asked immediately, suspicious.

Still bearing the pain in his stomach, Robb frowned. That was unexpected.

“This one wants to return to the place she was taken from.”

Asha nodded, relief settling on her face. She was expecting a heavier price.

“And where is that, girl?”

“Meereen.”

Robb’s eyes widen. He had heard the news coming from Slaver’s Bay.

“Meereen is no more, girl. Haven’t you heard? The city fell three years ago.”

Missandei was not taken by surprise with that answer.

“This one knows the city has fallen.” Missandei answered, gulping. “This one heard master Victarion say that Queen Daenerys had burnt Meereen, Yunkai and even Astapor, putting an end to slavery at the bay once and for all. This one heard him say that the ruined cities are now called things like Dragon’s Waste, Flame Bay and Harpies’ Pyre. But he also told that there was still hope among the ashes: Queen Daenerys has established a new place that is flourishing among the old ruins of an ancient city and that welcomes any freemen. All this this one has heard.”

“Are you talking about Daenerys Targaryen?” Robb had to intervene. He was not expecting that at all. “The Dragon Queen?”

“Yes.” Missandei replied, looking now at Robb. “This one is proud to have served Queen Daenerys as her scribe for a time. But then the Queen flew on the black dragon’s back into the Dothraki Sea and the Great Masters took Meereen back. This one was captured during the battle, chained and sold to master Victarion.” Her eyes were again on Asha. “He was by then at Meereen to offer his services to Queen Daenerys but, as she was presumed lost, he bought this one and sailed back to the Iron Islands. He later gave this one to master Euron. This happened two months before the Queen returned to Meereen bringing the Doom of the Harpy.”

*The Doom of the Harpy.*
Robb had heard rumors about how the Mother of Dragons, the lost Targaryen princess who had married a dothraki lord, had broken chains all over Essos. Slavery was now withering everywhere thanks to her. And some believed that one day she would invade Westeros with her dragons to take back the Iron Throne and avenge her family. Even so, six years had passed since her dragons had allegedly hatched and still the Seven Kingdoms had not received a shadow of a threat.

His father, who usually talked about those rumors with late Maester Aemon, believed the Dragon Queen hadn’t come yet only for one reason: two of her dragons were still untamable, flying above the Dragon’s Waste. She would only come when she had learned how to control the creatures.

However, the strangest thing in all this was the words the girl had just said.

_He was by then at Meereen to offer his services to Queen Daenerys._

Were the Greyjoys making alliances with the Targaryens? That was a thought that had never passed his mind. What interest could Euron have had on the Dragon Queen? Had he believed she could use his ships to invade Westeros?

“That’s why my uncle had a special interest in you,” Asha realized, looking at the girl with different eyes. She was not a sorceress. Or a whore. _Only a little scribe full of secrets._ “You know everything about this Targaryen queen.”

Missandei bit her lip.

“Yes.” She confirmed, embarrassed to admit the truth. “This one is ashamed of having betrayed her Queen by revealing some of her secrets.”

“No one can blame you,” Asha comforted, placing a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “I know my uncle can be… _persuasive._ What kind of information did you give to him about your queen?”

The girl seemed reluctant to share her Queen’s secrets again.

“Forget that question. I don’t care about your Queen’s businesses.” Asha retorted, seeing that the girl wouldn’t answer to her previous question. “But I do want to know where my uncle Victarion is hiding. I know he is somewhere building ships, but I need to know where.”

“From what this one has heard, master Euron and master Victarion had a plan. Master Victarion would take the timber to a secret place to start build ships. This one heard them talk one time about a place in Hammertown.”

“In Great Wyk?” Asha asked.

Missandei nodded.

“However, I don’t think master Victarion has taken his ships to that place. That was all an illusion to deceive master Euron.” Missandei gulped and, for the first time, seemed a little frightened. “Master Euron has told this one what were his suspicions.”

“And what suspicions were those?”

Once again, Missandei gulped, holding her hands together.

“Master Euron believed that Master Victarion intended to use the horn from Old Valyria. The magic horn.”
“Magic horn?” This was making less and less sense to Robb.

“Oh, the horn.” Asha repeated, probably remembering something. “I almost forgot about that. Yes, I know about it. Dragonbinder.”

“Dragonbinder?” Robb asked. He had to show that he was there, hearing about things he thought impossible.

“A magic horn that makes a dragon obey to the man who blows it.” Asha replied quickly, returning her eyes to the girl. “My uncle has the horn since he travelled to Meereen, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, it was supposed to be a gift for Queen Daenerys but as she was missing at the time, master Victarion kept it.”

“But why would Euron or Victarion give the horn to another person if they can use it to bind a Dragon to them?” Robb intervened again. A year ago, he would never have believed that those words would ever leave his lips. However, he knew how the ironmen thought. A weapon able to make a dragon obey wasn’t the kind of thing that any man would give away willingly.

“I heard rumors.” Asha answered again, a little impatient. “Apparently, if a common man blows the horn, he burns from the inside out.” Asha answered back. “I saw a man die that way in the kingsmoot when Euron showed us what he had found during his trip to Valyria.”

“So he wanted to give it to the Dragon Queen, because they she can’t burn and all that shit, and then form an alliance with her. Is that it?” Robb asked, thinking he had grasped Euron’s plan in his entirety. It only proved how mad the Greyjoy’s were.

“Yes.” Asha confirmed, not taking her eyes from Missandei. “But now it seems Victarion has changed the plan.”

Missandei nodded.

“According to what master Euron told me, master Victarion was always insisting on finding a way to use the horn himself.” She revealed. “But since master Euron did not believe that would ever work, master Victarion made his own plans. He arranged to take master Euron out of the Iron Islands, convincing him to come to this land with strong good trees and then… Then master Victarion drugged master Euron’s wine and beat him in the courtyard in front of all his men. When master Euron lost his senses, master Victarion removed his only eye and then told the men that anyone who wanted glory should follow him. He said he would not return to the Iron Islands because he had other prizes in sight and the means to achieve it. And so most of the men went with him and I was left behind to tend master Euron’s wounds.”

“That’s it, then?” Asha asked, a smile on her lips. “Build a new fleet somewhere, take control of at least one dragon and conqueror other prize that I presume is the Seven Kingdoms?”

As Missandei nodded, Robb shuddered.

Dead men rising beyond the wall. Dragons making fire rain upon cities. Magic horns at the hands of crazy men. An oblivious king sitting on the Iron Throne. He could not even understand which one of those things was the worst. But one thing he was sure of: something great was coming.

That was a frightening thought.

*We certainly live in strange times.*
“That’s why I must return to my Queen as soon as possible. She must know what your uncle is planning and take action before it’s too late.”

Asha nodded and that moment her hand relaxed at the handle of the dagger at her waist.

“Yes, girl, as to that…”

A thump, a flash of light and a gasp of surprise.

Robb blinked his eyes to make sure he was seeing right.

Asha’s dagger was buried between Missandei’s eyes. Her aim had been accurate enough to kill the girl instantly. Her eyes were wide open, a smile forming in her mouth and a river of blood already flowing through her neck. She had been only a little girl, a girl who wanted to go home to his mother.

And now she’s dead.

“Why?” Robb managed to ask after what it seemed to be an hour. He stood near the door with his mouth opened in surprise and tears prickling behind his eyes.

“Why I killed her?” Asha stood up and approached the girl to remove the dagger. “I had no use for her and I had to be crazy to sail to a bay that is known as Dragon’s Waste.” The dagger came out and with it a golden eye rolled on the floor. “No, she is better dead than alive.”

She sighed, as if a burden had just left her chest.

Only then she saw that Robb was staring at her with disgust and contempt.

He didn’t know which of the Greyjoy’s siblings was the worst. The one who acted impulsively or the one who seemed wise, but was in fact lethal?

“She could have helped you find your uncle…” He managed to say. He couldn’t still believe an innocent girl was dead, slaughtered like an animal.

“Find my uncle? But I don’t intend to find him.” Asha retorted seriously. “You heard the girl. Victarion wants to use the horn to do whatever he wants to do. He has taken ships and timber, yes, but he said he was leaving the Iron Islands behind. That means this war is over. I must make my way home tomorrow, as shall you, to care about my people. I don’t have time for dragons, magic horns and children’s tales.”

“You can’t be serious.” Robb replied.

“I am.” She replied, grabbing his cock through the pants. “Now do you want to go for a last ride or not? He can still go your chambers an hour or…”

He pulled her away aggressively.

“No.” He advanced into Missandei’s body and, carefully, as if the girl was only sleeping, he took her in his arms. “This is over and I can’t stand to look at you any longer.”

And, taking the dead girl, he turned his back to Asha and went to the pyre still burning in the courtyard.
AUTHOR’S NOTES: This chapter was easier than the previous one but it had its perks, mostly because I wanted to create a close portrait of Ned Stark. Tell me if you liked it and what I can do to improve Ned in future chapters. And speaking of comments… thanks once again to all of you who commented and followed! It is very important for me to receive your support. I promise that things will start to accelerate in the next chapters. Soon I will publish also an Appendix with the Westeros Houses and some details about the families and characters so that you can understand better the situation of certain characters after the time jump.

Finally, I hope to publish the next chapter next Tuesday. I can tell you that I am excited to show it to you, guys. I’ll join two characters you never saw together living in the same situation. And at last, sorry again for my English. I’m trying to work on it! I’m waiting for your comments and follows!

EDDARD I

It was the same dream again.

Not the one about Lyanna. No. Since he had broken his promise to her, his sister had started visiting him less during the night, as if she was thankful for what he had done. It had not been an easy decision bringing the truth to daylight, but after escaping death by a mere twist of destiny, Ned knew he had to tell Jon about the Tower of Joy. *In case the next time I don’t have the same luck.* Now he could only hope that it had been the right decision and that the memory of his sister could be honored in more than one way.

No. His dreams were different now.

They were about Catelyn.

*Cat.*

He missed her so very much, especially now that the memory of her was starting to blur. After all, the last time they had met had been six years ago, outside Littlefinger’s brothel. Of course he could still remember her smile and the fire burning on her auburn hair… But not the smell of her warm skin or the sound of her voice. That he missed. Oh, and how much!

In the dream they were again on the Godswood in Winterfell.

She was watching him behind a veil of fog while he sat next to the heart tree cleaning *Ice*. Her mouth was always closed. No sound ever came from her throat. However, this time she had leaned forward, as if to kiss him in the forehead and whisper in his ear how sorry she was for not having understood
the price he had paid. She had never forgiven him for that one failure in their marriage. And, despite the fact the truth was now safe from Robert’s fury, he still couldn’t tell her. He had said the vows before the weirwood on the haunted forest six years or so ago.

I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. That meant he was not allowed to write to Cat, far away in King’s Landing, to tell her that their marriage had been a happy one, that he had not fathered a bastard as he had told her, that he had kept his honor to her.

It was those words the ones he told her every time they met in dreams.

I’ll see you again, my love. I swear, he usually finished, receiving her kiss in the forehead. And that’s when the dream started to turn into a nightmare. Catelyn’s kiss was cold. And then, when she pulled back to look at him again, her eyes were always burning with a blue fire.

The dream shattered as a horn echoed through Castle Black.

Ned opened his eyes. He was not on the Godswood. Blinking in the darkness, he felt the cold sweat running down from his forehead. Somewhere a fire burned in a fireplace casting strange shadows in the room. With the image of those blue eyes still in his mind, he sat on the bed. Yes, he now remembered. He was in the Flint Barracks. All around him men awoke to the sound of the horn, their forms moving beneath fur cloaks.

“What is it?” Mumbled Ronnel Harclay on the bed beside him, his eyes still closed.

Ned placed his feet on the cold floor.

“Brothers coming, I think.” He replied, lifting his head toward the ceiling.

“The party from Long Barrow?”

Ned shook his head.

“It can’t be. It’s too early for them to be back.”

That moment a second blast was blown.

“Wildlings.” Ronnel bellowed, his teeth clenched. “Why can’t they sleep?!”

Slaughter again, Ned thought while getting up. Even though there wasn’t much light in the barracks, he quickly dressed his tunic and chainmail. In the meantime, his sworn brothers of the Night’s Watch left their beds, getting inside their armors and leaving hastily to the armory. Someone opened a window while he was putting his boots. Outside it was still night and snow was falling heavily.

“Move on, lads!” Someone yelled from the courtyard. “Move on!”

Every time a second blast echoed through the Wall almost every man was sure that a third wouldn’t come. The majority of them still laughed every time a survivor of the Battle at the Fist of the First Men told the stories about the dead. They hoped to hide their fear behind laughs and jokes. The ones who believed – or at least were trying to make an effort, like Lord Commander Marsh – kept on saying that the dead would never come near the Wall or, if they dared, that they would never breach the gates. No. The wildlings are the threat now, ser Alliser kept on saying. Don’t let Lord Traitor and his puppy bastard frighten you.

Ned didn’t want to frighten anybody.
Soon after reaching the Wall, Ned had realized how much he was unaccustomed to obey orders. Obeying orders that didn’t play with what he believed made things even more difficult. Still, Ned saw himself as an honorable man, no matter what the entire kingdom thought of him. In fact, he now believed that this was his fate: protect the North from the true threat. King’s Landing had only been a test. Here, at the Wall, the true battle for the realm would be fought.

And today he had to do his best again.

Leaving the barracks with Ronnel and Edd, the three of them advanced quickly through the courtyard to grab weapons from the armory. Ned received the sword Mikken – the blacksmith of Winterfell – had made for him three years ago. It was very different from Ice. His family’s sword, as Robb had told him during one of his visits at Castle Black, was now kept in the great hall at Winterfell. Even so, Quiet Wolf was a good sword. It was not made with valyrian steel, but it was longer than his leg and lighter than any sword he had ever wielded. The handle was carved in the form of a black wolf head, inspired by Jon’s Longclaw. It seemed appropriate.

Hoping not to use it, he sheathed the sword and joined the other men waiting in the courtyard under the snow.

“How can this be an attack?” Edd asked, his breath freezing in the air. “If the wildlings are storming the gates at Long Barrow, how can they be here?”

Long Barrow, Eddard thought bitterly.

Jon and Benjen had left five days ago to the castle on the east with reinforcements to fight a new band of wildlings. The idea had come from ser Alliser himself. He knew Ned and Jon’s positions about the wildlings’ situations and was doing his best to undermine their plans. Besides, Alliser knew how hard it was for Jon to wield his sword to fight against wildlings. When he had made Jon a ranger, promoting him from a steward position, it had been with the hope that the boy would betray himself and leave the Wall to fight alongside the wildlings. This time for good.

For a time Ned thought it would break the boy. Jon was changed since the girl’s death. The pain consumed him from the inside and took care of his instincts in times of pressure. But he was strong. He has Lyanna strength in him, Eddard had said many times to himself. So the boy had learned to shut up his mouth and, like Ned, had found out other ways to fight for what he believed.

“It can’t be an attack.” Edd replied, with his cold voice. “Most likely starving people asking for help again.”

“Well, someone is optimistic today.” Mocked Ronnel with a snort.

Six years after taking the black, Ned was not known among the Night’s Watch for being friendly. As far as he knew, his sworn brothers saw him as an arrogant and unpleasant man.

“Well, whatever it is…” Edd said, rubbing his hands. The three of them had their eyes on the winch elevator that was coming down from the top of the Wall. “I hope we don’t have to fight today. My balls are freezing out here.”

The weather was becoming colder by the day and they still had not finished the first year of winter. Every day the snow fell unceasingly while the cold winds rose to extinguish fires more quickly. To further aggravate the situation, the provisions they had for the coming years were scarce.

Soon there will be worse problems than frozen balls.
“Don’t lie to us, Edd.” Grenn, who was listening beside them, got into the conversation. “Everyone knows you have no balls.”

Not much later, the elevator stopped and Lord Commander Marsh stepped into the courtyard followed closely by Alliser Thorne, Janos Slynt and Thoren Smallwood. Power was currently a strange thing on the Night’s Watch and everyone knew it. Bowen Marsh, at the time of the election, had more votes to win than ser Alliser but when the wildlings’ attacks had begun, the Lord Commander wasn’t able to be up for the challenge. That’s why he had turned for ser Alliser looking for advice, quickly becoming his puppet.

“A group of wildlings is approaching the gate.” The Lord Commander warned with a high voice. He seemed lost, as usual. “No more than ten. Ser Alliser and a party of fifteen rangers will meet them while the others stay here getting ready to fight if that proves to be needed.”

*So I was right*, Eddard thought grimly. *More slaughter coming.*

Ser Alliser stepped in front of Bowen Marsh and took control of the situation.

“The men I call will accompany me today.” He said, imperiously. Eddard had to recognize that the man was a natural leader. All the same, it was not the leader the Wall needed. “We’ll ride out there, surround those bastards and kill them. It’s easy and simple.”

Without further delay, he started picking up rangers to accompany him. Grenn was picked up, as was Ronnel and even Janos Slynt and Thoren Smallwood. Ned lifted his chin, hoping to hear his name. His hand caressed the handle of the sword, his fingers touching gently the wolf’s head.

Slowly, names were called and every place was filled.

And Ned wasn’t among them.

“What are you doing?” Edd asked, seeing that Ned was prepared to take a step forward.

“I’ve to go.”

He wanted to see with his own eyes what Benjen had reported.

Since Mance Rayder’s death at the Battle of Castle Black, a dozen men had claimed the title of King Beyond-the-Wall but none of them had succeeded in commanding the free folk to march south. So they had turned to each other and started striking different points of the Wall, being constantly defeated by the northern armies garrisoning the old castles. Now, however, the situation was more desperate. The majority of the surviving wildlings was now mere bodies, starving to death and freezing in the snow. Soon they would be nothing more than meat to the dead army. Even if the dead were not seen for more than four years, that didn’t mean they weren’t coming one day.

*Every life lost is a loss for the Wall.*

“Lord Commander!” Ned yelled, making way between the men standing next to the gate. Heads turned immediately to him and whispers, soft like snow, erupted among some of the brothers of the Night’s Watch.

Bowen Marsh, who was whispering something to Donnel Hill, looked behind and seemed not surprised to see Eddard looking defiantly at him. Unlike ser Alliser, who had despised Ned since the moment he had arrived at Castle Black, the Lord Commander still treated Ned with some respect, remembering the days he had been Lord of Winterfell and Hand of the King. In fact, during a few months after the Stark’s army had come to assist the Night’s Watch, Bowen Marsh had relied on
Ned’s guidance to prepare for the war. They had only parted ways when Ned had suggested opening the gates to give the wildlings the Gift lands.

“Yes?” He asked, growing red.

Lord Commander Marsh, also known as the Old Pomegranate, was a round man with a red face. Even though he had won the election after Mormont’s murder, he would have done better as Lord Steward, with his counts and measures.

Ned gulped before continuing.

“May I ask to accompany ser Alliser?”

Alliser, who until that moment had stood watching Ned in silence, took a step further to shake his head. A smile crossed his lips.

“Have I called your name, Lord Traitor?”

Ned’s hand clenched the handle of his sword.

“Have I talked to you, ser Alliser?”

He also took a step further, leaving behind the black mass of men gathering in the Castle Black’s courtyard. Alliser Thorne was a slim and sinewy fifty-year-old, with black eyes and black hair streaked with gray. He had a thin smile, and a sharp, cold voice. For moments, they stared at each other and all the other brothers waited. The tension was more than palpable.

“Now, now…” Bowen Marsh intervened, taking a step further. His eyes were on Ned’s hand, still clasped around the wolf’s head. “No need for that, ser.”

Ned turned his eyes from ser Alliser to the Lord Commander.

“You are a ranger, ser Eddard.” The Lord Commander replied, after casting a quick glance to ser Alliser. “You can go with ser Alliser if you want, but you’ll have to obey. Am I clear? Don’t waste our time defending those savages.”

Ned nodded, but from his lips didn’t pass a word to secure that promise.

Ser Alliser was clearly not satisfied with that outcome but didn’t protest again.

“Let’s move then, you lazy asses!” Alliser yelled, climbing to his horse. “We’ve wildlings to kill.”

While waiting for a stable boy to bring his horse, Ned exchanged a last word with Edd. He was the only one at Castle Black at the moment in whom he could trust.

“Ser Alliser will make you kill wildlings, Ned.” Edd muttered softly. “I thought you didn’t want to kill another one…”

Ned placed a hand on Edd’s shoulder and brought him closer to him.

“Don’t worry. I’ll not kill any wildling today.”

As soon as all horses were brought up to the gate, the small party of sixteen men started to ride through the tunnel. For what seemed to be ten minutes they advanced throughout the long, twisting and narrow tunnel that led to the other side. They stopped for a while when two rangers had to climb down their horses to open up the gate that stood in the middle of the tunnel. After resuming their
march, they continued in silence. The fire burning on the torches kept them warm.

At last, they reached the outer gate of the tunnel – a solid oak door nine inches thick – and Ser Alliser stopped and, for the first time since they had left the courtyard, addressed the group.

“Let’s see what these fuckers want this time.”

The gates opened and they rode beyond the Wall at full speed. The limits of the haunted forest in the distance were nothing more than a black line fading against the dark sky. Snow kept on falling, covering them and getting inside their furs. The torches were extinguished in less than a minute.

*The Fields of the Dead*, Eddard remembered while galloping behind the others. He could hear, once in a while, bones crushing beneath the hoofs of his mount. *Bones*. Wildlings and brothers of the Night’s Watch alike. Thousands of them buried in a grave of snow. That was a worrying thought. And again the cold eyes, burning blue, made him shiver.

The horses didn’t need to gallop much further.

Soon they found the wildlings that had been seen from the Wall.

The group had only five people. A family. A woman in her twenties clutching to her side two girls under ten years. There was also a man, not much older than the woman, holding a boy in his arms. The child, that must had only five years, reminded Eddard of little Rickon back at Winterfell. The group, shivering beneath their furs, was in such a bad state that they took their time to realize sixteen horses had appeared out of the snow to surround them.

*How can they possibly think this is a threat?*, Ned asked to himself while taking out his sword to point it to the wildlings, as all the other men had done.

He looked above to see ser Alliser expression through the snow. The man stood at the top of his horse, his lips contorted on the strangest smile Ned had ever seen. Janos Slynt, on the other hand, seemed more uncomfortable. Could Alliser’s strongest ally, the very same man who had betrayed Ned, have a heart in his chest after all? Ulmer too seemed a little uncertain, his sword descending slowly as he caressed his beard.

Ignoring the swords pointed at him, the man holding the child stood in silence, blinking the snow out of his eyes. Meanwhile, the men of the Night’s Watch waited.

“Shall we really kill them?” Janos Slynt voiced the thought on everyone’s mind. “They will die either way.”

The wildling man placed the boy on the freezing ground to catch a girl who was wandering towards a horse.

“Yes, you’re right, ser Janos.” Alliser replied, finishing his sentence with another laugh. “It seems Lord Traitor might have its way today.”

*If we had my way we would take these people back to Castle Black.*

“You should go back to the Haunted Forest”, Alliser told the wildlings with disdain, his eyes darting toward the forest at the distance. He had to raise his voice to be heard above the whistling wind. “We will not strike you down if you don’t want to attack us, but there is no place for you here.”

“Please, ser, please…” The woman cried, falling to her knees. The little girl fell beside, her face frozen on the same expression, her skin white and her eyes blue. *Not the blue of the dead.*
Yet. “Please.”

Promise me, Ned. The words echoed in his mind, so similar to Lyanna’s, the same despair of a person who knows death is coming. He looked to the woman more carefully now. Her nose was black, taken by frostbite and soon the skin on her neck would be dead too, since it was growing darker. The woman knew her chances to live were scarce.

“What do you want, woman?” Ser Alliser asked again, scornfully.

It was the man who took a step further this time. He had his mouth and the head above the eyes covered with a scarf.

“We came from an encampment near Whitetree… Because we heard a rumor…”

Lord Commander's brows furrowed.

“What kind of rumor?”

“Please, ser, please…” The woman was now weeping, her voice suffocated by sobs.

“We heard that you crows were taking the children…” The man continued, raising his voice.

Ned’s eyes darted toward Alliser Thorne again. He was shaking his head, the eyes focused on one of the little girls who had tears frozen on her cheeks like crystal.

Yes, look at them. See what you have done.

“You heard a lie!” Alliser Thorne replied a few seconds later. “Now get back to your forest if you don’t want to die today.”

“No!” Screamed the woman, trying to get hold of ser Alliser’s boots. “Please, good ser! Protect my children… They don’t have to die… They are only children, good children…! They will obey you, I swear…”

Ser Alliser kicked the woman with his boot, making her fall behind with a whimper. She hit her head in the snow and the cry stopped.

“Ser Alliser, they are only children.” Pointed Eddard, unable to stop the words coming from his throat. “We can take them to Castle Black. I’m sure my son Robb is willing to take the children as wards in Winterfell if you send them to him…”

Ser Alliser spat to the ground.

“You are not the Lord of Winterfell, Stark.” He said, his breath frosting in the air. “Besides, I’m letting them live. Isn’t what you wanted?”

“They’ll not live here! Take at least the boy and the girls…”

Alliser Thorne snorted, enjoying himself.

“No. We can’t have precedents.”

Eddard looked again to the children. The boy was white, his eyes almost closed. He wouldn’t live much longer. Ned couldn’t even know if the boy could actually recover in the warmest room of Castle Black.
“And what do you think would happen if you were to let the wildlings sleep beside your own children?” Asked ser Alliser, amused. “How much long would it take for them to kill your spawn?”

From the corner of his eyes, Ned saw something gleaming in the snow, something cold.

_A blade._

Without announcing himself, the wildling man had managed to get a knife between his fingers and had thrown himself against Ser Alliser. He pulled his leg from the horse, making the master of arms of Castle Black fall on the snow with a surprised scream. His sword fell on the ground and the horse, scared, beat his hoofs violently on the ground, disturbing the mounts of the closest men.

Ned barely had time to think.

He saw the knife plunge into ser Alliser’s chest, managing to intrude between chainmail and leather. In a split second, he thought of standing there, waiting for the wildling to end with ser Alliser’s life. But then he understood he couldn’t. Before the wildling could strike for the second time, Ned plunged his sword on the man’s back, trespassing fur, flesh and bone. He then drew his sword out, covering the snow with blood, while the wildling fell beside ser Alliser.

Someone screamed. A girl.

Janos Slynt and Ulmer had already climbed down their horses to assist ser Alliser’s wound. The man was in shock, his eyes wide open, without realizing what had just happened to him. Janos pressed his gloved hands against his friend’s chest.

“We must take him to Maester Sam.” He yelled immediately.

Ned climbed down his horse to inspect the wildling.

He was already dead.

In less than two minutes, Thoren Smallwood and Janos Slynt managed to put ser Alliser back on his horse.

“Go back to your fucking forest or I’ll make arrows rain on you within an hour.” Janos shouted toward the woman and the children. The only one weeping now was the oldest girl. The other three seemed oblivious to what had just happened. “You hear me?!”

And then he turned his horse to ride back to the gate, ser Alliser’s horse galloping afterwards between two riders. One by one, all the others left until Eddard, Grenn, Ulmer and Ronnel were the only ones staying behind. They stood in silence looking to the wildlings. The dead man had his eyes open, staring sightlessly at the sky. The blood around him had already frozen and looked like a mirror with red glass. Meanwhile, the children were now hugging the woman, the only adult survivor, to console her.

“What are we waiting?” Ulmer asked, climbing to his horse. “Let’s ride back.”

Ned, finishing cleaning the sword with a ball of snow, sheath _Quiet Wolf_. He had to do something for the survivors before returning to Castle Black.

“Walk east.” He said to them, loud enough for all of them to hear him. “The rumors you heard are true. You just knocked on the wrong gate.”

Beside him, on the horses, the other men stirred uncomfortably. The little girl furrowed her brow,
curious. The woman, who was supposed to take the lead, didn’t spoke a word.

“East?”

“Right by the shore there is a Castle.” Ned continued, calmly. “There is a man there called Cotter Pyke who can help you.”

Finally, the woman stopped weeping and looked to Ned.

“Please, let us come with you… The sea is too far… We won’t survive.”

Ned knew that. He knew the boy wasn’t going to live another mile. But it was the only chance for them.

“You have to try.”

“Why?” The girl asked again, defiance brightening in her eyes. She had red hair. Kissed by fire, as Jon had told him a while ago. “You killed my uncle. You’re a crow, just like them…”

“Your uncle tried to attack one of my brothers, little girl.” Ned replied, sure those words would be enough. “Now return to the forest and hide among the trees as you go east. Believe me. It’s all I can do for you.”

And, before the girl could say anything else, he climbed back to his horse and rode to the gate. The other three followed him. As he rode through the snow, distancing himself from the children behind him, he felt tears stinging his eyes. Ned suspected that soon his dreams would be disturbed by each one of those wildlings he had just condemned to death. Still, there had been nothing he could have done. He had no authority to save them.

Finally, they passed the gates back to the icy tunnel and Grenn and Ulmer came down to close the gate. It was then that Ronnel dared to exchange a look with Ned that had a very clear meaning: What have you done? It was common knowledge that Cotter Pyke used to trade with wildlings in Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. What few men knew was that since last year the Commander of Eastwatch was in fact smuggling wildling children into Westeros. Most of them, Eddard suspected, were put in galleys and taken to Essos. Probably many of them would end as slavers. However, that was a better destiny than to die in the snow.

The point was that a secret kept among the sworn brothers who supported the wildlings cause was now known by Ulmer and Green.

“What was all that shit about?” Ulmer asked before climbing up to his horse. He was a grey-bearded outlaw, skilled with a bow. He was the last man of the Kingswood Brotherhood. “Pyke is letting wildlings pass?”

“Yes.” Eddard said, his voice cold as ice. “Will you tell?”

Grenn, mounting again his horse, shook his head to say no. Ulmer, however, seemed more suspicious and kept his ground.

“I know ser Alliser calls you a traitor.” He said. “But I never saw you as one, ser. Until now.”

That word doesn’t mean anything by now.

“Ulmer, do you remember your vows to the Night’s Watch?” Eddard asked, firmly. Every time he asked himself if what he was doing was the right, he remembered his vows.
“What of it?” Ulmer asked.

“Didn’t we swear to be the shield that guards the realms of men?”

Ulmer laughed.

“We are no shield if we let the wildlings pass. Do you want to bring rape, robbery and plunder to the North, ser? If I rightly recall, you were Lord of Winterfell and it was your duty to behead any wildling that had somehow entered the kingdom. So explain me how that makes sense.”

“It was what my father taught me, and his father before him.” Eddard replied. “It doesn’t mean we were right. Now that I’ve seen with my own eyes, I know the wildlings are just like us. And they are dying out there, filling this land with dead corpses. They are desperate for food, for shelter, for protection. They are men, same as us… The only difference is that there is a Wall between us.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sick and tired of hearing all that shit… And my position is the same, ser. Letting the wildlings through that gate would never result. Besides, we would have to share our provisions for the winter and the weather isn’t that bad yet…”

_Idiot._

“They will die then.” Eddard retorted. “And then they’ll rise and attack the Wall. And how do you kill a dead man, Ulmer?”

“Fire.” He answered. “I participated on Mormont’s Great Ranging, ser. I fought at the Fist of the First Men…”

“And you think it’ll be easy to make fire during the cold nights? To make pyres with the dead?”

Ulmer kicked the gate.

“Don’t worry about them, ser. They’ll never pass this gate.” Lord Commander had ordered the door to be reinforced a few months ago with steel and ironwood. “I’m more worried with you now. Do you plan to rebel against Lord Commander?”

_Traitor. Exiled. Rebel._

“Of course not.”

Ronnell moved again on his horse, uncomfortable. This was too risky.

“Well…” Ulmer grinned again. “Then you don’t have to worry, ser. I know you’re a fool and that someday you’ll lose your head, but it won’t be on my account. I won’t tell your secret. I hate ser Alliser as much as you do. He always treated me like shit.” Ned nodded and a cold smile touched his lips, acknowledging Ulmer’s vote of trust. “However, I don’t like you either. You are letting the wildlings trick you. They are not the same as us. They aren’t! And remember that even those children would have grown up one day to be just like their parents…”

“I guess we’ll never know.” Ronnell replied, anxious to put an end to the conversation.

Ulmer gave a friendly pat on Ned’s horse's muzzle and turned to climb his own mount. Without exchanging another word, they resumed their journey to Castle Black. By the time they reached the courtyard, the brothers, who only an hour later had gathered there, had already dispersed.

Delivering his stallion to a stable boy, Ned and Ronnel prepared to go searching for Edd in the
Shield Hall but Hernen, Lord Commander’s squire, came running to detain Ned. The boy was wheezing.

“Lord Commander has summoned you to his chambers, ser.”

“Why?” Ned asked immediately. Could it be about Alliser’s attack?

“A raven, ser.” The squire replied quickly. “A raven arrived. It’s all I know.”

*Dark wings, dark words.*

“I’ll meet you later.” Eddard said toward Ronnel. His friend, who was certainly eager to talk about what Ulmer would or wouldn’t say, nodded and turned back.

Snuggling inside his fur, Eddard followed the squire across the courtyard. Around them the typical sounds of Castle Black were awakening for another day: the latest recruits starting their train, the metallic sounds coming from the blacksmith and the wind whistling unmercifully.

Since Lord Commander’s Tower had burnt down a few years ago - the night Jon had set it on fire to save Mormont from a wight – the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch kept his quarters on the King’s Towers. It was a round tower with merlons atop it and with a lot of stairs. Ned climbed up all the steps until he finally reached the last floor. Voices came from behind the door.

*Janos Slynt.*

Sighing, he stood against the wall while the squire knocked three times at the door.

The voices stopped immediately and were followed by footsteps.

“Ser Eddard.” Janos opened the door to let him in. “I was just telling Lord Commander what happened.”

Eddard nodded, uninterested.

“Yes, yes, very brave…” Slynt bowed his head. Even though six years had passed, the former commander of the City Watch was still afraid to face Eddard alone, as if he feared some retaliation. “You acted quickly, ser. One more stab and ser Alliser could have died.”

Once again, Ned didn’t respond to what seemed to be a very poorly done thank you. He sighed and looked behind Janos’ shoulder toward the desk where Lord Commander was waiting. Although he had no intention of retaliating against Janos Slynt, Ned treated him as a man without honor, ignoring him whenever he could.

Janos Slynt was used to it by now and, understanding that no other word would come from Eddard’s lips, said “I shall leave you now, ser.” After looking back to exchange one last glance with the Lord Commander, he passed into the corridor and began making his way back to the courtyard.

Ned entered the room and heard the squire closing the door behind him.

Lord Commander’s room was circular and quite simple. It had a large bed, a desk full of papers and a fireplace. A bookcase with some books and scrolls was leaning against a wall. There was also a little cabinet with some swords and a bow, but only for decorative purposes. A tall candlestick with seven burning candles stood at the desk’s side, lighting the dark chamber.

“Ser Eddard, take a seat.”
Seated beside his desk, the Old Pomegranate pointed a finger to a chair on the other side of the table. As soon as Ned sat in the chair, the Lord Commander took a long breath and looked to the squire.

“Boy, pour us some wine.”

Hernen, an orphan from a small house on the Riverlands, obliged immediately and brought two cups and a mug with mulled wine.

“Maester Sam is treating ser Alliser and it seems he’ll be fine.” Marsh said, after a few seconds of silence. “A superficial wound and two broken ribs.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.”

Bowen Marsh nodded, as if expecting that answer.

“Yes, it’s good news.” He drummed his fingers around his glass. “But this only proves the wildlings are too tricky, ser Eddard. Will you now see reason?”

Ned didn’t reply for a while, pondering the words he should say next.

“Ser Alliser was refusing help, Lord Commander.” He finally said. “Three starved children, a dying woman and a man who must only had twenty years. They were asking for help. How can we blame the man to let despair take hold of his senses?”

Bowen Marsh lifted his cup and took a long sip. His eyes stared back at Ned while he drank. Meanwhile, Ned decided not to drink so early in the morning. He didn’t know yet what Marsh wanted and what news had arrived at Castle Black. By the time the Lord Commander put his glass down with a dry thud, a more serious expression had taken hold of his face.

“A raven from Long Barrow flew in right after you left.” He said, showing him a bit of parchment that was hidden beneath a book. “The wildlings attacked Long Barrow as we feared, but the castle is now safe. Lord Umber and your brother are currently securing the gate.”

But not my son, he understood by the tone of his voice. Something had happened.

“However, the attack was worse than we thought. Two hundred wildlings commanded by the new Lord of Bones, it seems. Two giants.” He looked down at the scribbled message. “And yes, three mammoths. I don’t know how they still have such numbers… But somehow they managed to break the outer gate and make our men meet them beyond the Wall. Some of our sworn brothers died, and your son…”

“What about him?” Ned asked. His hands clasped the cup, feeling the warmthness of the mulled wine.

Bowen Marsh pressed his lips, reluctant to continue.

“It seems your son was killed during the fight.”

For a moment he thought he hadn’t heard right.

“Killed?” The word sounded strange in his lips.

“Lord Umber is not sure…” Bowen Marsh continued, passing the parchment. “They found your son’s cloak and his sword in the snow after piling up the dead to make a pyre. It seems your son was taken down during the fight… And there is a chance that his body was piled with the bodies of other wildlings and burned down…”
No.

“It can’t be.”

“I’m afraid it’s true, ser…”

“And the direwolf?” Ned interjected immediately.

Bowen Marsh was taken aback with that question and instead of replying his eyes darted toward the message. Ned hadn’t moved an inch to take the letter. His hands were still holding the cup fiercely. The tendons of his fingers were fully stretched.

“Well, Lord Umber didn’t mention the wolf. The beast is probably lost beyond the Wall.”

Eddard nodded, making an effort to look distressed.

No, Lord Commander, Jon isn’t dead. He can’t be.

And then he took the cup and drank all of it in one long gulp.
AUTHOR’S NOTE: Here it is. I hope you like it. Feel free to leave your review making suggestions and letting me know if you liked the portrayal I made of a few key characters that appear in this chapter. Also, I’ve a very important question to ask you: is anyone free and wants to be my BeatReader? I don’t understand yet how I can find one but I definitely need someone to check my writing for grammar and misspellings.

MYRCELLA I

When the first slap knocked her to the bed, Myrcella knew everything was going as planned.

“Stop, please!” Myrcella Arryn didn’t allow herself to cry. Lying on the bedspread, with her face half hidden in the pillow, she could feel her skin starting to burn where Lysa had hit her. From the corner of her eye, she saw her mother-in-law moving towards her menacingly.

“I know the likes of you”. She said, a maniac smile crossing her lips. “You’re just like your mother… Thinking you are too good for my son.”

“No, I don’t…”

“Why are you taking Moon Tea?!” Lysa yelled again, her hands clasping Myrcella’s legs fiercely. She had long nails, long enough to tear between the green satin of the gown and find flesh.

“I haven’t taken any tea!” Myrcella repeated, gulping. “I swear, Lady Lysa!”

But those words were not enough to make her stop.

A second slap came soon after, making Myrcella turn her head in the pillow. Feeling the blood rushing to her face, the Lady of the Vale looked up to stare at Lysa. Her mother-in-law was an ugly fat thing. She smelled of sour milk – even though she did her best to hide it with scented waters and powders – and resembled a plump fish with bulgy blue eyes. Her breasts were sagging, probably thanks to the voracious appetites of her son and the skin of her face was getting wrinkled each day. Still, Lysa Arryn had a tremendous force.

“You’ve been married to my son for four years and there is no sign of a child yet!” Lysa screamed again, her voice echoing through the walls. “And my husband always said that the seed was strong. So why are you not expecting a child? I’ll tell you why! You’re taking Moon Tea. I know you are!”
"I swear I’m not!" This time Myrcella tried to roll out of bed to stand up and defy her mother-in-law. Long were the days she had been courteous and gracious. The girl who had left King’s Landing had been forced to grow up.

Lysa shook her head firmly and pinned Myrcella to the cushion, pressing her wrists against the soft bedspread.

"Do you take me for a fool?" She inclined her head to the right side, watching Myrcella scornfully. "You are taking Moon Tea. If not for my son, then perhaps to prevent a child from another man…?"

This is too easy.

Myrcella gasped, evoking her best abilities to perform the character she needed to be. It was a talent she had developed quietly when she was a child, pulling Tommen once in a while to play with her. They did their best pretending not to be afraid of Joffrey, like it as a game. That lesson was now proving more useful than she had ever thought it would.

"I’m not betraying my husband, Lady Lysa, and the simple fact that you imply that is preposterous."

"Oh, don’t act so pure, you conniving bitch. I see the way you look at ser Arys…" Lysa replied back, her lips twitching into a wicked smile.

Ser Arys was a good-looking man and a very gallant one. And yes, he had become more than a simple guard of the Kingsguard since they had arrived to the Vale: he was an ally and one of the few people who reminded her of King’s Landing. But he was not her lover, even though Lysa wouldn’t believe otherwise. She kept on insisting that Myrcella had no affection for her son. And that wasn’t the worst: she also implied Myrcella was sharing her bed with ser Arys, Marillion and even Maester Colemon’s name had come to her lips one time.

"I will not answer again to those disgusting lies." Aware she was disheveled and red-faced thanks to the slaps she had just received, Myrcella finally managed to slide out of the bed. Gasping for breath, she tried to smooth down her dress.

"These are not lies." Lysa Arryn replied, lifting her chin. "The maids are whispering about you, saying that you have taken Moon Tea every night last week…"

Oh, the maids, Myrcella made an effort to not smile back. Yes, the plan was working.

"What…?" She asked, doing her best to seem confused.

"The maids are whispering about how you have been taking Moon Tea." Lysa repeated, a cold menace hidden in her low tone. "And Maester Colemon reported that someone was stealing from his cupboard…"

"How many times must I say that I’m not taking Moon Tea?"

That was enough to break Lysa again.

She pushed her daughter-in-law against the wall, refusing to hear another word. Meanwhile, her hand grabbed a handful of hair from Myrcella’s scruff, pulling back the girl’s head. Screaming to the continuous pain flowing through her head, Myrcella closed her eyes and felt the tears prickling behind her eyes. A hideous smell of garlic came from Lysa’s mouth.

"I think it’s time to shut you behind doors for a while." Lysa said threateningly. "My son can visit you to perform his husbandly duties, but no one else should be allowed in your company until you
conceive.”

The only answer Lysa received was a scream. And that bought Myrcella another slap, strong enough to throw to the floor.

“You may’ve born a Lannister.” Lysa said, watching Myrcella from above. The girl was curled up on the ground with her face hidden behind curls of blonde hair. “But here you are nothing.”

*I’m Lady Arryn,* Myrcella said to herself, feeling hiccups in her throat. No, she would not break now. Not today. *I’m the Lady of the Vale.* Only a few more hours and…

Someone knocked loudly on the door.

“Princess, are you alright?” Ser Arys asked from the corridor. As always, Lysa had found a way to get rid of the knight to discreetly get into Myrcella’s room. It was the only way to catch her off guard.

“What do you want?!” Lysa yelled, turning her face toward the door. “She’s perfectly fine, aren’t you?”

“Mother?” The voice of Robert Arryn echoed from the corridor, startling Lysa.

*Thanks the Seven, he came,* prayed Myrcella, lifting her head toward the door. Her eyes lurked between golden hair.

“Mother, what are you doing?” Robert insisted, still outside the room.

Lysa posture changed in a blink of an eye.

She took a step back, to distance herself from Myrcella and her face immediately assumed a calmer expression. As if realizing for the first time that her dress was askew, she bent forward to smooth the skirt. Only after that did she take advantage of an old mirror on the wall to make sure her red dry hair was properly combed.

“Not a word to him.” Lysa threatened, pointing a fat finger to her daughter-in-law.

*I don’t need to tell him a word.*

When Myrcella had married Robert Arryn four years ago, they were both children. Even though her uncle Tyrion had negotiated for them to be married only when Robert was fifteen, her grandfather had made sure they were married as soon as she arrived the Eyrie. Now, she had grown and was aware how things worked in the Vale. Her husband, on the other hand, was still a child. That was why Lady Lysa kept on ruling the Vale on behalf of her son, acting as Lady Regent and making sure Myrcella, the new Lady Arryn, had no power over her.

“Robert, please, help me!” Myrcella pleaded, staring directly back to Lysa.

The door opened to reveal ser Arys standing in the corridor. Robert was right behind him.

Her husband was small, thin and pale, with long brown hair and big eyes. Even though he had twelve, he seemed to be actually eight years old. And he didn't look healthy yet. For the last two weeks he had been in bed, recovering from one of his worst seizures. Out of bed for three days now, he looked dreadful, but had the wits to act as it was expected of him.

*I’ll be back today.* She remembered the words written in the note she had received that morning. *You...*
can put the plan in motion.

“What’s happening?” Robert asked, confused, his eyes jumping from Myrcella to his mother.

As always, Lady Lysa intervened quickly.

“Nothing for you to worry, sweetrobin.” She intervened, grabbing her son’s arm. Myrcella had managed to get up and stood by the wall. Her hair was still disheveled and her gown completely ruined.

“Are you sure, Mother?” Robert asked, his eye still staring to Myrcella. “I heard screams and Myrcella called of help…”

“Your mother attacked me, my lord.” Myrcella replied quickly. She ignored the rabid look coming from Lysa.

Robert closed his eyes and shook his head, as if to process that information.

“Attacked?” He blurted out, his eyes still closed. “My mother would never do that…”

“Of course I wouldn’t.” Lady Lysa interrupted, kissing Robert’s dark hair. “I’m afraid your poor wife is tired and feverish, my sweetrobin. She mustn’t know what she is saying… I just told her to stay abed during supper because she must clearly be catching a cold.”

Robert’s eyes opened and a goofy smile took form on his lips.

“But Lord Baelish will dine with us tonight, Cella.” He replied, excited and quickly forgetting all he had heard about the attack. “He must have brought us presents!”

Myrcella managed to smile and nod.

“Don’t worry, my lord.” She replied, once again ignoring Lysa completely. “As I just said to your mother, I’m perfectly fine to dine with you.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea…” Lysa argued.


Ser Arys frowned and looked to the boy, as if he wanted to tell him something. How could Lord Arryn be totally unaware of the tension between his mother and wife? Or how Myrcella’s hair was disheveled? The moment passed in a blink of an eye.

“Well, in that case we must prepare for dinner.” Lysa took hold of Robert’s arm and pushed him toward the door. “We don’t want to make Lord Baelish wait, do we?”

And then, Robert’s attention left definitely his wife to focus on his mother. A glow that showed the excitement in him took hold of his eyes. The same radiance Robert used to have every time the Doors of the Moon were opened to let someone fly out to their death.

“No, we don’t, Mother! And I’m curious to find out what he brought me today…”

Casting one last glance to Myrcella, as if to assure her that their conversation was not finished, Lysa went into the corridor taking Robert with her. Left alone with Myrcella, Ser Arys closed the room’s door behind him.

“Are you alright, princess?”
Princess.

He was the only one in the Vale who still called her by her old title. Since her marriage she had assumed her new title as Lady Arryn. It was a burden, actually. She would have preferred to be a princess until the end of her life. Sometimes she even wished that her uncle Tyrion had shipped her off to Dorne to marry Trystane Martell instead. There she could have used her title until the end of her life and be married to a more suitable man.

“Yes, ser.”

Ser Arys had light-brown hair and a comely face. That day, he used his cloak of heavy wool, pinning it with the golden leaf of his house. Snowflakes were melting in this hair, proving that he had been outside.

“Have I arrived in time?” He asked, worried. “I did my best to get the boy and bring him here…”

Myrcella nodded, sitting on the bed.

“You’ve arrived at the right time, ser.”

“I’m pleased to hear it, princess. And do you think it worked?”

“Robert is stupid, but yes, I think he is suspicious.” She gulped. Her face was still burning where Lysa had slapped her. A shadow of pain was also still vivid on the back of her head. “I want to believe he has grown up a little since we left the Eyrie.”

They had left the castle atop the mountain almost two years ago. Lysa didn’t want to change their residence to a castle below, but finally had been convinced when the snow and winds had started to grow violent. After a few months staying at Snow, they had finally decided to move permanently to the Gates of the Moon to pass the winter.

The castle at the mountain’s foot was bigger than the Eyrie. It was a stout structure with a moat, a gatehouse, a yard and square towers. While in the Eyrie they had little to do, here there was more movement and activity. And outside the windows there wasn’t only sky: they could actually see trees covered in snow and the top of the mountains glistening against the dark sky, Giant's Lance raising up above all of them. Sometimes during the night Myrcella had even wondered if she could actually run back home, stealing a horse and making her way through the forest.

But, as Lord Baelish had showed her, there were better plays for her to make and the Vale was her home now.

Myrcella was still in King's Landing when Littlefinger had been banished from the Small Council - a demand made by Queen Sansa and her mother - and packed all his things to return to his home at the Fingers. Little else was known about him since then. That's why Myrcella was taken by surprise when she had reached the Eyrie, a few months later, to find the former Master of the Coin there acting as adviser of the Lady Regent. Later, gossiping with her handmaids, she found out that more than Lady Lysa’s adviser, Lord Baelish was trying to marry her.

He is trying to get his influence back.

That plan, however, blew in his face when the Throne, the Lords of the Vale and Lord Edmure Tully refused to accept that Lady Lysa married someone of such a low birth. Since then Lord Baelish began to appear less and less in the Vale. He was always traveling to the capital to check his businesses there and, according to what he said during his last visits, to meet old friends in the Stormlands. Myrcella knew he was a sneaky man, but he made her laugh and brought her gifts every
time he paid a visit.

Of course Lysa did not like it. She was a very possessive woman, her mother-in-law. She usually confiscated Myrcella’s gowns, although they would never fit her. And that was not the extent of her jealousy. By the way she moaned loudly whenever Lord Baelish passed the night in the castle, Myrcella began to suspect Lysa had a need to show who was taking the man to bed.

“When has Lord Baelish arrived?” Myrcella asked, lifting her chin again.

“An hour ago, it seems. He is dealing with some businesses with Lord Royce.” Ser Arys moved uncomfortably. He didn’t like Littlefinger, but it had come from him the idea of making an alliance with him.

“Well, thank you, ser Arys.” Myrcella did her best to smile with courtesy. “Now I must prepare for dinner. Can you send for Myranda?”

“Of course, princess.”

A few minutes later, Myranda Royce appeared to help her dress for dinner. She was the closest friend she had on the Gates of the Moon. With a curvy body and a great bosom, Myranda had something funny about her. It was perhaps the fact that her husband had died inside her. That and the stories Myrcella had heard about how the girl was sleeping with Marillion and ser Harrold in the stables.

“You’ve done well, Randa.” Myrcella replied, smiling through the mirror while getting inside her dress. “Someone told Lady Lysa the rumors you spread about the Moon Tea…”

The girl giggled, pleased with herself.

“I’m only doing my duty, my lady.”

Myrcella smiled back.

No, you just want a proper marriage. Myrcella had promised to find her a wealthy husband if Myranda pledged her allegiance to her. She had done it without second thoughts.

“Nonetheless, it was well done.” Myrcella replied again, getting out of her dress. “Lady Lysa reacted exactly how we hoped. No, no, not the pink…I want the yellow gown. Yes, that one.” She pointed, seeing that Randa was picking up the dress she would wear tonight.

“I see you have been practicing…” Myranda said a few minutes later, while helping Myrcella get inside the yellow gown. Her eyes were locked in Myrcella’s left forearm where small cuts, the size of a nail, were cut along her skin. Some of them were scared already while others were still fresh and red. “Does it hurt much?”

Myrcella covered her arm with the sleeve of her gown.

“It doesn’t matter if it hurts.” She replied, staring back to herself in the mirror. “It is a necessary pain.”

Although she did not see her mother for years, Myrcella could recognize how similar she was getting to her. She had blonde hair, brilliant green eyes, fair skin, and a slender, graceful figure. That was one of the reasons why Lysa hated her so much. She had not found out yet why Lysa Arryn hated the Lannisters so much, but she suspected it was because Jon Arryn’s death. At least, that was why Lysa had always been so reluctant to accept the marriage. Could the rumors be true? Had her mother
really poisoned the old Hand of the King?

Myrcella shook her head, letting the curls in her hair twirl. Her hair wasn’t disheveled any longer. Myranda had done a good work smoothing it down to make the curls fall to her back like a waterfall. She pressed her lips in a thin line and furrowed her brows. Yes, there she was. The Myrcella so like her mother, the granddaughter of the Great Lion of the Rock, the niece of the Kingslayer and the Imp, the sister of the King. A Lannister. Sometimes she even wondered if she had a drop of Baratheon blood in her veins, remembering those disturbing rumors uncle Stannis had spread throughout the kingdom.

*It doesn’t matter if I was Lannister or Baratheon,* she said to herself. Her family had sold her away to the Arryns. *And now I must fight for my place here.*

As night fell, Myrcella and Myranda left the room and descended from the Falcon Tower to the hall where dinner would be served. It was a large room at the heart of the keep with a high ceiling and five fireplaces, all lit to fight the cold. The windows, which had the form of a falcon, were covered in frost. The banners of House Arryn hang behind the table on the dais, side by side with the banner of House Royce. Two dogs barked fiercely competing for a bone under the table.

A quick glance toward the table was enough to tell her that the dinner party was already there. Much like it had happened at the Eyrie, they had a small household on the Gates of the Moon. Lysa was always very suspicious, letting in the castle only a handful of guards, her most trustful advisers and the Royces, who had their seat in the castle.

Robert was already in his chair at the head of the table fascinated with a silver dagger. *Littlefinger’s gift,* Myrcella realized quickly. Lysa was also there, now wearing a long dark blue dress, trimmed with ermine fur on the collar. She was constantly looking toward Lord Baelish, laughing exaggeratedly whenever he spoke and trying to capture his attention any way she could, even though he was too busy talking to Nestor Royce.

Littlefinger was not the same gallant man who had left King's Landing. Now that she looked at him, after not seeing him for nearly a month, Myrcella noticed that Lord Baelish had let grow a beard and that his eyes were surrounded by dark circles. *The portrait of a man who loves his games, but that has no longer a board to play.* It was more than obvious that he had tried to regain his power and reputation several times, but all the attempts until now had failed. Lady Catelyn Stark had made sure that no one stretched a hand to the man who had betrayed her husband.

Lord Baelish stood upright. A smile touched his lips, even though it didn’t reach his eyes.

“My lady, I’m so sorry for your loss.” He leaned over to kiss her hand. The caress of his gray beard tickled against her skin.

*My loss?*

“Oh, thank you, my lord.” She replied, remembering in time that her mother’s family was grieving. She had received the news about Tywin’s death three days ago.

He nodded again with his teasing smile. *Not much longer, my little lioness,* he seemed to say.

“I’m glad to see you back. Will you stay for more than two days this time?”

“At least a week, I suppose. I’m afraid more businesses expect me at Storm's End soon.”

*What is he plotting in the Stormlands?* That was something Littlefinger hid for himself, although Myrcella knew it had to be something more than the brothels he had opened there.
“Well, I suppose we’ll have at least time for dinner?”

He laughed and nodded, offering his arm to accompany her to the chair.

Only then Myrcella noticed that Lysa was purple with jealousy. Nestor Royce, which had called Myranda to sit beside him, looked slightly uncomfortable noticing the proximity between the two of them. Old Nestor, unlike his daughter, was on Lysa’s side and was itchy every time Littlefinger returned and bossed him around, acting as Regent’s Adviser. *We’ll have to deal with him soon,* Myrcella noted, taking a closer look on Randa. She suspected the girl would be pleased to help bring her father down.

And then Myrcella looked at Robert and saw he was still too much focused on the dagger.

“Petyr, sit here.” Lysa ordered sharply, pointing to the chair beside her. All the smile and laughs were gone.

Littlefinger cast a glance in her direction and smiled complacently, obeying quickly like a lap dog. It was amazing how, after so many years resigning himself to Lysa’s whims, he continued to keep up his farce. Of course now Myrcella knew him well enough to understand his behavior: Lysa was Littlefinger’s only powerful friend at the moment. The woman had even broke ties with her sister when Lady Catelyn had asked her not to receive Littlefinger in her household.

*I can never be blind like her,* Myrcella thought while taking her place alongside Robert.

“My dear, that’s a fine gift you have.” She acknowledged, looking at the knife. “But now is time to dine. Can you put the dagger aside for some minutes…?”

Robert looked up wide-eyed, not realizing what she meant by that.

“But mother said I could use the dagger to dine if I want…”

“My lord, you certainly don’t want to cut veal with such a nice dagger, do you? It’s one of the daggers of the Winged Knights!” Nestor Royce broke, coming unexpectedly on Myrcella’s help. He seemed as fascinated by the dagger as little Robert. “It would be a pity to use such an ancient relic to cut meat. The wings on the handle, do you see them? Oh, they are marvelous! It is certainly a great piece…” He turned to Littlefinger. “What makes me ask again, Lord Baelish, where did you found a relic like this?”

“I have several friends in the Vale who were in need of money and were willing to get it by selling their heirlooms… I will not reveal the family name, Lord Royce. I promised I wouldn’t. I do not want to embarrass them that way.” Petyr answered, giving his hand to hold Lysa’s.

Nestor Royce nodded, his eyes back on the dagger.

“Nonetheless, it is an excellent weapon, my lord. Not to cut veal, but to fight. Maybe I can show you how to use it tomorrow…”

“Nonsense.” Lysa interrupted quickly. “Lord Robert has no health for that and besides, he doesn’t need to use a dagger. He has good men to fight for him.” She turned her neck to face Littlefinger and placed a kiss on his cheek. “Your gift was wonderful, my dear. I’m sure it will be beautiful in Robert’s collection…”

“Yes, it’s beautiful.” Myrcella intervened, placing her hand on Robert's wrist, making his hand fall on the table and the dagger with it. The sound of iron meeting wood echoed in the hall. “But there is absolutely no need to play with the dagger while we dine.”
Lysa faced Myrcella from across the table.

“Lord Robert can use the dagger when he wants.”

Myrcella’s hand tightened around her husband’s wrist.

“No, he can’t. I demand that my husband has a minimum of decency and dine with a proper knife...”

“Decency?” Asked Lysa back, raising her voice.

“Myrcella and Lord Nestor are right, Mother.” Robert stepped in, to the surprise of everyone else at the table. “The dagger is an excellent gift, Lord Baelish, but I would be giving it bad use if I were to cut veal with it. There is no point arguing about this again.”

If he could always talk like that my life would be easier, Myrcella thought, smiling honestly toward her husband. Yes, Littlefinger was right. Robert only acted like a child because Lysa was protecting him too much. Everything Myrcella was doing for herself was also for him. Perhaps Robert could finally grow to be the ruler the Vale deserved, following his father’s footsteps. Perhaps she could even love him someday…

And then Robert blinked nervously and Myrcella’s hope died.

Robert handed the dagger to one of the servants that put it on the edge of a window. Across the table Lysa looked furiously at Myrcella. Don’t test me, girl, her eyes seemed to say. It was the second time that day that Myrcella defied directly her mother-in-law in front of Lord Arryn. That was a dangerous game if the plan failed. However, when Lord Baelish smiled discreetly to Myrcella behind his cup, she felt reassured.

You are doing great.

“So the old lion is dead...” Lysa said a few minutes later, after all of them had been served with a generous portion of veal and mashed potatoes. Mulled wine, sweetened with spices, filled their cups.

“A problem in the heart.” Littlefinger confirmed. “The king must soon announce a new Hand of the King.”

“A Tyrell, of course.” Nestor replied, snorting.

“Yes, yes.” Lysa replied quickly. “It will certainly be a Tyrell. That Highgarden whore is certainly helping her family anyway she can...” Lysa's eyes stopped on Myrcella once again. She took advantage of every situation to subtly attack her. As if I'm to blame for Joffrey's actions. “My sister should have dealt with the problem by now… If her daughter is Queen, she can’t allow other women climb to her husband’s bed. And these Lannisters are dangerous. I would not be surprised if that stupid brat we have for a King killed my niece to marry the Tyrell girl.”

The stupid brat is my brother and this might be considered treason, my lady, Myrcella said to herself, taking a spoon of mashed potatoes to her mouth. She didn’t take the bait and continued to chew in silence.

“There are rumors that Kevan Lannister may be chosen for the place instead of a Tyrell...” Littlefinger said, taking a gulp of wine.

“Oh, I was just wondering… There will be a tournament?” Myranda asked, intruding on the conversation excitedly.
Nestor tried to shut her up, giving her a kick in the arm, but the girl shook her head and focused her gaze on Littlefinger, waiting for his answer.

“Yes, I suppose there will be.” He said. “But only after a new Hand is announced...”

“Oh, father, you must let me go then!” Myranda squealed, excited, clutching her father's arm. “You know how I always wanted to see a tournament! With riders of all Seven Kingdoms! “

“Shut up, girl. You're being inopportune.”

Myrcella remembered well the last tournament she had attended. It had been the one held to celebrate Joffrey and Sansa’s wedding. She could see in her mind all the colors of the banners, hear the clashes on the palisades and still remember the excitement she had felt when the Knight of the Scarlet Sands had taken off his helmet to reveal himself as Oberyn Martell. Oh, how great that tournament had been!

“Maybe it wasn’t a bad idea to visit to King's Landing...” Myrcella suggested, facing her husband. “After all, you don’t go there since you were a child, my lord.”

Let him taste power, Littlefinger had told her. Force him to think by himself.

“A tournament in King’s Landing?” He asked excitedly. “Could I be in it?”

Could you survive it?

Myrcella, however, didn’t have time to answer back.

“We’ll not travel to King’s Landing during the winter.” Lysa intervened coldly, as she always did. “The capital is not the place for my son and a tournament... There is too much excitement for him there.”

“Lysa, my dear, your constant need to protect Lord Robert is absurd. It would be good for him to leave the Vale for a few weeks...” Littlefinger said quietly. “Get him warm cloaks to make sure he is warm during the journey and go. There is nothing to fear in the road. We live in peaceful times.”

Lysa was taken by surprise with that turnaround. Littlefinger in defense of Myrcella? Oh, that was something she couldn’t take.

“Petyr, I’ll not have this discussion again.”

Littlefinger sniffled, counterfeited.

“It would do him good, Lysa…”

Lysa shook her head and didn’t make an effort to hide her irritation.

“Do him good, you say?” She shook her head again and her burning eyes locked on Myrcella for a moment before returning to her lover and adviser. “That would only be good for you. I know you want to get back into the good graces of the Lannisters, Petyr, but it will not be at our expense!”

“At your expense?” Littlefinger threw the fork to his plate, as if offended by those words. “It hurts me to hear such accusations from you, Lysa, after everything I’ve done to help you rule the Vale. Do you still believe I’m only here because I want to use you to return to power?”

Lysa, deep down, knew this was the only reason Littlefinger always returned to her feet. Still, she preferred to hide the truth and believe that Petyr, her dear Petyr, loved her with all his heart. Quickly,
her irritation disappeared and she tried to apologize.

“Oh, no, my dear. I’m so sorry...” Lysa said immediately, embarking in a full tone of false sweetness. “But you know how I feel every time you talk about leaving the Vale... Here we are safe.”

“For now.” Littlefinger retorted, pretending to act offended. “If you want me to be your Adviser, I’ll advise. And my advice is this: Lady Myrcella’s idea is a good one. Letting the boy go to King’s Landing would strengthen your alliance with the Iron Throne and remind the King that the Arryns are still their friends. Besides, Lady Myrcella could see her family again and grieve for her grandfather’s death.”

“Lady Myrcella doesn’t need to grieve.” Lysa retorted, casting a look towards Myrcella. “I bet she barely remembers her grandfather...”

Myrcella prepared to answer, but Littlefinger was faster.

“The question isn’t if she remembers him or not.” His eyes darted toward Myrcella. “It is the most sensible action to do.”

“Sensible?” Lysa laughed, the irritation creeping up again. “Like when you said it would be sensible for me to marry Tyrion Lannister and move to Dragonstone?”

Myrcella blinked hearing those words, as it did everyone else at the table except Littlefinger. Neither of them knew about that marriage proposal. Her uncle Tyrion married to Lysa? That meant another alliance between the Arryns and the Lannister. No, not the Arryns. The Tullys, Myrcella realized quickly. After all, Lysa was born a Tully and marrying for the second time would mean an alliance for her birth house. She would also have to leave Robert to rule the Vale without her nefarious presence. Well, that was a genius match indeed, considering also that both Lysa and Tyrion were undesirable bachelors of Great Houses.

Myrcella was learning how the game worked.

“Dragonstone is nothing compared to what you could have by now.” Littlefinger continued. “If you had followed my advice, you could soon be Lady of Casterly Rock. I hear the Imp is determined to fight for his right to rule the Westerlands... But I will not return to this again.”

“Lady of Casterly Rock?” Lysa seemed outraged again, her voice growing louder. “That's what you wanted for me, Petyr? Hand me the Imp to get rid of me?”

Littlefinger grabbed Lysa’s hand and took it to his lips.

“Of course not.” He said, trying to calm her down. “You're misunderstanding and exciting yourself unnecessarily, my dear... I just want the best for you and your family. And for that I am taking all necessary precautions. That’s it.”

“Precautions, Lord Baelish? Precautions against the dragons?” Interjected Robert. He looked paler since the dinner had begun, probably disturbed by all the discussions around him. Still, he had managed to steady his voice to utter those words.

“The dragons will never fly to Westeros, my dear...” Lysa was quick to answer, as always, to calm down and stifle any initiative coming from the boy.

Littlefinger stared at Myrcella and, for a brief fraction of a second, blinked. Myrcella raised her head and prepared to face her mother-in-law again.
“Let Robert speak, Lady Lysa.”

The effect caused by the words was the one they expected. Lysa closed her mouth, while her face flushed. Robert, in turn, looked confused, not knowing whether to look to his wife or his mother. Myranda, further down the table, stifled a laugh.

“Yes, my lord.” Littlefinger answered, stroking his beard. He was good concealing his feelings. “It's smart on our part to prepare ourselves for the dragons if the Dragon Queen decides to attack us. We must reinforce our alliances.”

“Then we shall go to the tournament!” Robert replied, his eyes looking with uncertainty toward his mother. “And I shall fight.”

For the first time Lysa didn’t speak, since she wouldn’t dare to question her son’s authority. Her eyes were locked on Myrcella. If they were alone, she would have attacked her by now.

“Oh, splendid!” Randa exclaimed, clapping her hands to her mouth. “Splendid!”

Across the table, Littlefinger turned to Lysa and whispered something in her ear to try to calm her down. However, no matter how sweet his words were, they were unable to calm her down. Lysa was furious and would continue feeling that way for the rest of the night. Taking the cup to her mouth, Myrcella knew they were winning.

Not long after dinner was over and Marillion, the bard, was called to warm the night with his voice and music. By that time, Lysa was slightly calmer and again on speaking terms with Littlefinger, even though she had not exchanged a word with anyone else. The wine kept flowing gently to the glass still in her hand. The couple left toward a window in the hall to have a moment of privacy.

Meanwhile, Robert took his place in the big chair near a fireplace and was playing again with his dagger, passing it through his fingers. If the blade wasn’t inside its sheath, he would have already cut himself half a dozen times.

“I'll use an armor like the ones the Winged Knights wore.” He said, loud enough to make Randa laugh. She and her father had taken seats in chairs nearby.

“That’s a good idea, my lord…” Myrcella said, approaching her husband. “But please, be careful with that dagger. You can hurt yourself.”

“I'm being careful, my lady.” He quickly replied, lifting his eyes from the dagger while throwing it from one hand to the other. “Can I sleep with you tonight?”

Myrcella swallowed and did her best to smile.

He is in a good mood.

“It would be a pleasure, my lord.”

Marillion started to play Let Me Drink Your Beauty, bestowing it to Myranda’s beauty. The girl laughed, ignoring the reproaching look her father was giving her.

Myrcella, occupying the chair next to Robert, cast a look toward Littlefinger and Lysa, who were still flirting near a window.

It is time.
“My lord, why don’t we go to bed earlier? While you visit Maester Colemon to get your treatment I can order some tea or mulled wine for us…”

Myrcella stretched a hand to caress her husband’s, with his pale skin. Discreetly, her fingers clenched around the handle of the dagger.

“Go to bed early?” Robert seemed reluctant, peering toward Marillion, sitting cross-legged near one of the fireplaces. “But I want to hear more music…”

“I can tell you a story.”

“A story? About the Winged Knights?”

“Yes.” Myrcella smoothed one of the long black hair locks falling forward Robert's eyes. “And maybe another one about dragons.”

The boy nodded, with a smile in his lips.

“Yes, yes. Two stories then…” His hands continued tightening the dagger.

“We’ll meet in your room then.” Myrcella said, whispering like a child. Every time she tried to be seductive she failed miserably. But when she tried to be childish, Robert was persuaded easily. “Now give me the dagger so I can give it to Lady Lysa.”

“The dagger?” Robert asked, the fingers tighter than ever. “But I want to take it to my room.”

“I do not think your mother would approve.” Myrcella replied, pulling the knife harder. “You know what she thinks about weapons in the castle…”

“But it’s only a small dagger and would stay with me.”

“I know, my dear.” Myrcella replied, caressing Robert cheek with her free hand. “But what would she say if she were to find out that the knife is not in the armory with all the other blades? She would blame me for being irresponsible. And I do not even want to imagine if you cut yourself unintentionally… She would hit me again. Or worse.”

“Again?” He asked Robert, shocked. “So she really attacked you today?”

Myrcella nodded, looking down and waiting for her husband to be convinced she was too embarrassed to say another word about it.

“No need to talk about this again.” Myrcella said, finally managing to free the dagger from the boy’s grip. “Now go visit Maester Colemon, my dear.”

“I should talk to my mother first…”

“I am sure her intentions were the best.”

“But she can’t beat my wife!” He said, stiffly. “She can’t!”

“Oh, no, no, no.

“My dear, don’t get too much excited now… Please, calm down.”

“Only I can beat my wife!”
Attracted by the agitation, Lysa left Littlefinger by the window and ran to check on her son. Pushing Myrcella away with an elbow in the stomach, she kneeled on Robert’s feet. The Lord of the Vale was already clenching his teeth and foaming, his eyes rolling while his whole body trembled.

“What have you done?” Lysa shouted, angrily, focusing her eyes on Myrcella. “You know how his nerves are delicate!”

Littlefinger, however, had already advanced to take action. Nestor Royce and Marillion, who had already abandoned his harp, approached Robert to carry him up to Maester Colemon’s room. Myranda ran out of the hall and started screaming through the keep, warning the whole castle.

In the commotion, Littlefinger took advantage of Lysa’s distraction to approach Myrcella and whisper softly in her ear.

“You can do it now.”

Myrcella gulped and tried to ask how, since part of the plan was now in ruins. Robert was not supposed to have one of his bloody attacks. They needed him, didn’t they? But when Lord Baelish turned his back to get closer to Lysa and give her a last kiss, asking her to calm down, Myrcella knew it was now or never. Lysa, with tears in her eyes, asked Littlefinger to stay by her side, but then he said he had to make sure Lord Arryn was being well treated.

“Stay here, my love.” He kissed again her temple. “I will be quick.”

And, without checking Myrcella one last time, Littlefinger left the hall leaving them alone.

“You don’t want to know if he dies or lives, do you?” Lysa asked, sitting in the chair previously occupied by her son. The tears were still running down her face. Even so, it was impossible to measure the disdain in her eyes. “Putting stupid ideas in his mind, making him excited… Do you want to kill him? Is that your plan?”

“No.” Myrcella said, still gripping the dagger between her fingers.

Lysa’s gleamed, noticing the dagger for the first time. She laughed.

“What are you doing with that knife, girl? Do you think you can kill me?”

Myrcella looked at the knife, still in its sheath and pulled the winged handle so that the blade could shine in the firelight.

“You never liked me, Lady Lysa, but it’s time for us to change that.”

“Go ahead, girl.” Lysa was clearly amused, looking to the dagger with a smile. “Kill me and everyone will know about you and how the Lannisters raised you up. Go on. Show me your true colors.”

Myrcella wanted to stick the dagger in the chest of that annoying woman and watch her die. For a moment, she thought she would actually do it. But that move would finish her game even before it began. She knew she had to make another move, even if it meant putting herself at the mercy of Lord Baelish and becoming a pawn in the game he was about to begin.

Myrcella took the dagger’s blade to her left forearm, where were all the cuts she had inflicted on herself. Ignoring the pain, she acted quickly and cleanly, letting the blade rip through silk until it could find skin. One by one, she felt the scars on her arm breaking, almost without pain, to give way to a long gash that run from her elbow to her wrist.
She felt dizzy immediately, seeing the blood flowing down her arm and being absorbed by the yellow dress fabric. However, she had enough strength to face Lysa and the terror written all over her face. With a blurred sight, she threw the dagger dripping blood to the feet of her mother-in-law. The sound of iron colliding against the stone floor echoed inside her head like a bell.

“What the hell are you doing...?” Lysa asked, kicking the dagger to the other corner of the room.

Myrcella did not answer. Instead, she began to run toward the door.

“HELP ME! PLEASE, HELP ME! SHE ATTACKED ME! SHE WANTS TO KILL ME!”

The doors of the hall opened immediately and ser Arys appeared with his sword wielded. He had been just outside ready for this. Three guards were right behind him. Their eyes scanned the scene, noticing the blood that covered the princess, the dagger that shone on the floor and how Lady Lysa remained in the chair, frantically shaking her head.

Ser Arys pointed his sword toward the Lady Regent of the Vale.

“Arrest her at once and call for Lord Baelish.” By that time, he was already extending his arms to take Myrcella in his lap. “Lady Lysa tried to kill Lady Arryn.”

And then Myrcella fainted.
"It’s called the Hand of the King and not the Queen’s." Joffrey said, without looking up from his plate. After refusing several invitations, the king had finally agreed to dine with his wife. However, things weren’t happening as Sansa expected. “The queen has no say in the matter. My mother, for instance, was not consulted when my father asked the traitor to be our Hand.”

Every time Sansa tried to meddle in political affairs, Joffrey would bring up Eddard Stark’s treason. The years had passed, but for the king that day in the plaza before the Great Sept would always remain vivid. Sometimes he even suggested that her father should have lost his head.

You may have power, Joffrey, but not the wisdom to use it.

"I'm just curious, Your Grace, because I have heard rumors." Sansa continued, lowering her head to cut a piece of the capon in her plate. "Gossips say you’re thinking about appointing Lord Garlan Tyrell..."

Joffrey's eyes rose to face Sansa. Although once she'd find him handsome, now she had nothing more than repulse for him. Her husband was tall and kept his blond hair quite long and curly. However, his lips were like slimy worms and his eyes were constantly filled with something evil. And now he had grown a beard, or what he thought was a beard. Sansa knew it must be the influence of Margaery. The beard growing on his chin was short, with only a half dozen golden hair, and ridiculous. Sansa believed Margaery had only asked Joffrey to grow it as revenge for the beatings she had to endure. After all, mistress or not, it was the only way to make the king hard.

"Mother says gossip will always exist." Joffrey said, lowering his head to his plate. He plunged his knife into the fish, tearing between scales with ease. "But at the end of the day gossip will be just words carried by the wind."

At the beginning of his reign, Joffrey had ordered that the tongues of all those who spoke against him were cut. In fact, a handful of nobles who had lived at court at the time had lost their tongues that way. Joffrey was not merciful with the ones who repeated Stannis’ lies. Lady Tanda Skoteworth had been one of those making that mistake.

Not that we miss hearing her voice.

Joffrey had only stopped applying that punishment after Tywin Lannister took his place as Hand of the King. He had been one of the few able to control Joffrey in some way, although lately even he couldn’t handle the king completely. Now the old lion was dead, Cersei was the only one with a flicker of a chance to control Joffrey. Still, for how long would the Dowager Queen be able to make him stay on the right path?

"Your Grace, giving a position so important to a Tyrell will not be seen well by other Great Houses."
Sansa said, as her mother had instructed her earlier. Being queen was easy. Being a *good* queen was a little more difficult. Even so, she was doing her best to learn and play her part. And today she felt confident with herself. "The Tyrells have already a strong position at court. Prince Tommen’s engagement places them near the crown. And one of their liege lords has already a seat in the Small Council."

*Besides, all Seven Kingdoms know who you’re taking to bed.*

"In the meanwhile, we have no bonds with any house from the Riverlands or Dorne. And given that relations with the Martells are still uncertain, appointing a Tyrell as Hand of the King would only enrage them."

"Doran Martell is an old fool." Joffrey said, spitting a piece of fish to his dish. "And a *sissy*. I barely remember he exists..."

Ser Meryn Trant, who stood silently near a window, snorted. The Kingsguard never left Joffrey’s side, even here in the Queen’s solar. Meanwhile, Sansa was not allowed to have one of her guards with her when her husband visited. They had to stay on the other side of the door since Joffrey didn’t trust any of them. Besides, the queen was always safe with the king. Or so it was supposed to be.

"Prince Doran may be a fool, but Oberyn and his daughters aren’t."

Oberyn Martell was like a riddle. There was something attractive about him, but at the same time lethal. It was easy to see why they called him Red Viper. He seemed to seduce his prey... only so he could devour them more easily. And he was also unhappy with the Crown, no matter how much he and his family knelt and swore their allegiance to the Throne. The way Oberyn had ridden from Sunspear to King’s Landing to request the honor of executing Gregor Clegane for his crimes in the Riverlands was proof enough he had a thirst for blood.

"What of it, you stupid woman? If Oberyn Martell or his bastard daughters try to attack us or the Tyrells somehow, they will be considered traitors and punished appropriately." Joffrey replied hastily, losing his patience. "I’m bored with this."

Sansa contained a smile behind her lips. If Oberyn Martell and the so called Sand Snakes did something against the Iron Throne, it wouldn’t be easy finding them to make them answer for their crimes. Still, that was a subject not worth continuing. Joffrey was already in a bad mood and Sansa had no intention to make things worse.

The queen’s hand landed briefly on her belly.

*Tell him you’re expecting a child when his mood grows sour,* Lady Catelyn had advised. But now the moment had come, Sansa felt uncertain. There was something inside her that asked her not to tell him. Maybe the fact that the child could not be from Joffrey’s. That and the memories the child brought up: the warm kisses in her chambers, the sweet taste of almonds and the songs with hidden meanings.

No, she was not ready.

"The decision is yours, Your Grace." Sansa said then, raising her head to face her husband. "I just hope you make the right decision. Appointing Lord Garlan Tyrell as Hand of the King will only give them more power over the realm."

Across the table, Joffrey rolled his eyes and pointed his finger toward his wife.

"Will you shut your mouth?!" He screamed. "Unlike the Starks, the Tyrells are loyal."
"That's what Lady Margaery whispers in your ear."

"All men are loyal until the moment they cease to be."

Joffrey hit his hand on the table. His cup fell down, spilling red wine over the linen towel.

"Who are you to talk about loyalty?! Your father betrayed me, your brother brought chaos to the Riverlands and…"

"I'm the queen." She answered back, in a tone cold as ice.

Joffrey’s rage turned into a laugh.

“Unfortunately, you’re the queen.” He agreed, lowering his voice even though it was filled with a tone that could cut as deep as valyrian steel. "But you have no power over me, you stupid woman. I know what you’re trying to do by putting ideas in my head to disrupt my honest feelings for Lady Margaery. It’ll not work."

Sansa gave a dry laugh.

"Joffrey..." She started, trying to maintain a cool head. "You can sleep with whoever you want. I’m not trying to mess up your feelings for your little mistress. I don’t care about her."

That was a wrong move.

"You should care then." He replied, pushing his plate across the table. A servant who was waiting right beside ser Meryn took a step toward the plate but Joffrey made a gesture to stop him. His eyes were still pinned on Sansa. "If you were more like Lady Margaery, I wouldn’t have wandered off your bed. Unlike you, she is a true lady."

There are whores more ladylike than your rose. However, Sansa knew the best answer to those stupid words was silence. She pressed her lips and her tongue licked the inside of her cheek, tasting again the salty flavor of the capon she had just finished.

"The Tyrells have demonstrated their support and done their best to prove their loyalty. Why shouldn’t I reward them?" Joffrey continued his rant. "After all, if Lord Garlan hadn’t sent Lord Redwyne’s fleet to fight the Greyjoy’s we could’ve burned villages all over our coast."

As if you ever cared about fishing villages.

“And what has your brother done when I demanded his help?” He insisted, getting red with all the spiteful words coming out of his mouth. “He turned his troops to the Wall to fight wildlings. Wildlings! As if a goddamn wall made of ice was not able to keep them away."

"You wouldn’t speak that way if you lived in the North, Your Grace." Sansa replied firmly. It was not the first time they had that discussion. "And the last time we heard news about my brother, he was riding to lay siege at Torrhen's Square..."

"Yes, to freeze up his ass while one of the Greyjoys fled to Gods now where with the Iron Fleet. Yes, yes... How helpful your brother has been to the realm!"

Sansa was slightly perplexed with those words. Joffrey should have received news from the North that hadn’t yet reached her ears. The last thing she had heard was that Euron and Victarion Greyjoy had made a surprise attack in the North and that Robb had gathered forces, left the Wall and marched south to retaliate against the ironmen.
Varys.

The Spider was her friend, or so he claimed to be, but sometimes some of the whispers his little birds sang to him arrived late to her ears. As Varys used to say, sometimes he had to break the news first to the Small Council, as was his duty.

"My brother has remained loyal to the crown since our marriage, Your Grace." Sansa retorted with a slightly cold tone. "I'm sorry he was unable to resolve the Greyjoy’s situation, but I'm sure Robb will not rest until the matter is properly solved."

Before Joffrey had time to reply, Sansa stepped forward.

"But none of this has to do with what brings me here today."

"I do not see what else you could have to say." Joffrey said, irritated. Reclined in his chair, with his arms crossed, he did not seem willing to hear any other word coming again from Sansa’s lips. He seemed bored and more childish than Edwyle.

“I must insist on the matter of the Hand of the King," Sansa replied firmly. "Contrary to what you think or believe, I am the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and your success is also mine. I know the conditions of our marriage were not ideal. Yes, we both know that. But we’ve a son keeping us together, or so I hope. A son who will one day sit on the Iron Throne to rule after you."

And better than you.

“But to secure that Throne for him, we must ensure that our reign is long and prosperous and that no one rises against us. We’ve to make sure the Great Houses stay united, loyal and content."

She was ignoring everything she had talked with her mother. Nonetheless, every word felt right.

"I'm not asking for your love, for your sympathy or even for your respect. I demand only that you fight for our future. Edwyle’s future."

An enigmatic smile crossed Joffrey’s lips.

"So I hope you make the right decision, Your Grace." Sansa continued, feeling a little nervous now. "Don’t let your feelings for Lady Margaery blind your reason. Make a safe move. Look, I'm not even asking you to give the position to a Stark or a Tully. Give it to someone else you know better, like your uncle Kevan or even Tyrion... No one would criticize you for benefiting one of your own."

Joffrey, still with a wicked smile on his lips, started shaking his head.

"Stop acting like you actually know what you’re saying. Kevan is an old buffoon and Mother says the Imp is doing well as Master of Coin. Besides, I can’t stand him. No, neither of them would fit as my Hand. My mother wants me to pick a lord from the Stormlands or from the Westerlands."

Cersei Lannister was also suspicions of the Tyrells then. Sansa had tried to talk with the Dowager Queen, but her mother-in-law had not found the time to receive her.

"However, you’re only women and don’t actually have a word in the matter. You are just wasting your time, you and my mother.” Joffrey smiled again, always so self- assured. “After long deliberation and counselling with Grand Master Yandel, I’ve decided to appoint Lord Randyll Tarly as the new Hand of the King and I won’t admit any woman to question my decision ever again.” He shouted, banging a fist on the table for the third time that evening. “Can you know shut your mouth once and for all, you dreadful woman?”
Joffrey stood upright so hard that the chair scraped the floor and clattered. Startled with the noise, Sansa grabbed her cup.

*Randyll Tarly.*

Joffrey did not want to give the place to Lord Garlan, or even Willas, but to one of the vassals of House Tyrell. More precisely, to Randyll Tarly, one of the most ruthless men of Westeros. That also meant Sansa had no chance of finding help with the Hand if she needed. Garlan would have been easily manipulated, Wyllas would have been worse, but Randyll would be impossible. Besides, if she was remembering right, his own daughter, Talla Tarly, had ceased to be Lady Margaery’s handmaid the previous year to marry Horas Redwayne.

That meant a triple alliance between House Tyrell, Redwyne and Tarly.

Margaery in Joffrey’s bed.

Lord Redwyne controlling the Royal Fleet as Master of Ships.

Lord Tarly as Hand of the King.

"Lord Tarly?!” She asked, without hiding her terror. "How *stupid* can you be? Can’t you see how dangerous this is?!"

"What did you call me?"

Sansa swallowed. She was so disturbed assimilating those news she barely noticed the words coming out of her mouth.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace, I should not have called you that... But can’t you see how dangerous this is?"

"What did you call me?" Joffrey asked again, about to lose control.

"Your Grace, please, it was nothing..."

"Ser Meryn, punish her."

The knight of the Kingsguard took a step forward towards Sansa. The queen did not even have time to protect herself. Meryn’s hand descended on her and slapped her quickly, as he had done so many times. Even after all those years of torture, whenever she felt the fury of Joffrey by the hand of one of his knights, the pain remained the same. Sansa let out a moan, loud enough to be heard outside the solar.

Almost immediately, Dacey Mormont opened the solar’s door and startled all of them.

She was wielding her sword.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Joffrey said, shrilly, pointing an arm toward Dacey. Ser Meryn had already taken his sword out of the sheath to defend the king against Sansa’s guard.

Dacey Mormont was the only woman in the Red Keep defending a member of the royal family. When naming Sansa’s Queensguard, shortly after the Battle of the Blackwater, Robb had told her that Dacey would be an excellent choice for her guard, especially if she ever needed to keep someone close to fight for her in a ball or a social event. Dacey was able to wear dresses as well as armor. Today, however, she looked tired, with gray spots around her eyes.
"Your Grace, is there a problem?" See asked, casting a glance in the direction of ser Meryn Trant.

Sansa was as surprised by Dacey’s behavior as the other two. All her guard knew what happened behind doors when she was alone with Joffrey. In fact, all of them had been instructed not to intervene in her defense in those specific cases. Otherwise, the peace between Starks and Baratheons wouldn’t have lasted long.

"Mormont, you should wait outside." Sansa ordered, coldly. She suspected Dacey’s intrusion would only worsen Joffrey’s mood.

Dacey seemed reluctant, but eventually nodded and with eyes fixed on ser Meryn, put the sword down and left the room.

"And yet you speak of the Tyrells?" Asked Joffrey, who stood in a corner like a coward. "It seems to me that if there is someone here behaving in a strange way is you."

"I’m sorry for my guard, I think she is indisposed..."

"No, no." Joffrey interrupted, advancing two steps toward Sansa. "That’s not all, is it? You are hiding something from me."

For a second, Sansa feared Joffrey knew her little secret.

“Your sister is in the city.” He said, afterwards.

*Oh, Arya. Stupid Arya.* She had never felt such relief hearing about her sister.

"What about her, Your Grace?"

"I know she’s in the capital, hiding secretly in an inn at Flea’s Bottom." Joffrey said. "And I also know she visited you recently in this same room. Yet you have not said a word about the arrival of the noble Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell. The girl appeared at night, sneaked into the castle and disappeared the same way... Don’t you think it’s suspicious?"

"One of the Tyrell guards brought her to the castle."

"A Tyrell guard? Oh, don’t make me laugh. You don’t even attempt to lie, do you?"

"I swear to you, Your Grace, I’m not lying." Sansa insisted quickly. "My sister just paid a quick and discreet visit to keep away from the court’s apparatus. She chose to stay in an inn instead of accepting the comfort of the Red Keep. You know how she is wild."

"Very interesting, indeed." Joffrey said sarcastically. "Still, it’s a bit irregular, don’t you think? A secret visit to your quarters."

"A visit to her mother and sister. Nothing more. " Sansa laughed nervously. "Your Grace, you are suspicious of me? After all I said to you tonight?"

Joffrey nodded, approaching Sansa slowly.

"I never trusted you." He said. "After all, you are the daughter of a traitor."

His hand landed on Sansa’s face, caressing the red mark left by ser Meryn.

"I'm watching you, my lady, and every move you make. If you raise your voice once more against the Tyrells or question my decisions, I'm afraid I'll have no other choice but to take more drastic
measures."

With the threat hovering in the air, he turned his back to the queen and, after making a signal to ser Meryn, walked out of the room. He had barely left the room when Dacey Mormont entered, her hand still resting on the hilt of the sword.

"Your Grace, I must apologize for my intrusion moments ago..."

Sansa raised her hand to silence the guard immediately.

"I do not want to hear your excuses, Mormont." She said, very directly. "What you have done should have been avoided. Next time you pass the night drinking in a tavern, ask another guard to cover your turn instead of you humiliating yourself."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Dacey Mormont could have many talents, but in recent years had developed an appetite for drinking.

"Where is my mother?" Sansa asked, wiping the corner of her mouth with a napkin.

"It's on her chambers, Your Grace, with Prince Edwyle keeping her company as well as your handmaidens and Modaen, the bard."

Modaen, Sansa thought, feeling a shiver. All she wanted was the bard's company. He was always able to make her forget the world.

"I'm joining them later." Sansa said, swallowing hard. She had to do something first. "Send word for Lord Varys, please. Ask him to meet me. He'll know what to do."

Leaving her chambers and Maegor's Holdfast to meet the Spider in his rooms at the Red Keep was too risky. The corridors were full of guards serving Joffrey, Cersei and the Tyrells and, from what she knew, none of them was on their side.

She would have to deal with Cersei later. She believed the Dowager Queen would work with her to stop the Tyrells. First, of course, she had to prove her loyalty and how Arya’s visit meant nothing. Bloody Jeyne Westerling, Sansa thought. Of course the Cersei knew everything happening in her chambers through the Westerling girl. Not telling about her sister's visit had been a mistake.

However, this meant that her mother-in-law also knew that Olenna had visited her. Even if she didn’t know the content of the conversation, she must certainly know the Tyrell were plotting something. Maybe Sansa could tell her about the marriage proposal and what that could possibly mean? Joffrey wouldn’t have believed about that proposal, but Cersei will. Or so Sansa prayed.

Alone in the solar for more than twenty minutes, she drank a bit of wine while waiting for her face to stop burning. The cramps in her legs, and the pain in the belly, were getting stronger now the day was coming to an end. Soon, very soon, she would have to tell Joffrey about the child before he thought again she was hiding something.

And I am, Sansa thought, touching gently her stomach.

Finally, when Dacey entered the solar and told her everything was ready, Sansa stood and nodded. Picking up an old copy of the Seven Pointed Star, she left her quarters and moved by the gloomy corridors of Maegor's Holfast. Silently, Dacey followed, maintaining her distance. As they passed near Lady Catelyn's room, she could hear the chords of Modaen’s harp. The bard was singing the ballad he had composed especially for Edwyle, The Stag Prince. She smiled sadly and continued on
her way. Passing the drawbridge that separated Maegor’s from the Red Keep, she nodded to Ser Balon Swann – the guard keeping watch on the holdfast gates that night – and entered the main castle.

The Royal Sept wasn’t much farther. The chapel stood opposite the Maiden Vault – the chambers where Baelor had confined his sisters. At that hour, most of the nobles were dining in their chambers and not praying to the Seven. It was the perfect hideout for a private conversation.

"You can wait here, Mormont." Sansa commanded, now with a less rigid tone. "It will not take long."

The Royal Sept inside the Red Keep was not as opulent as the Great Sept but was more beautiful than the one her father had ordered to build for Lady Catelyn at Winterfell. It had high crystal windows, each on one of the seven walls. It was also there that stood the altars, one for each of the aspects of the Seven. As she entered, she saw that there were a few candles lit. Besides a kitchen maid who prayed on a bench beside the altar of the Mother, no one else was present.

Except the Septon sitting on a bench before the altar of the Strange.

Discreetly, Sansa approached him. The maid, noticing the presence of the queen, made a long bow and with a flushed face left hastily. Graciously, the queen sat on the bench behind the Septon and opened the book at a random page. With her eyes closed, she muttered a quick prayer to the Stranger before speaking softly, almost in a hiss.

"Are you getting slow or simply giving your loyalty to another?"

The Septon fidgeted uncomfortably without looking back. He had the same round features as Varys although his cloak was old and smelly instead of the bright colored robes he used to dress. Extraordinarily, he also had a wig that gave him a long gray hair that improved his disguise. A crystal glistened on his neck.

"Oh, Your Grace, you wound me. I've always been a dutiful Spider to you. Though, as I said before, sometimes some information must come first to other ears. If you are here because of your brother, you have nothing to fear."

"The king told me my brother failed to fight the Greyjoys. To me, that seems pertinent information for my ears, don’t you think?"

"Your brother failed indeed, Your Grace." Varys continued, with a chuckle. "It appears Euron Greyjoy was betrayed by his brother Victarion and now he left with the remaining Iron Fleet to sail towards Essos. As for your brother, I think he is still carrying out the siege at Torrhen’s Square, unless something has changed in the meantime."

Sansa nodded, more relaxed.

"I will write to him soon. But next time you receive news about Lord Stark, I want you to come to me first."

"I will do my best, Your Grace."

*Always treacherous.*

"Do you know who the king intends to choose as Hand of the King?" Sansa asked then, cautiously.

"Everything points to Lord Garlan Tyrell, Your Grace, although the Queen Dowager continues to
urge our good king to choose Lord Eldor Estermont for the place or Lord Kevan."

*So even Cersei doesn’t know.* That proved how Joffrey was getting out of hand.

"I fear it’s neither one of them." Sansa revealed, peering through the corner of her eye to be sure they were still alone in the sept.

"Interesting." Varys said quietly. "Can I ask then who is in the mind of our good king?"

*Tell the truth, omit or lie?*

"It seems Lord Tarly would be the king’s choice."

"The king’s choice or the Tyrells’?" Varys asked assertively.

"Is there a difference nowadays?" Sansa asked quietly. "But the Tyrells are going too far..."

"They are ambitious, it’s true." Varys said. "And lately they have registered more wins than any Stark and Lannister. The death of our late Hand was certainly a misfortune for the entire kingdom, but not for the sweet roses of Highgarden, was it?"

*Tywin Lannister killed by Tyrells.* Could it be true? Sansa shook her head. No, she could not continue on this spiraling path towards conspiracies behind conspiracies. The threat at hand was already serious enough.

"How much does the Dowager Queen know about this?"

Sansa could hear Varys smile in his voice.

"A part of it, Your Grace. It seems our good King is keeping to himself some of his most recent decisions."

*So Cersei needs me more than ever, as I need her.*

Would they be able to prevent Lord Tarly’s promotion?

For a few seconds the two remained in silence, looking at the figure of the Stranger. The statues of the Seven decorating the Royal Sept had been carved in marble more than one century ago. The Strange figure was veiled, and the cloth was so well sculpted that it seemed true, with its realistic ripples. Between the hands of the statue was a skull grinning wickedly.

"Lord Varys, I want to believe you are loyal to me." Sansa replied after a few seconds. "If today I am the queen I owe it largely to you. The advice and information you have given me over the past few years have helped me keep the crown... This is why I ask you, are you willing to help me in the future?"

"Your Grace, you wound me again... I’m your most devoted servant."

"No, you’re not." Sansa said again. "But if you want to keep peace in the Seven Kingdoms, please work with me. Give me your fealty at least I end this Tyrell conspiracy."

"Your Grace, you truly wound me questioning my loyalty.” Varys assured solemnly. “I’ve always sympathized with you, have I not? Who made a deal with Queen Cersei to save your father’s life? Who made sure the North would not raise arms against the Iron Throne and drag the Seven Kingdoms in a bloody war? Who convinced the Small Council that you should be made Queen even after Lord Stark’s crimes? I did all that to secure peace and prosperity, especially now that winter is
upon us and that we hear strange stories from the East and from Beyond the Wall. And once again, I'm sympathizing with you. You want more proof that I'm on your side, my good queen? Here you have it: I know your condition, as well as the name of the one who caused it, but I'm keeping it a secret for your sake."

Sansa gasped and dropped the book on the floor.

"What do you mean by my condition?"

"You know what I mean, Your Grace. The rising song."

Varys knew about the child.

He even knows about Modaen.

"How can you know?"

"I've my ways, Your Grace. I'm not known as Spider by chance..."

"Lord Varys, I'm astounded."

No one knew of her relationship with the bard. Nor even Lady Catelyn or one of her handmaidens. She had a fairly low-key romance with the bard. In fact, they had only slept together twice. So how could Varys know? She didn’t believe Modaen had said anything to the Master of Whispers or was one of his spies. He couldn’t be, could he?

"I'm protecting your secret and your life, Your Grace. Isn’t that proof of my loyalty?"

Dazed, Sansa remained silent for a few seconds. She was frightened. Not afraid Joffrey and Cersei would discover her love affair. She was not even scared for her life. No, she feared what Joffrey would do to Modaen if the truth came out. Killing him would only be a favor.

"I've no choice, have I?" She asked, whispering.

And here she was, thinking she could play the game of thrones, meddle between intrigue and power, only to be played again as a pawn.

"You have nothing to fear from me, Your Grace." Varys moved again on the bench. "Now, how can I help you stop the Tyrells?"

Sansa swallowed and, with her hands still trembling with fear, focus on what to say.

"I want to know every word Lady Margaery whispers in the king’s ear." She said quietly. "I want to know why Lady Olenna proposed a marriage between her grandson and my sister Arya." She paused and her eyes landed on the skull in the hands of the Strange. "And above anything else, I want to know what they hope to achieve with this game."

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this chapter in less than a day and I really enjoyed returning to Sansa. I'm trying
to show how she is adapting to her position as Queen, even after all those years at Joffrey’s side. She thinks she can play the game of thrones by her own, following her mother’s guidance, but can she really? She commits mistakes side by side as do things well. We’ll see how things work out for her. I can tell you that the next three chapters will focus on King’s Landing (and that the next one will be a POV from one of my favorite characters).

A quick note regarding the chronology of the chapters: Two days passed between this chapter and the first Sansa’s POV. However, when I wrote Robb’s chapter I covered more than a month but finished somewhere at the time Sansa is currently (you can know that she doesn’t know yet that Torrhen’s Square siege has ended). Meanwhile, Eddard and Myrcella’s chapters happened somewhere between these two days.

At last, I ask you to review, follow and favorite my fanfic if you like this chapter. I’m doing this, putting my original fanfic in a drawer, as long as I’ve readers. If you are there, show me you are reading and liking this fanfic. Any suggestions to the story will be welcome, really. I’m doing my best to write – I’m a little addicted, in fact, writing even while I work – and I need to know this is worth continuing. I’m also searching for a BetaReader to help me improve my writing!
Cersei I

Chapter Notes

It seemed appropriate to publish this chapter on the day after Game of Thrones’ Season 6 Episode 10 aired. I particularly didn’t like some of the episodes of this season, but I loved the finale. The first half hour was incredible. What did you think? Cersei is my favorite character of the all series and even though I prefer the Cersei from the books, I admit I love Lena Headey’s performance.

So, I’ve found a BetaReader who is currently reading and editing the first chapters. This one, however, isn’t yet edited by him. I thank him very much for his incredible work on the first two chapters!

Next chapter is almost ready and I hope to publish it by Wednesday/Thursday. Now, if you like this chapter, feel free to leave your review and follow. Everytime I see an e-mail with a review my heart jolts and I want to write even more.

CERSEI I

The room was warm, but there was still a cold breeze giving Cersei Lannister goosebumps. Looking up from the letter she was writing, the Dowager Queen turned her head toward the window. It was snowing again. From afar, sounds awakened in the Kingsguard’s courtyard where Prince Edwyle was preparing for his horse lessons. The child has definitely too much Stark blood in his veins, Cersei thought. Every morning, no matter how cold it was, the prince left the Red Keep to ride to the Kingswood’s boundaries.

Exhaling a long sigh, she returned to her letter.

Your grandson Jon will be welcomed as a ward in Casterly Rock, she wrote. Lord Andros Brax of Hornvale, one of Casterly Rock’s vassals, had been unable to travel to the capital, but had sent a letter of condolence as many other families of the Westerlands. Now she had found the time to answer those letters, she was taking avail of the opportunity to strengthen old alliances in the West.

The move she wanted to make concerning Casterly Rock would shake some of the allegiances sworn to House Lannister. Thus, she needed to ensure support everywhere she could. Of course Tyrion and her uncle Kevan would raise their voices against her plan, but they would have to accept the Iron Throne’s decision. Or face the consequences, she thought amused.

Someone knocked at the door. Who could be at this time? The Red Keep was still awaking. She, for instance, was only out of her bed because Lord Varys had made a very early visit to tell her about Lord Tarly.

The dark face of Taena Merryweather peered through a crack in the door, with her sarcastic smile on her lips, as if something extremely funny was about to happen.
"Your Grace, the Queen is here and requests an audience."

Cersei didn’t even have time to give an answer.

Sansa had discreetly entered the room and was advancing forwards with a very determined look in her face, as if those rooms were her own. Isn’t Maegor’s Holdfast enough for you?, Cersei asked herself, squeezing the quill between her fingers.

"What do I owe the honor of your visit, Your Grace?"

She was not yet accustomed to utter those two words to address Sansa Stark. The years could have passed and yet it would always be strange. However, she had to treat her daughter-in-law with respect if she expected to receive the same treatment. She could no longer be the queen, but she was the king’s mother, and, at that time, that meant there was much more power in her hands.

"It’s a delicate matter, Your Grace." Sansa replied, keeping her eyes towards Cersei.

"Lady Merryweather, you can wait outside." Cersei commanded, with a twinge of irritation. Her friend nodded, laughter still dancing on her lips, and after a sharp bow she left them alone. "I’m afraid I can’t give much time, Your Grace. I’ve important matters demanding my attention."

While Sansa dragged a chair to sit, Cersei noticed the queen’s body was more robust than usual. Her breasts were swollen. Could the girl be pregnant or was she just eating too many lemon cakes? The long red hair inherited from her mother, almost as beautiful as Cersei’s blond curls, was caught in a long braid. A small silver crown with delicate deer’s stems rested on her head.

"I’m sure those matters can wait, Your Grace." Sansa said, trying to keep her voice steady. Cersei suspected the queen, deep down in her heart, was still afraid of her. "I’m here to ..." She paused for two seconds to weigh her next words. "To tell you about my sister."

Cersei blinked twice and felt her nostrils open.

"What about your sister?"

"My sister visited my quarters a few nights ago." Sansa continued reluctantly. "And since I don’t want to arouse any suspicions, I feel obliged to tell you why Arya didn’t request accommodations in the Red Keep."

"As I recall, your sister was never cut out for court, was she? Yes, she was always too much wild for dresses or even to take a bath... " Cersei said, allowing a smile to touch her lips. "However, it is indeed strange that your sister made a secret visit to your quarters, entering into the keep through the kitchens as if she was nothing more than a thief."

Although she had someone watching the girl and the strange young man who accompanied her, Cersei did not actually thought there was something to worry about. What could a girl of fourteen years old conspire against the Iron Throne? Besides, the North was too much focused fighting wildlings on the Wall, the Starks remained submissive and Sansa had a crown on her head. There was no reason to break up the peace.

"She only wanted to pay a discreet visit to her mother and sister, away from the court’s mess." Sansa assured firmly. "She’ll return to Winterfell in a few days..."

"I see..." Cersei said, leaving a suspicious note hanging in the air. "You don’t have to justify yourself, Your Grace."
"I’m afraid I have." Sansa insisted almost instantly. "I need you to trust me now more than ever, Your Grace."

Won’t the Starks ever learn they can’t trust anyone? Instead of voicing that question, Cersei remained silent, waiting for Sansa to continue.

"I believe you’re not yet aware, but Joffrey will appoint Lord Tarly as Hand of the King." Sansa said, her lower lip trembling slightly. "So, if we want to avoid a disgrace, Your Grace, I think we’ve to work together to convince the king to change his mind. The Tyrells are gaining too much power…"

Oh, little dove, how innocent you are.

"I’m perfectly aware of the king’s decision, Your Grace. In fact, I have already taken the necessary actions to control the Tyrells."

Sansa looked taken aback with that answer, but did her best to hide the thoughts in her head. Did she actually believed to know something Cersei didn’t?

How amusing.

"I’m glad to hear it." The queen said, pressing her lips. "And may I ask what are those actions?"

"I fear it’s too much dense for you to understand, Your Grace." Cersei answered, exhaling a long sigh. She had too much to worry about besides having Sansa behind her heels, remembering for the first time that the Tyrells were a threat.

You should have seen the Tyrell’s menace the moment they crossed our gates.

Cersei, on the other hand, had not made that mistake.

As soon she had placed her eyes on Margaery Tyrell, she had realized she could be beautiful as a rose… but she had thorns behind her petals. Even though she claimed to be a virgin – which wasn’t difficult to believe, since she had been married to Renly Baratheon – she was as conniving as her grandmother. The Tyrells, in fact, had even tried to negotiate a marriage between the girl and Joffrey. But since Cersei had given her word to Eddard Stark to marry Sansa and Joffrey, that proposal had been refused. Besides, her father had said that a marriage with the North would help the Seven Kingdoms heal their wounds.

But the Tyrell’s ambition had no end.

With the prospect of marrying only a prince, Margaery had found a way to Joffrey’s bed. Only by that time did Cersei recalled old words from her childhood. Until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear. The prophecy of Maggy the Frog had for many years fallen into oblivion. In fact, she had never imagined Sansa would ever be able to match that description. But Margaery, by having the crown not in her head, but between her thighs, was now queen in the king’s head.

"Your Grace, I must insist in an alliance...." Sansa repeated, much to Cersei’s annoyance. "I myself have plans to do something and would prefer for my plans to be aligned with yours."

"Plans?" Cersei asked, pleased. Watching Sansa trying to act like a queen was like watching a children play with their toys.

“I intend to start a rumor among my ladies that Lord Kevan will be the new Hand of the King. Soon
the whole city will know the rumor and it’ll most likely become true. Joffrey will certainly change his mind under such pressure..."

"No." Cersei said, shaking her head. "The new Hand will be announced to the Small Council tomorrow. You’ll never origin a rumor strong enough to change the king’s decision."

Stupid girl, Cersei thought to herself. Sansa was struggling to take her position as queen, but she was clearly not having much success. She was a beautiful thing to give heirs to the throne and entertain bored ladies of the court. Politics and intrigue, on the other hand, were not for her. The Wolf Queen, they call her in the city. The Fool Queen would suit her better. There was nothing fierce in her. Even now, trying to defend herself, she seemed lost and weak.

"And you ought to know Joffrey better by now." Cersei added, in a coldly calm tone. "My son is determined when he makes a decision."

Sansa blushed slightly and opened her mouth to protest.

"That means you won’t do anything?"

That means I’ve done something a long time ago, she thought, recalling the document kept in her desk drawer. The legacy her father had left her.

"Of course I will do something. Didn’t I just say I had already taken actions? But if Joffrey wants Lord Tarly as Hand of the King, there’s nothing we can do to change his mind. Unless you want to infuriate him, we mustn’t interfere with his decision."

"I hope you are right, Your Grace." Sansa replied nervously. "Two vassals of the Tyrell’s in the Small Council, possibly three, if Grand Maester Yandel votes on major decisions with the other gentlemen... We’ll be at a disadvantage."

"You’ve three Lannisters on the Small Council, Your Grace," Cersei answered immediately. "And I’m sure we’ve Lord Adam Marbrand and Lord Varys’ support." Sansa nodded and prepared to reply again. "Besides, what do you fear? You are part of the royal family. Joffrey’s interests are the same as yours."

"But are they really, Your Grace?" Sansa cut, to Cersei’s surprise. "The Tyrells are hungry for power and I’m just an obstacle in their way. I can be married to the king and be the mother of the heir to the Iron Throne, but I am also the daughter of a traitor and I don’t have the love of my husband. I am sure the Tyrells will use those arguments any chance they have to attack my position. And as for you, Your Grace, we both know the more influence Lady Margaery has on Joffrey, the less influence you’ll have on him."

The girl is not so stupid after all.

For a moment, Cersei considered telling her the truth. Lord Randyll Tarly would be Hand the King because she wanted. Tywin had devised that move years ago, predicting the intrigue that would follow his death. As much as Margaery whispered in Joffrey’s ears, it wouldn’t be one of her brothers getting the job but one of the Tyrell’s vassals. It would be an honor and an insult at the same time and, above anything else, a safe move. Lord Randyll would never dare to betray her and would follow her orders.

Unless he wants his legacy ruined.

"Do you want to help, Your Grace? Make your husband happy." Cersei went on. "I reckon it’s not easy to spend a night beside my son. He was never easy... but if the Tyrell girl is able to share a bed
with him, you must also be."

Sansa stopped and her eyes twinkled. The queen’s hands, noticed Cersei, rested on her belly.

"The king has no interest in me."

"Find a way to gain his interest then." Cersei replied patiently. "Give him another child. I am sure your mother gives you the same advice."

Sansa gave a nervous laugh and shook her head.

"Another son, Your Grace? Joffrey badly wants to see Edwyle, his own heir."

"Robert never had affection for his children as well." Cersei answered back. "But he showed affection whenever I gave him a son."

"But at least King Robert had the decency to end quickly his improper affairs."

"Be careful what you are about to say, Your Grace." Cersei replied, ominously. "Making such comparisons can be... treacherous."

Sansa ignored the warning. Clasping her hands, she bit her lip before continuing aggressively.

"This relationship between them is more dangerous than I ever thought... And last time I met Joffrey, he told me that if I didn’t respect his decision, he would be forced to take more drastic measures. So, Your Grace, I’ve reasons to fear for my future and my son’s.” Sansa stopped for a moment to catch her breath. "I don’t know what is in Joffrey’s head, and what is Lady Margaery whispering to him, but something is happening. The Tyrells will not rest until they have a crown. And unfortunately for them, this can only happen if they manage to remove me from power... or if they rise up against Joffrey."

Cersei rolled her eyes and wished it was not too early for a glass of wine. Leaning back in her chair, she threw a long look at Sansa again.

"Raise arms against the throne?"

"It's the only explanation I can find for the visit Lady Olenna paid me two days ago."

Cersei frowned, taken aback with that answer. What did the girl mean by that? She didn’t know anything about a visit from the Queen of Thorns. Could the Westerling girl had failed to tell her something? The latest report she had given referred only to Arya Stark. *Maybe it's just Sansa lying to turn me against the Tyrells.* Either way, she would have to question Jeyne Westerling later.

"And what sought the Queen of Thorns?"

"She wanted to propose a marriage between my sister Arya and his grandson Wyllas."

*An alliance between Starks and Tyrells?* This made no sense. As Sansa had just pointed out, both Houses were rivals at the moment. Cersei sniffled, finding that more and more strange.

"A marriage that you’ve refused, I'm sure." Cersei said, with uncertainty.

Once again, Sansa bit her lip.

"Yes, I refused it."
"Probably poor Lady Olenna is just losing her mind."

"That's what I told my mother, Your Grace, but she fears the Tyrells are seeking support among other Houses to start a war. After all, if they can’t conquer a crown throughout marriage, why not by war? We both know Joffrey is not a popular king… or a kind lover."

Cersei was deaf to her son’s insults.

"Even so, an alliance between Starks and Tyrells against Lannisters and Baratheons…? I’m sorry, Your Grace, but it makes no sense. The Starks would fall beside the Baratheons and the Lannisters, and even if all my children and the crown prince died, other Houses would claim their rights to the Iron Throne before a Tyrell could take the place…"

"Unless the Starks agreed to fight alongside the Tyrells to start Edwyle’s reign earlier. As I recall, Lady Alerie Tyrell, the daughter of Lord Garlan, is a year younger than Edwyle and is not promised to marry yet…"

Cersei gulped and took a few seconds to absorb it all. Could any of that be true or was only Sansa lying again? Whatever it was, it was working. She was now worried when she hadn’t been.

_Edwyle on the Iron Throne._

Yes, the North and the Riverlands would accept the grandson of Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully as their king, as probably would the Vale. The Westerlands could even be enticed to accept the great-grandson of Tywin Lannister as ruler of the Seven Kingdoms. And if the boy married Lord Garlan’s daughter, theReach would have a Tyrell Queen on the throne, even if she was a child of three years old. That would leave only Dorne and the Stormlands out of the equation.

"Oh, you shouldn’t listen to your mother." Cersei said, hoping to discredit Sansa’s words. "Last time Lady Catelyn was carried away by suspicion, the Riverlands were submerged in slaughter. The Tyrells are ascending, is true, but they won’t for much longer. Tommen’s wedding will put a stop to it." Cersei’s eyes glittered towards Sansa. "And about this ridiculous plan you have told me… I'm sure you would never betray us. The price your father paid for peace was very high, Your Grace. It would be a pity if all his efforts to make peace were ruined by your…” _Stupidity. “Innocence.”_

The threat in her voice was clear.

"I would never betray the Iron Throne." Sansa said, unblinking. "I have no interest to ruin my son’s childhood with chaos and blood. That’s why I brought this to your attention, Your Grace. We can work together…”

"Maybe we can, yes.” Cersei lied. She would never work with Sansa, but she needed an excuse to keep the girl close to her. “For now, you don’t have to worry with the Tyrell. Lord Randyll will be controlled properly and Lady Margaery will leave Joffrey’s bed earlier than you think.” Cersei replied, icily. "Prince Tommen will marry in two weeks, a few days before the Hand’s tournament, and leave with his wife to Casterly Rock. I hope you can use this opportunity to regain Joffrey’s trust."

"_Casterly Rock?_" Sansa blinked, a nervous smile touching her lips quickly.

"Prince Tommen will leave his place as Lord Paramount of the Stormlands to take the lead of the Westerlands." Cersei said quietly. It was the best to House Lannister. Even though Tommen was not a Lannister in name, what mattered was the blood. "And Lady Margaery will accompany him."

Sansa smiled and nodded.
"Does Joffrey know?"

Cersei shook her head.

"The king will know tomorrow." She said. Her son would not be pleased, but he would have to accept. It was something he knew would have to happen eventually. "Are you calmer now?"

The queen nodded, relief still shaping her lips into a smile.

At that moment, a scream echoed through the Red Keep, coming from outside. After exchanging a look with Sansa, Cersei instinctively looked at the window behind her. New screams began to emerge from the courtyard. In a mixture of fear and uncertainty, Sansa dragged her chair and ran to the window sill. Cersei followed her, feeling her heart beating wildly in her chest.

When they reached the window, they saw a crowd gathering in the courtyard. Snow kept on falling, covering everything with a thin white cloak. One of the sworn swords of Sansa’s Queensguard, the woman from Bear Island, was screaming wildly to other soldiers. Jaime, Cersei saw, had already left the White Sword Tower, his armor gleaming in the cold light.

“What happened?” Cersei saw her brother’s lips moving to form that question, even though she couldn’t hear his voice.

"Prince Edwyle fell from the saddle! He hit his head and… Someone bring a maester! Prince Edwyle fell from the saddle of his horse… and he is… he is bleeding!"

Sansa yelped the moment she noticed the small body strapped on top of the gray little pony. Among wolf fur, it was possible to see a little head with golden curls painted with red blood. Even before she could think, Cersei placed her hand on Sansa’s shoulder and whispered softly, trying to comfort her.

“He’ll be fine.”

However, she was not so sure of that. In fact, for a brief moment she prayed for the prince to die. That small body was no longer her grandson or even the heir of the crown. In her eyes, that child was only a boy who could bring down everything for which she had worked in the last years.

And that thought frightened her more than anything.

*Let him die.*

“Yes, he’ll be fine.”
It’s has not been easy working on this fanfiction. Once again, I ask all of you who are reading this to let me know if you like the story. I feel I’m getting less reviews each chapter I publish and I start wondering if I’m actually losing readers. I’ve plans to write more than 40 chapters, but sometimes I’m so tired and thinking this is actually a waste of time that I have started wondering if I can finish this story earlier. Please, let me know if I should continue working on this. 

Lastly, this chapter is from Arya. We’re almost finishing the King’s Landing arc. After next chapter, that will be from Cersei again, I will focus on other characters spread all over Westeros.. and Essos. In this chapter, I’ll do a flashback about Arya’s journey to Essos and why that travel was so important. And I’ll also introduce a secondary plot. Review if you like it!

"From Braavos we went to Pentos. And yes, we spent a few days in Lys to resupply our ship... My brother Bran wanted to go further to Dragon's Waste to see the dragons and the silver haired queen, but by then Ser Rodrik Cassel forced us to return to Westeros. 

Arya Stark was telling Donnel Locke all about her trip. Ser Donnel was just passing through the capital, being aboard the Purple Vessel, which had docked at King's Landing the night before. The ship carried a large batch of wine from the Arbor. With his flat nose and long dark hair, the man had found Arya in a tavern and recognized her from previous visits to Winterfell.

"Well, that's quite an adventure, my lady."

"Call me again ‘my lady’ again and I’ll break this mug on your ugly head.” She threatened, with a deep laugh, before taking a long swig of beer.

The beer in the Rat’s Pit tasted like piss. Still, it was cheap enough to fill more than half the room with drunk costumers before noon. Outside, the snow continued to fall on the narrow streets of the poorer section of the capital, covering the muddy puddles in the alleys and wearying off the stench of urine and shit.

Once again, Donnel laughed. Even though Arya had met him only two or three times, it had been nice to see a familiar face among the thieves and swindlers that were usually on the tavern. She had arrived at King’s Landing a week ago and since then passed much of her time wandering through Flea Bottom while Gendry attended his personal businesses.

"Well, and what brings you to the capital now? Missing your sister and mother?"

"My sister? Seven Hells, no. Five minutes with our gentle queen reminded me how I missed not seeing her… But yes, I’m here to deal with some private businesses and to see my mother, of course.
Last time I saw her was at Robb’s wedding… Five years ago.”

"Seven Hells, it has been five years already? It looks like it was just yesterday that we met on the Twins to marry the Young Wolf to that fragile little thing... And then, of course, to march against Stannis Baratheon."

_Five years._

Arya had been back at Winterfell little more than a month when a letter had arrived from Lady Catelyn asking for her and Rickon to join her in the Riverlands. Bran had been too weak for such a long journey and, since Robb wished some of his siblings present at the ceremony, they had left. It had been then she had met for the first time the weasel boy who she was supposed to marry.

"And when can we expect new puppy wolves at Winterfell?" Donnel Locke asked, finishing his beer and spitting into the mug. "By this time I was expecting that Lady Marissa had given one or two heirs to the North..."

"I’m afraid my brother’s wife is not adjusting well to the North...” Stupid Marissa. “And I don’t think they had many opportunities to make a child in the last few years."

With battles still happening on the Wall, it was hard to find Robb at Winterfell. Arya suspected it was a relief for him to be away from his wife. The marriage arranged by Lady Catelyn, though it had assured an important bridge, was loveless. _And how can they still believe I’ll marry a Frey boy?_ Every year that passed, her talent to wield the sword increased. At the same time, she was even surer that the only needle she would ever use would be the sword at her waist.

"I am sure Winterfell will be full of children before winter is over." Donnel said, signaling a maid to refill his mug with beer. Daringly, he squeezed the maid’s ass when she turned her back to grab a jug.

"And you, when do you intend to return home?" Arya asked.

Donnel shrugged.

"I heard there will a tournament in honor of the new Hand of the King." He said with a smile. "Maybe I’ll stay for a few more weeks... I don’t attend a tournament since my cousin’s wedding! And it would do be a good break before heading back to White Harbor. I suppose Lord Wyllis is preparing a new battalion to join the war on the Wall..."

"Oh." Arya said, not hiding her disappointment. "I was hoping I could return to the North in your ship, but I’m afraid I’ve to come back earlier. If I arrive a day later from what I promised to Ser Rodrik, they’ll force me to enter a dress and marry that ugly Frey as soon as they see me..."

Donnel received the mug from the maid’s hands and gave her a silver coin. The girl, in a token of appreciation, twirled her skirt to show what lurked beneath it. Then, she turned to Arya.

"And you, young man? Do you want a drink... or maybe something to eat? "She winked as her tongue dampened her red lips.

Donnel choked with beer, unable to control the laughter emerging from his throat. Arya, however, had learned how to control her feelings. She kept her eyes fixed on the woman, a smile waking up on the edge of her lips.

"I think my friend would serve you better..."
The maid shook her head and leaned over. Her hand landed on Arya's knee and slowly began to slide toward her waist.

"I like younger and inexperienced boys..."

Arya had her face very close to the maid’s. The jug of beer was still quite safe in the woman’s hands.

"Inexperienced?" Arya asked, as if offended. The maid’s hand was now almost between her thighs. It wouldn’t take long for her to realize the truth. "I assure you I’m much more experienced than my friend here..."

The maid’s face changed completely the moment she realized there was no volume in Arya’s pants. Her eyes flashed looking for something that was not there. Inevitably, her mouth opened in surprise.

"You are a bold young girl if you’ve the courage to attend this pisshole... But I don’t mind. I can do things with my tongue that..."

A bag dropped on the table. Both Arya and the maid turned their heads to see the stuffed bag of coins Donnel had just thrown.

"All this talk between you two left me... excited." He explained, drinking what was left of his beer in one gulp. "You have good money there girl… Now let’s go."

Annoyed, the maid stepped back and took the bag.

"You are generous, ser." She said, counting the silver. "This buys you three hours in my company..."

Her eyes flashed again towards Arya.

"It seems we’ve to postpone our meeting..."

Arya nodded and reached out.

"Meanwhile, can I keep that jug...?" She pulled the beer jug from the maid’s hands, who laughed in answer.

"Well, well..." With a reddened face, Ser Donnel had already stood up. Something was clearly visible in his pants. "It seems I’ve to leave you for now, Lady Stark."

Lady Stark. The least she needed was for the entire tavern to find out who she really was. She had been calling herself Nymeria Stone since she had arrived at the capital. Arya grabbed her empty mug and lifted it in the air, as if she was actually considering throwing it at Donnel’s head.

"Didn’t I tell you for not calling me that again?"

Donnel let out a long laugh and grabbed the maid by the waist, hoisting her in the air. The stubby breasts of the woman almost left the cleavage of her dress. The maid, now more than ever, had her eyes on Arya, realizing for the first time who she really was.

I guess I won’t be coming back to this pisshole again.

"Pardon me, little wolf. Pardon me."

“Fuck you, Donnel.” She added, as they walked away. “Literally.”

Soon the couple disappeared into one of the stinky rooms in the back of the tavern.
Lady Stark.

Those two words made her think of home again. On the one hand it would be nice to return to Winterfell and to see her brothers again. She longed also for the companionship of Nymeria and her rides in the cold mornings. Oh, how she missed that more than anything else! But what about Zachery-fucking-Frey? Whenever Robb or his damn wife spoke about her marriage, she would consider again running away to become a sellsword in Essos. What she wanted was to fight. That, however, was constantly denied to her. Robb hadn’t allowed her to join the fight against the wildlings, even though he praised her talent with the sword. It seemed unfair she had to stay home or live the rest of her days as a lady.

And, of course, there’s Gendry.

Things with her friend were strange since they had left Lys. Although they were best friends - training swords every time they could and playing cards at night to steal money from drunken players – something had broken recently between them. Being all alone in King’s Landing had damaged even more that relationship.

While savoring a new mug of beer, she began again wondering what would happen to her friend.

Gendry was Robert Baratheon’s bastard son.

Her own father had them that secret during the journey to the North, six years ago. *Hide in Winterfell, boy, and you’ll have the Stark’s protection until your last day,* Lord Eddard had whispered. At the time, those words had sounded something enigmatic. However, shortly after the War of the False Stags started and Stannis Baratheon scattered for all the Seven Kingdoms the rumor that Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen were in fact sons of Jaime Lannister. If it was true or not, no one could ever prove with certainty. Nonetheless, weeks later a massacre happened at King’s Landing. Several children, allegedly King Robert’s bastards, were assassinated.

"Don’t worry." Arya had told Gendry, noticing how he seemed worried since the news had arrived at Winterfell. "You are safe here. The queen will never find you."

But Gendry, with tears of sorrow shining in his eyes, replied harsh words.

"I'm not worried. I’m furious. I feel useless. Children are dying because our father never cared about us."

From that moment forward his inheritance began to weigh more on him. As he focused his fury on his right arm, hitting the hammer fiercely, he soon became a great help to Mikken, Winterfell’s blacksmith. He could be a bastard, but what of it? He was determined to seize the opportunity Lord Eddard had given him and start a new and honest life.

At least, that was his resolution until a strange message arrived for him.

Gendry Waters,

*My name is Mya Stone and it seems we share the same blood. It was not easy to find you, but recently I bumped into a girl who knew a blacksmith who, in turn, knew where you’d gone. For now, my intent with this letter is simple: invite you to join me on a demand for the future of our father’s House. You can find me at the Crossroads Inn in the Riverlands during the next two moons. There is much we have to discuss.*
"The future of our father's House?" Gendry repeated, rereading the message. "I'm reading right?"
Her friend had learned recently how to read and write with the help of Maester Luwin and was not
yet fully confident of his new ability.

"Yes, you read." Arya confirmed over her friend's shoulder.

"Do you think... Do you think this is true?"

Although a part of Arya wanted to believe it wasn't, because that possibly meant losing her friend,
she had been unable to lie.

"You'll only know if you meet her."

"Yes, I know..." Gendry continued, hesitant. "But the Riverlands are so far away, Arya." He added,
with sweat running down from his forehead. "Lord Stark will never let me make such a long
journey..."

"Lord Stark doesn't have to know where you go."

Fortunately for Gendry, Robb was in the Wall and the castle was in the hands of Ser Rodrik Cassel.
With the help of Arya and Mikken, Gendry eventually received authorization from the castellan to go
to White Harbor “negotiate” with steel sellers. Alone, he took a horse and made his way south. Arya,
although she wanted to follow him, was not allowed to leave Winterfell.

"It would be a good thing if the boy didn’t come back." Marissa Frey had said one time during
dinner. Robb’s wife was short and slightly fat. She had a twisted nose, as if something smelly was
attached to her nostrils. "I'm sure that without him distracting you every day, you would be already
married to my cousin..."

"Not likely, my lady." Arya said with the sarcasm her sister-in-law hated so much.

And Gendry returned two months later.

The boy who had left Winterfell seemed older now, with a more defined body and a dark beard
growing in his face. After he reported to Ser Rodrik Cassel, he sent a note asking Arya to meet him
at the top of the Broken Tower. She obliged immediately and, when she finished climbing up the
stairs, she found him waiting between the tower battlements with his back to her.

"Was it worth it?" Arya asked, sitting beside him.

A smile Arya never had seen covered Gendry’s lips.

"Oh, Arya, it was better than I thought!" Gendry revealed, his voice trembling with excitement. "She
really is my sister, Arya! We’re so much alike..."

He told Arya all about his sister. This Mya Stone had apparently grown up in the Vale, where she
had taken care of the goats climbing the road to the Eyrie. However, recently the girl had found out
who her father was and had started looking for her siblings. Up until that moment, she had only
found Gendry.
“But she thinks there are other King Robert’s bastards alive...” He continued, excitedly. "And she wants me to find one of them."

Arya frowned as a smile reached her lips.

"If you're leaving Winterfell again, this time you’ve to take me with you. I need an adventure."

Gendry laughed and shook his head.

"I doubt you can come with me, Arya. I don’t even know if I can do what Mya asked of me..."

"Why?"

"Because this bastard is not even in Westeros." Gendry revealed, his dark eyes glinting again with excitement. "He is in Lys, an island somewhere in the Narrow Sea."

That complicated things a little.

"Well, I have an idea..."

After suggesting to Rickon and Bran how good it would be travelling to Essos before the winds of winter become too stringent, the idea started to take form. Together, the three Stark wrote to Robb on the Wall until they were able to convince him to let them go on the trip. Bran was more enthusiastic than all the others, whispering again something about his dreams. And thus they departed to Essos, traveling first to Braavos and then along the coast to Pentos and, eventually, to Lys.

The trip went well. The sea didn’t put their ship in imminent risk and the winds were in their favor. The city of Braavos was the one Arya liked best. All channels connecting the different arteries of the floating city and the large statue of the Titan watching all the boats entering and leaving the city: it was fascinating. But they didn’t stay there long.

They found the mercantile city of Lys a few weeks later. Built on an island, Lys was protected by high walls and had hired sellswords on her gates and battlements. After entering the city, they found out the economy wasn’t as good as it had been during the last century: the withering commerce of slaves was affecting all businesses. However, it was strange to think about slavery in a city that valued so much political freedom. Power was determined by conclaves of magisters, chosen from amongst the wealthiest and noblest men of the city.

"And where can we find your brother?" Arya asked, during the first morning they spent in the city. They were installed at an inn near the port, not far from the ship. Bran, Rickon and Hodor were still asleep. Rodrik Cassel, on the other hand, was already in the common room, eating slices of bacon and drinking mead.

Gendry peered out through the window and pointed to a cluster of towers and domes a few blocks away.

"Somewhere there, I think. At the palace of Lady Almyra Heilnarth. I think he’s a protégé of a noblewoman..."

"A palace, huh? It seems that one is living well..."

After leaving the inn behind Ser Rodrik’s back, they advanced throughout the colorful streets of Lys to reach the part inhabited by the lysene nobility. When they asked for Lady Almyra Heilnarth – in a very, very poor high Valyrian – they were led to a palace with blue stones, large marble columns, three large towers and a magnificent glass dome. Guards detained them as soon as they approached
"Talk to Lady Heilnart we come." Arya tried to say in high Valyrian.

"Westerosi." The guard retorted.

"Yes, Westerosi. From Westeros. We came to talk to…" Arya turned to Gendry, forgetting again the name of his brother. "How is he called? Eddard? Edwyn?"

“Edric Storm.” Gendry announced, turning directly to the guards.

“Edric Storm?” One of the guards repeated, sniggering. “No, no.” He retorted, while the other laughed. “Edric Storm is now Lord Varlyn Herlinath. Understand? Varlyn Herlinath.”


When the guards opened the gates to let them in, they were searched for weapons. Her sword, Needle, as well as the dagger hidden in her boot were seized and stored with the promise of being returned later. The same happened with the two knives Gendry kept in his belt.

Inside the palace they were taken to a private garden, right in the heart of the building, which had gorgeous, fragrant flowers and a small fountain with the statue of a naked woman. The native goddess of Lys, Arya realized. Not long after, a lady with long blond hair and wearing a long silk dress came into the garden, followed closely by a young man who must at least be eighteen years old. He wore also lysene costumes, but his hair was as black as Gendry’s. Besides, there was something extremely familiar about his face.

He must certainly be Edric Storm. Or Varlyn Herlinath, as the guards had named him.

"My lady wife’s guards said you came from Westeros." Edric pronounced, haughtily, moving forward. The woman with blonde hair inspected them with a pair of blue eyes. "What do you want from the noble house of Heilnarth?"

Gendry advanced towards the bastard with a smile from ear to ear.

"I’ve come from Winterfell, my lord. I travelled a long distance to see you…” He said with the same respect he always spoke to Robb. "Because we share the same father"

Edric looked startled by that response and, for a few seconds, stood in silence looking at Gendry. Eventually, he turned to his wife and said something to her in High Valyrian. Possibly a translation of what Gendry had just told him. His eyes wavered from Gendry to Arya. Even before continuing, the lysene woman snapped her fingers to dismiss her guards.

"How do you call yourselves?" Asked Edric when they were alone in the garden.

"Gendry Waters, sir." Gendry said, slightly more comfortable. "And I assume you are Edric Storm."

Edric confirmed with a nod and looked again towards Arya.

"And who are you? Another bastard?"

"No.” She considered calling him ‘my lord’ but since he seemed an arrogant brat and he wasn’t in fact her lord, she kept the words in her mouth. “I’m Arya of House Stark.”

If Edric was curious with that answer, he didn’t show it. He simply nodded and focused again on
Gendry. The lysene woman was still watching them impassively, without understanding a word.

"How have you found me, Gendry Waters?" Edric asked, clearly nervous. "I have left Westeros many years ago, when an honorable knight sworn to Stannis Baratheon saved me from a dreadful death at the hands of a red priestess... Since then I have lived with another name. Today, I am part of the lysene nobility and I no longer answer to the name my mother gave me. So I don’t see how you could’ve found me…"

"Our half-sister, Mya Stone, told me where I could find you." Gendry continued cautiously. "How she learnt where to find you I don’t know… She never shared that information with me. Nonetheless, I am here to invite you to join me and Mya. We want to honor our father’s legacy and build a family as if…"

Edric smiled and raised his hand to stop him.

"What do you really want with this nonsense, Gendry Waters? Gather all Robert Baratheon’s bastards so we can live happily ever after until the Illborn King kills us? Or are you and this Stone girl foolish enough to believe we, poor bastards, have the power to start a rebellion against the ruling Baratheons as the Blackfyres did with the Targaryens kings?"

Gendry shook his head, shocked by that idea.

"All we want is to know each other..."

"How touching." Edric replied coldly. "Too bad I’ve no interest in any of it. Westeros has long ceased to be my home and I’m afraid I’ll never have brothers. The closest I had of a sister was Princess Shireen Baratheon and now even she is dead…"

"My lord, but we are your brothers and the legacy of House Baratheon is in our hands..." Gendry protested, starting to blush.

The lysene woman interrupted him to ask Edric Storm something in high Valyrian. By what Arya could understand, it sounded like the lady had asked "How much time does he have?". Edric hastened to make the appropriate translation, turning to Gendry.

"How old are you, Gendry Waters?"

"Twenty-one, my lord, but I don’t think..."

Edric said something in high Valyrian that seemed to be really sarcastic. The blond woman looked disappointed and turned back, leaving the garden without another word.

"I think we’re done here.” He said. “If you ever came back, Gendry Waters, I’ll call the city guard and have you two arrested. Do you understand? Now get out of my house.”

The guards appeared almost immediately and escorted them back to the street, returning their weapons at the gates. Edric Storm - or rather Varlyn Herlinath - watched them from a window before disappearing behind silky curtains.

"Fucker." Arya retorted, as they walked away from the palace. "But I'm not surprised. He’s one of those bastards who think he's better than the others because his parents were nobles... A little bit of humility would do him good."

Gendry spat to the ground.
"What a waste of time." He said, as they advanced resolutely down the street. "I don’t understand why Mya asked me to visit him. I hope she is having better luck finding the others..."

"And now what do we do?" Arya asked.

"Now I’ve to go to King's Landing. I need to find Mya and tell her what I’ve found…"

"King’s Landing? Are you sure? We could simply return to Winterfell and ask Mya to join us there. I'm sure she can work for us…"

“No.” Gendry replied quickly. “She’ll never come. We need to find the others first.”

“And what if they don’t care about you or Mya, just like Edric did? At least at Winterfell you’ve a family…”

"No, I don’t." He said, assertively. The harshness of his words hit Arya as a stone in the head. "At Winterfell I'm just a blacksmith apprentice. I'm not much more than that... But alongside my siblings, my real siblings, I can at least build a home. Even if we can’t use the Baratheon name, what matters is that we’ve each other. So yes, of course I’ve to find Mya again… You can return to Winterfell, Arya. You don’t have to follow me.”

“No.” She retorted, angrily. “I’ll come with you… But I honestly hope Mya isn’t playing you into something bigger, Gendry. You’re too much innocent.”

"Bigger? What do you mean by that?"

“You heard Edric… He talked about the Blackfyres…”

“Arya, please, that’s ridiculous. Mya and I wouldn’t stand a chance against the Iron Throne. What could a stable girl and a blacksmith do against the combined strength of Baratheon, Lannisters and Starks? Moreover, we are bastards... and we all know how things worked out for the Targaryen’s bastards. How could I ever want that for me?”

“I know you don’t want that…” But that those mean Mya wants the same thing as you. “Forget it. You’re right, Gendry. I’m just being jealous. I fear I’ll lose you soon…”

Gendry patted her head, disheveling her hair.

“Don’t worry. I’ll never leave you, Arya, even if I don’t live at Winterfell anymore.”

That hadn’t made much sense at the time, but Arya had found solace in those words and was keeping them in her head, searching for a solution.

A few days later, they left Lys and went back to Westeros. With some difficulty, Arya managed to convince Ser Rodrik to go to King’s Landing, and even now, sitting in the Rat’s Pit drinking beer she couldn’t still believe how she had convinced the former castellan of Winterfell to leave her behind.

But here she was, in the city she hated so much, with its red castle looming up imperiously above all the other houses. Every corner, every street, every building reminded her of those dark days of her childhood. The city was full of death and fear. She remembered Syrio Forell in an endless dance with wooden swords. The head of the man of the Night's Watch who had promised to take her home. And Sansa, of course, sharing her bed with the man who almost had killed father.

"Arya?"
She was so entangled in her thoughts, she didn’t notice Gendry, with his tousled black hair and his thick beard, entering the tavern. His dark robe was covered with snowflakes melting before the heat of the flames.

"You're back." Arya said with a half-smile. She pointed to the seat in front of her.

Gendry sat up and shook his hair.

"How'd it go?" Arya asked, fearfully. Only the previous day had Gendry found out where Mya was living. It seemed the girl was working somewhere in the Red Keep, as a servant. Today, they had finally met. Gendry had insisted to go alone.

*Mya must love me as much as I love her.*

Gendry shrugged.

"Not very well, to be honest." He said, grabbing Donnel’s empty mug to fill it with beer. "Mya wasn’t happy when I told her about Edric…"

"Hum." Arya murmured thoughtfully. "So they argued, she thought happily. "And did Mya found someone else?"

Gendry nodded.

"A girl named Bella who worked as a whore at Stoney Sept. She is now in a monastery of the Silent Sisters..."

"Well, well, that’s what I call a transformation."

Gendry gave her a furious look, forcing Arya to remember this was not the time or the place to joke about his half siblings.

"So it’s just you and Mya..."

"Not necessarily." Gendry replied, turning the mug between his hand. "Mya heard about two twins in the Westerlands, near Lannisport..."

"In the Westerlands?" Arya sniffed automatically. "Where the hell is she getting that information?"

"I just asked her the same thing..." Gendry said. "And do you know what she said? That I don’t need to know more than I know."

Arya snorted. Who did Mya Stone think she was to treat Gendry as if he was a mere little bastard?

"You know what? To hell with her! You did what she wanted and she didn’t even thank you. Stop being her lap dog..."

Gendry sniffled and Arya realized she had hit a sore spot. After a few sips of beer and almost a minute of silence, Arya realized then what must have actually happened between the two siblings.

"She wants you to go to the Westerlands look for these twins, doesn’t she?"

Gendry nodded.

"She wants us to leave tonight."
Tonight? Gendry, you can’t even be thinking of saying yes to this… What will happen if you find these twins and they send you away?"

Gendry hid his face behind his hands and let out a long sigh.

"I have to do this."

"No, you don’t. I’m the only family you’ll ever need. Besides, they are waiting for us at Winterfell. We promised Ser Rodrik to return before the next moon…"

"Arya, for the first time I’ve a family…"

"A family who mistreats you!"

"So what?! How many times have you argued with Bran? How many times have you ignored orders coming from Robb? And how often do you speak ill of your sister?" He asked, flushed with irritation. "Still, you never gave up on your family, Arya… did you?"

"It's different, Gendry, I know them since I was born…"

"And I don’t." He countered. "And I will not know them better until I give them a chance."

Arya bit her lip.

"But Gendry…" Arya felt tears stinging her eyes. Suddenly that conversation sounded like a farewell. "I can’t go with you to the Westerlands…"

“Mya wouldn’t want that also.” Gendry replied. “She says this is a family affair.”

_Fucking Mya._

“But I’ll be back soon, Arya. And I promise you, I’ll return to Winterfell with my siblings and take a place in your household, if Lord Stark accepts me and my family…”

“How much time will take for you to come back to King’s Landing?” Arya asked instead.

Gendry smiled and extended his hand.

"Arya, you don’t have to wait for me… I swear I’ll return to Winterfel…”

“No. I’m only leaving this place with you.” Arya replied.

Gendry laughed.

“And what about Ser Rodrik?"

“He and Robb will agree to extend my time in King’s Landing if I stay with my sister and mother in the Red Keep.” At least Arya hoped they would.

The door of the tavern burst open in that moment, startling some of the men who were in tables near the door. The sounds of the tavern grew silent immediately. Arya exchanged a quick glance with Gendry and followed the direction of his eyes to the door, where a maid covered in blankets was distressingly moving her arms in the air.

"The prince! The prince! " The woman cried hysterically, tears flowing through her cheeks. From the outside, bells began to echo through the city. "They say the Prince has been murdered!"
AUTHOR’S NOTES: Cersei is by far my favorite character. Even though in the books and in the TV Show she makes dumb moves, it’s brilliant how she earns respect by fear and how she fights for her children’s future. By writing this fanfiction, I certainly intend to make her more clever. Thus, this chapter is probably my favorite so far. Don’t expect great events. It’s a political chapter, but we learn more about Cersei’s game and how the Iron Throne is dealing with matters all over the Seven Kingdoms.

And this is also the end of the King’s Landing arc! I know some of you are already tired of this arc, and that’s why I’m letting you choose the next POV (from several I’ve planned). It could be from Robb, Jon, Daenerys, Myrcella or Eddard. Let me know your pick in the reviews until next Sunday!

Now, I give you the chapter.

CERSEI II

"The prince is fine.” Joffrey said, slightly uninterested, before the Small Council. “All this unnecessary outcry saying he’s dead is completely stupid. The little brat only broke his leg…”

"But someone did this on purpose, Your Grace." Jaime said, interrupting the king.

Jaime was sitting right in front of Cersei and had remained silent since the Small Council’s session had begun. Her twin brother was getting old, even though Cersei still felt like she was at the top of her beauty and strength. His blond hair, for instance, was receding and becoming more fragile. In half a dozen years Jaime would be bald as Lord Tywin had been. Still, the lord commander of the Kingsguard continued to be a handsome man and had the same appetite of a fifteen year old boy every time he visited her at night.

"From what I found out, someone made slashes on the Prince’s saddle." Jaime explained. "Whoever did this knew what they were doing... The saddle was not entirely cut off, you see? They weakened the straps that hold the saddle to the horse so they would break while the Prince was riding…”

"But who would want the prince dead?” Adam Marbrand, the commander of the City Watch, asked. He didn’t have a brilliant mind, even though he was smart enough to be manipulated with a few golden coins.

"It's not hard to understand who." Tyrion intervened, sarcastically.

Cersei looked up to face the Imp. Her little brother was still strutting, thinking he had all the knowledge of the world inside his little mutilated head. Despite being Lord of Dragonstone, he had
visited his castle only once since the forces of Stannis Baratheon had surrendered. The plan at the
time was to marry him to Princess Shireen Baratheon, which was in fact a great idea considering the
two were identical in their ugliness. But since the girl had fled to die somewhere in the Narrow Sea,
the Imp was still unmarried. In the meanwhile, he was doing a great job as Master of Coin. Thanks to
him, the Throne had paid off all Robert’s debts in only three years.

Joffrey was attracted by the sound of his uncle’s words and his face immediately grew red. *The Imp
can’t resist teasing him*, Cersei thought, drumming her fingers on the piece of parchment before her.
She needed Joffrey in a good mood to break him the news about Margaery. Tyrion, as usual, wasn’t
helping.

"I don’t want to hear the Tyrell name again, alright?" Joffrey screamed, digging his nails on the table.
"The Tyrells aren’t behind the accident… Lady Margaery, unlike Sansa, has a kind heart and would
never harm the Prince."

*The Tyrell girl knows what she's doing.*

The Red Keep had been submerged by turmoil in the previous night. Queen Sansa had completely
lost her mind, taken away by fear of losing her son. When Joffrey had ignored her plea to act against
the Tyrells – because she was sure they had to be the ones behind the accident -, Sansa had ordered
her own guard to arrest Lady Margaery. That would have led to a bloodbath between Stark and
Tyrells if Joffrey and the City Watch hadn’t stopped the Queensguard in time. Sansa was
immediately locked up in her quarters and each one of her guards was taken to a cell.

A new twist in the game no one saw coming, not even Cersei. During the whole day the Dowager
Queen had kept her distance from those events, letting her spies bring her any important information
about the Tyrells and Sansa’s movements. She needed to be careful making her next move if she
wanted to end all the tension disturbing the castle.

"If you say so, Your Grace, who am I to point out the obvious?" Tyrion insisted, finishing his
sentence with a hiccup. He was drunk. *Again*. “I’m just a poor dwarf without a nose."

"The Tyrells are loyal to the Iron Throne, Lord Tyrion.” Lord Redwyne assured, toping his words
over Tyrion’s. Of course he would come in defense of House Tyrell. *Not long now and you’re out of
this table*, Cersei thought while focusing her eyes on the Master of Ships.

"Yes, I’m sure they are, Lord Redwyne..."

Before Joffrey could say anything else, Randyll Tarly spoke. The new Hand of the King had just
received his gold necklace and was already dealing with a delicate problem. He resembled slightly
Tywin Lannister, with his bald head and the short gray beard covering his jawline. With a serious
expression, Lord Randyll turned to the king.

"Soon we’ll know who the culprits are, Your Grace." He said, with iron in his voice. "Ser Jaime, all
the servants working in the stables were arrested, I presume...?"

Jaime nodded quickly.

"They are being interrogated right now by Ser Balon Swann."

Randyll nodded, turning his head again towards the king.

"You’ve to excuse your lady wife, Your Grace.” He continued. “She’s just a weak woman worried
about her son and jealous of Lady Margaery’s beauty… Don’t let her error cause damage to the
peace your grandfather managed to bring to the Seven Kingdoms.”
Joffrey snorted.

“Peace… I’m afraid I’ll have to punish my wife, Lord Randyll. For now she’ll be confined to her rooms until I say otherwise.” Joffrey commanded, without giving space to be questioned. “Later I’ll think what I shall do with her.”

“Yes, Your Grace, it’s a smart decision for the meantime.” Randyll replied, even though Cersei suspected he didn’t really mean those words. “Well, it’s now important to ensure the prince’s safety. How is the Prince recovering?”

The Hand of the King turned his attention to Grand Maester Yandel. The successor of Pycelle - who had died two years ago in his bed, next to a whore - was a tall, slender man with a beard with wisps of silver and gold. He had blue eyes and a sickness that made his hands tremble considerably. Still, he seemed more capable than Pycelle.

"The Prince is doing well, Lord Randyll." Yandel said, outlining a toothless smile. "He has already regained his conscience. His leg is broken, yes, but that’s nothing a few weeks of rest and a few drops of milk of the poppy don’t solve... Soon the boy will be running as if nothing had happened."

Cersei pressed her lips and struggled to ward off the morbid thoughts that came again to her mind. She failed. A part of her still wished Edwyle had died. She couldn’t forget Sansa’s word, even though she knew now they were a lie. As Jeyne Westerling had confirmed, the Queen of Thorns had never visited Sansa’s rooms. That was the first proof Cersei had found out about the girl lying. The second one she had deducted by herself: why would the Tyrells try to kill the Prince if they wanted to put him on the Iron Throne instead of Joffrey, as Sansa had suggested?

No, Sansa’s lies had blown up right in her face. The question that followed was: why had she lied? The answer was also evident. By instigating fear in Cersei’s mind, Sansa had made sure her mother-in-law was on her side and would get rid of the Tyrells. Not that Cersei needed a push to do something about Margaery and her family. However, it had been the only way Sansa had found to secure Cersei’s attention and support.

But what would the Queen do if Cersei’s plans didn’t work out? That thought was leaving the Dowager Queen distressed more than anything else. Could Sansa use Edwyle to put a crown on his head earlier? She might not have the Tyrells support, but she could easily make alliances with other Houses. And what would Robb Stark do when the news about his sister being locked as a prisoner reached Winterfell?

No, I’m being paranoid, Cersei repeated for the thousand time. The only thing Sansa wanted was to feel safe and Cersei knew how to give her safety. The Tyrells had to go. That was it. Lady Margaery and her family had to leave the city before something happened. Something like the Prince’s death. As soon Sansa had what she wanted, all that nonsense about conspiracy would be put to rest.

"The safety of Prince Edwyle must be our priority." Cersei intervened. "I think we should keep the child at Maegor’s Holdfast, protected by two men of the Kingsguard."

Her eyes turned to Jaime.

"Brother, I think it must be you standing guard at the Prince’s quarters," She continued. "And we must dismiss Sansa’s Queensguards. Not that their loyalty is questionable, but I believe the Prince will be safer under the watch of our men."

Joffrey nodded, pleased to hear those words.
"Yes, yes... I don’t want those Northerners around the Prince. I never trusted them and I never will."

Cersei didn’t want to take risks. If a conspiracy were to take place, Sansa’s Queensguards couldn’t have access to the child. It would be extremely easy for them to take the Prince Heir outside the castle and flee the city if they were the ones guarding his door.

"There are still ways to hurt our gentle Prince..." Varys said for the first time, in an almost inaudible whisper. "A turkey pie can hurt as much as a sword."

Cersei wanted to slap the Spider right there. She intended to have a backup plan. If Sansa did anything to betray the Throne, Cersei wouldn’t hesitate poisoning the prince. Now, however, Varys had ruined that.

"Yes, Lord Varys." Randyll agreed. "We must find someone to taste the Prince’s food and we must appoint guards to watch the kitchens."

"One of the Kingsguard can taste the food..." Cersei said, hoping thus to save part of her plan. She could easily manipulate Jaime and get his support if she needed. "Now, is there anything else to discuss about the Prince’s safety?"

"Yes." Joffrey said, again from his place at the head of the table. "Uncle Jaime, as soon as your interrogations come to a conclusive answer, I want to be the first to know who was behind this incident. Do you understand?"

*You want to protect your little rose.*

"Of course, Your Grace."

"Well, what other issues do we have to discuss?" Cersei laid eyes on Tyrion and couldn’t hold a challenging smile. He stared back at her, gave a little sarcastic laugh and turned his head. "Lord Varys... Do you have news about the Targaryen girl in Slaver’s Bay?"

A nervous smile touched the Spider’s lips while he shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, Your Grace... As you know, since Jorah Mormont stop sending his reports, it has become more difficult to obtain information about the girl. The last report I received came from a merchant who had passed through Bhorash."

“Bhorash?” Ser Addam Marbrand asked, not familiar with the name.

“Yes, ser.” Varys replied dismissively, keeping his eyes on the Dowager Queen. “It’s the name of the new city governed by the So-Called-Queen Daenerys Targaryen. It seems the place is growing day by day, with freed slaves coming from every corner of Essos..."

"She is only a girl..." Joffrey said, still with the same anger in his voice. "Why is she so difficult to kill?"

Varys giggled.

"The girl is surrounded by Unsullied, Dothraki and sellswords’ companies, Your Grace... It's not easy to get close to her. Last time we tried... our killer was devoured by the black dragon."

“If she is such a threat, then why didn’t she come to King’s Landing yet?” Joffrey asked, letting a smile twist his lips. “I bet she heard about our ballistae...”
Fifty ballistae had been built and placed along the battlements surrounding the Red Keep. They had been designed by the best specialists in warfare and by three Maesters specialized in dragon lore. The weapons, ready for battle, were their defense mechanism against the dragons. Since the Doom of the Harpy, they had made plans to defend the city in case the Targaryen girl ever decided to come. And they were confident the ballistae would work, since their missiles had been designed to strike lethally the beasts’ chests.

"Yes, yes..." Cersei said thoughtfully. "But is she already moving toward Westeros?"

The Master of Whisperers shook his head to say no.

"The merchant seemed sure that Daenerys Targaryen will only leave Bhorash when slavery has completely ended in Essos. However, there are whispers speaking about other motives... It seems she is unable to control the other two dragons rummaging among the ruins of the old slavery cities."

"Ah!" Ser Addam Marbrand laughed. "She can’t control the dragons? Well, why are we even worried about her then?"

"So far, she can only control the black dragon, Ser Addam." Varys said quietly. "But I’m afraid that soon the situation will change. The merchant told me what he had heard in the city. People are saying the Mother of Dragons is searching the advice of red priests and Asshai’i shadowbinders to find answers..."

Tyrion moved uncomfortably in his chair.

"A dragon needs a rider..." He explained, proving once more he had an inexhaustible knowledge about dragons. "And although dragons can be mounted by more than one rider, it seems obvious to me that these two other dragons refuse to obey Daenerys Targaryen because she already mounts the black one. My guess is the girl will only be able to control her dragons when she finds riders with enough courage to mount the creatures..."

"Nonsense." Lord Randyll declared, banging his hand on the table. "Ser Addam is right. We shouldn’t worry about dragons when we’ve more serious problems near our doorstep. Your Grace, if you want to solve the problem, I suggest you kill the girl once and for all to put an end to this trouble."

"Haven’t you heard Lord Varys?" Jaime questioned, staring at the Hand of the King. "All our attempts to kill her were a fiasco..."

"Maybe..." Cersei spoke before Lord Randyll could start fudging about military concepts. "We should use actual killers instead of the amateurs we sent previously. My husband, our late king Robert, sent one time a miserable killer who tried to poison the girl, isn’t that right?" Varys nodded, confirming her suspicion. "Maybe it’s time to find real help. It would cost us some gold dragons... but I’d rather lose some of those than wake up one day with true dragons flying over the city."

"Actual killers, Your Grace?" Lord Redwyne asked, curious. "Like the Faceless Men of Braavos and the Sorrowful Men of Qarth?"

"Yes." Joffrey said, his eyes shining with enthusiasm and appropriating the idea as if it was his own. Cersei didn’t say anything. What's mine is also my son’s. "If we hire killers, famous assassins, perhaps we could end the Targaryen girl once and for all... How come we never had that idea?"

“Oh, but we had, Your Grace.” Varys intervened again, smiling. “After we heard rumors that the Dragon Queen had emerged again from the Dothraki Sea, we sent a Faceless Man to kill her. Two
“years ago, I thought it was…”

“And he failed.” Retorted Cersei, quickly. “I remember that. But I also remember the assassin and how he said he had been living in King’s Landing for ten years and how he felt rusty, but capable of killing a little girl… I think those were his words. Am I remembering correctly, Lord Varys?”

“Yes, Your Grace, I believe you are…”

“So, if we want to kill the girl, we must go directly to a guild. Maybe to the Sorrowful Men now… And hire not one killer, but at least three of them.”

“Seven.” Joffrey commanded, quickly. “I want seven assassins after the Targaryen bitch. No place for mistakes now.”

Cersei smiled to her son, nodding.

“Yes, seven assassins. It seems good enough.”

Varys nodded and smiled. Jaime, on the other side of the table, remained silent.

"And how much would those services cost to our coffers?" Lord Randyll asked.

"My estimate..." Tyrion said, rolling a silver coin at the top of the table. "Thirty to forty thousand dragons..."

"Very well." Joffrey said, satisfied. "Find fifty thousand golden dragons, uncle. As soon as possible."

"Fifty thousand?" Tyrion laughed. "Our coffers may be full but I don’t know if we have so much money, Your Grace..."

"Borrow from Casterly Rock then." Joffrey ordered without patience to discuss money. “Or ask the Iron Bank. Do something, I don’t care…”

"Oh, yes, yes... Do something." Tyrion muttered, almost inaudibly. Once more, a sarcastic drunk smile covered his lips as he wrote down some numbers on a bit of parchment. "Within a week I shall have the money."

"And who should visit the guild at Qarth?" Grand Maester Yandel asked, stroking his beard.

Cersei didn't hesitate a second.

"Lord Redwyne, you are the Master of Ships and you know better than anyone the seas, don’t you? I believe you are the most capable man to go on this secret mission to Essos, to hire the assassins and to transport them to Slaver's Bay..."

Horas Redwyne, who had spent most of the meeting distracted, looking through the window, jumped in his chair and turned to face the Dowager Queen.

"Me, Your Grace?"

"Yes." Cersei repeated, drawing a smile that disconcerted the man even more. "If we want this plan to work, we need to keep it a secret between us. Besides, such a large amount of gold can’t be delivered at the hands of any man… We need an envoy in which we can trust. So, yes, I think you are our best choice."
"Yes, Lord Redwyne, I've always heard about your exploits in the sea..." Jaime joined his voice to Cersei’s, prodding the Master of Ships. "It's time for you to prove your talent."

Horas Redwyne gave a nervous smile and turned his head to face Joffrey, as if hoping the sovereign would disapprove the plan. But Joffrey’s eyes sparkled with excitement at the idea of defeating Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons.

"Bring me the head of this bitch, Lord Horas, and her dragons in chains. I want to kill them myself with our bastillae."

"It would be an honor, Your Grace... An honor..." Horas said, clearly confused and taken aback.

"Don’t be ridiculous, Your Grace." Tyrion retorted, laughing. "If the Mother of Dragons can’t control her children, how do you hope to get the three dragons delivered to you in chains? We’re not talking about little kittens."

Joffrey opened his mouth, but no words came out of it. His face started getting red again, fury taking hold of him.

"Lord Randyll, proceed." Cersei pleaded, before it was too late. From the corner of her eye, she saw Joffrey clenching his fists and lowering his head. Tyrion, on the other hand, seemed triumphant with his little victory.

"Wildlings." Grand Maester Yandel laughed, shaking his head as if he had heard the funniest joke in the world. "I still don’t understand how Lord Stark sent all his forces to the Wall, letting the North unprotected... It makes no sense."

Lord Randyll picked up a bundle of letters right in front of him.

"The wildlings, according to what Lord Commander Marsh writes, are a real threat, Grand Maester." He said, throwing the cards to Yandel "If the Stark’s army hadn’t flocked to the Wall, we could be fighting wildlings in Dorne right now..."

Oh, and you know everything about wildlings, don’t you? Cersei leverage over Lord Randyll – the weapon hidden in her desk, granted a long ago by her father – was about Randyll’s secret. The secret about the wildling child.

"You’re taking this too much seriously, Lord Randyll." Joffrey said, shaking his head. "The Wall and Robb Stark can defend themselves... That's why they have swords. We have bigger concerns deserving our attention in the South."

"So we must continue ignoring the call of arms coming from the North, Your Grace?" The Hand of the King asked. "I believe we could dispense an army of five-thousand strong men to reinforce the defense of the North..."

"Five thousand men?" Cersei asked, slightly incredulous. She had never cared much about the
North, but Lord Randyll was one of the best war minds of Westeros. If he said there was danger coming from the North, then she had to believe him. "Do you truly think Lord Stark needs such a powerful army at his command, Lord Randyll? Why doesn’t he ask to his uncle Edmure or his aunt Lysa?"

"Because his sister is the queen." Tyrion retorted very directly. "Or does family no longer means anything in this world?"

*It seems Queen Sansa has defenders in the Small Council after all.*

"Lord Tyrion's right, Your Grace." To her surprise, it had been Lord Varys the one who had spoken. "The Iron Throne should have honored its alliance with the Starks... Peace between the two Houses is still fragile and we need to strengthen those ties. I’m with Lord Tyrion and our good Hand in this matter. Send an army, however small, to show the Throne remembers the North...

Cersei looked to Grand Maester Yandel.

"Well, let’s do this then. Write to the Great Houses requiring them to send at least five hundred of his men to fight in the North." Cersei began to say.

"No." Joffrey stopped her. "Grandfather always said the Starks had the strength to defend themselves. And if the fleet of the Greyjoy’s has left the North, then I suppose the situation is improving. We shouldn’t waste our resources fighting a war that isn’t ours.”

"The North is part of your realm, Your Grace.” Tyrion said, quietly.

"I don’t care.” Joffrey screamed again, losing once more his patience with Tyrion. “If Robb Stark was able to capture the Kingslayer, stinky wildlings and starving ironmen can’t be hard for him.”

Jaime looked up to exchange a look with Cersei.

“Well, so we don’t send reinforcements to the North then…” Randyll continued, striking a line in one of his parchments. “That bring us to the tournament. How are the preparations?”

"My scribes are now copying letters to send to all the noble houses, Your Grace." Grand Maester Yandel said quickly. "I intend to send them tonight."

"Excellent." Joffrey retorted, without smiling. "I want this tournament to be the greatest in the Seven Kingdom’s history.”

"It will be certainly great, Your Grace." Tyrion joked.

In total, the Tournament of the Hand would cost the crown more than hundred and fifty thousand pieces of gold. Only for the winners’ prizes they would give out hundred and twenty thousand gold coins. All the rest would be channeled for the construction of silk pavilions next to the Kinsgwood as well as to hire fools, dance troupes and bards. It would certainly be a tournament worthy of songs and tales.

*And an exaggeration.*

"Can we now talk about Casterly Rock’s succession?"

The seat of House Lannister and the capital of the Westerlands was the major issue to discuss that morning. Although much had been said since Lord Tywin’s death, only now would Joffrey announce his decision.
"Are the rumors true?" Tyrion asked, casting a sidelong glance in the direction of Lord Varys. Apparently, the Spider was still whispering in too many ears. "Won't the seat be granted to its rightful heir?"

Cersei couldn’t contain a smile behind her lips. There was something that made her happy every time she crushed the Imp’s stupid dreams. Maybe it was because she liked to show Tyrion how she was in control of things. The threat the Imp had made a few years ago was also one of the reasons why she distrusted him even more lately. The day will come when you think yourself safe and happy, and suddenly your joy will turn to ashes in your mouth, and you'll know the debt is paid. Well, there weren’t ashes in her mouth and she doubted it would ever be.

"You know Father never wanted Casterly Rock to pass to you," Cersei started, catching a breath of air. Her green eyes flashed to Jaime, who kept his head down, hoping to keep away from that discussion. "And since Jaime refuses to accept the exemption the Throne gave him to leave the Kingsguard, we’ve to choose someone more appropriate to govern the Westerlands."

"And why am I not suitable, my dear sister?" Tyrion asked, letting his temper start to get in his way. "I'm too small, is that it?" The Imp looked around the table. "Must I remind you, my lords, that it was me who prepared King's Landing’s before Stannis Baratheon stormed our gates? That it was me setting the Blackwater Bay on fire? Or that our economy is finally improving thanks to my actions? If I were able to maintain order throughout the entire kingdom, how am I not fitting to rule a part of it?"

"Because you are a joke, Uncle." Joffrey retorted while biting his nails. A smile disfigured his face. "Here, at King’s Landing, you do a great job… but nobody besides us has to actually see your face. But taking the position of Warden of the West? It would bring shame to Westeros and to House Lannister. A dwarf at the head of one of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms. Oh, how they would laugh at us."

"You are a stupid boy, Your Grace, and you clearly know nothing about honor and succession laws..."

"Lord Tyrion, must I remind you are talking to the king?" Randyll Tarly inquired, expressing his indignation.

"Oh, Lord Tarly, you’ll soon find out the Imp has a need to call stupid to everyone around him."

Joffrey commented with a laugh. "I honestly think it's the only way for him to feel taller than all of us... Let him be. Giving him importance is what he wants. "

At the sound of those words, Tyrion's face turned red and his lips twitched in pure fury. He really hates Joffrey, Cersei noted, seeing the mischievous glint in her brother's eyes. Maybe it was time to get rid of him and find a new Master of Coin.

"What matters here..." Cersei began without patience or time for those trivial discussions. She could deal with Tyrion later. "It’s the succession of Casterly Rock."

Ser Addam Marbrand joined her in the discussion.

"Will the title pass to Lord Kevan, Your Grace?"

Cersei's eyes flashed to the only empty chair at the table. Her uncle Kevan had left the city the night before, after finding out the plans for the succession of the West, leaving the position of Master of Laws vacant.

"My uncle is old, Ser Addam." Cersei began coldly. "The king thinks the best decision is to reward
Prince Tommen with Casterly Rock, since he is directly my heir."

Randyll Tarly nodded.

"An excellent idea, Your Grace." He said, cajoling Joffrey. “The West must be delivered to loyal hands."

"Tommen is a Baratheon." Tyrion said quickly, grabbing the table edges tightly. "Not a Lannister... or is he?"

"Honestly, Tyrion..." Cersei began, amused with that feeble attempt of Tyrion to hurt her. "It's hard to believe that after all these years you continue to believe in the vulgar lies spread by Stannis Baratheon."

"But if Tommen is a Baratheon... Why the hell would he inherit something that is rightfully mine?" Tyrion insisted, refusing to give up on his ridiculous aspirations.

"Because I decided so, uncle." Joffrey declared loudly. "Tommen needs to grow and become a man. Taking the lead of the West will be good for him..."

"And who will continue the legacy of the Lannisters of Casterly Rock?"

Cersei handed him a document, which was already signed by Joffrey and stamped with the royal seal.

"As you can see, Tommen will name his offspring with the Lannister name..."

Tyrion cast a glance to the paper and didn’t even read a word.

"The Throne can’t just simply create new laws and trade the names of the Great Houses like it was a game... Tommen has Storm's End and should be satisfied with it, since it’s rightfully his. But not Casterly Rock! We are talking about much more than having blood Lannister at the head of our house... The Lord of Casterly Rock must know the land and the people who live in it. Tommen is only a child of fourteen who can barely distinguish Casterly Rock from Lannisport..."

Joffrey let out a long sigh.

"Tommen will adapt eventually."

"Tommen won’t adapt!" Tyrion pounded his fist on the table. “This is reckless!"

"Tyrion, control yourself." Jaime whispered, clutching the Imp’s arm to calm him down.

Even knowing she had Jaime’s love, a part of Cersei was jealous of the attention the Imp had always received from her twin. Jaime had for their younger brother a respect Cersei would never understand.

"Let me go!" Tyrion shouted, trying to get rid of Jaime's hand. "How can you not defend me, Jaime? You know very well that Casterly Rock is rightfully mine. "

"Tyrion, enough!" Jaime repeated, dragging the chair to stand up. His hand still closed around the Imp’s arm. "Let's talk outside."

But the dwarf, resisting his brother’s pull, didn’t leave the room easily. His eyes focused not on Joffrey, but on Cersei.

"I know it’s you behind this, sister." He said, the same dangerous smile contorting his lips. "If you
think you'll make life easier for you and your son, you're wrong." Finally shaking off Jaime's hand, Tyrion straightened his jacket and lifted his chin. "I don't need you to escort me outside, Jaime. I know the way."

Without uttering another word, he left the Small Council. Jaime, rolling his eyes, followed him into the hallway and closed the door.

"Well, well... Hopefully Lord Tyrion will accept the Throne’s decision." Varys said, letting out a giggle. "It would be a shame if our dear Master of Coin were to drown himself between jugs of wine..."

"We must excuse my brother today. I’m afraid he’s rather drunk… But be certain that if he ever tries to do something against the Throne’s decision, he’ll be punished accordingly." Cersei said.

Lord Kevan and Tyrion could cause disturbances among some of the Houses of the Westerlands, but it was unlikely that their revolt could be damaging. In fact, if it was to happen, it would eventually end up in a victory for the Throne and Cersei would have finally an excuse to cut off the Imp’s head.

"Well, I think there is no other issue deserving out attention today..." Lord Randyll said, intending to end the conversation. "We haven’t received any news from Dorne and from the Vale, so we can assume all is well..."

Cersei coughed and picked up the second piece of paper in front of her.

"In fact, Lord Randyll, there is another issue I would like to discuss." Cersei began, passing him the document. "As you all know, Prince Tommen celebrated his fourteen name day a few months ago. Since he’ll soon assume the title of Lord of Casterly Rock, I think it has come the time to celebrate his marriage to Lady Margaery. As you can see in that agreement, late Lord Mace promised to marry his daughter..."

"What's this?" Joffrey asked at the head of the table.

And so begins the wrath of the lion.

"Joffrey, you know what I mean..." Cersei began, hoping to maintain a reassuring tone. "Your brother is promised to Lady Margaery since the Battle of Blackwater. Now has come the time for them to become husband and wife and to start a life together..."

The look her son threw at her was different from everything Cersei had seen before. More than anger, there was hate in those green eyes she loved so much. Hate and disgust, as if Cersei had just stuck a dagger in Joffre’s back. Their eyes kept locked on each other for a few seconds. All the others around the table remained silent, watching and waiting for the result of that confrontation. Finally, Joffrey’s fury was channeled into a peculiar hypocrite smile.

"My lords, leave me alone with the Dowager Queen, if you please."

One by one, the chairs around the table of the Small Council were dragged through the floor.

"Your Grace, shall I start preparations for Prince Tommen’s wedding...?" Lord Randyll asked, still clutching the document in his hand.

"No." Joffrey said. The sinister smile was still on his lips. He stretched his arm to receive the document. Lord Randyll, reluctantly, gave it to him. "Start preparations for Lord Redwyne’s journey. Now, please, leave us alone."
Lord Varys left the room immediately, whispering something to Grand Maester Yandel. Lord Randyll paused a few seconds to gather his papers. He seemed to want to intervene again, but didn’t know to what extent something he could say would improve the situation. At the end, he decided to keep silent and left the room with Ser Addam Mabrand and Lord Horas.

As the door closed, Joffrey rose from his chair and began to walk slowly toward Cersei. He kept his head down, reading the document.

"What game are you playing, Mother?" He asked, flapping the document.

"Game?" Cersei retorted, trying to seem oblivious. "Have you forgotten the agreement signed with the Tyrells? Your brother is promised to Lady Margaery and is more than time for them to get married..."

"Tommen won’t be marrying Lady Margaery. I thought it was clear enough by now."

Joffrey dropped the parchment in the fire burning in the fireplace. Cersei gulped as she saw the paper turning to ashes. It was quite ironic that Joffrey had learned that tactic with her. Lord Eddard would certainly laugh if he could see them in that moment.

"Then what do you want to do with the girl, Joffrey?" She asked sternly. When would her son start to behave like a king? Or, at least, let the ones who had experience took the right decisions? "Do you intend to keep the girl as your lover so she can give you bastards until the end of your life? That's not what we agreed with the Tyrells. In fact, it shall be a relief for them to see Lady Margaery properly married. Her depravity ruined her reputation. Tommen still willing to take her shall be seen as a merciful act."

"No." said Joffrey, a vein throbbing in his neck. "We'll find another bride for stupid Tommen."

"Joffrey, I’m afraid that’s impossible. The Tyrells won’t be happy to find out you broke your word. After all, they have remained loyal over the years because they had been promised a wedding..."

"And they will have a wedding, Mother." Joffrey pulled the chair next to Cersei and sat down. "It will be me marrying Lady Margaery."

First, Cersei blinked. Had she heard correctly? Then, seeing her son’s face, she laughed.

"You?" She inquired, ignoring the hatred coming once again from Joffrey’s eyes. "Must I remind you are already married to Sansa Stark?"

"Our marriage will be annulled." Joffrey talked as if he had already thought of it. "I spoke to cousin Lancel and he assured me there are ways to annul the marriage if we prove the queen is not loyal to the Throne. Lancel believes it won’t be difficult to build a case against Sansa, since her father is a traitor..."

Her cousin Lancel Lannister had become a Septon two years ago and worked directly to the High Septon in the Great Sept of Baelor. Cersei knew about the king’s meetings with him, but she never had thought any harm would come of that.

He told me that if I didn’t respect his decision, he would be forced to take more drastic measures. Once again, Sansa’s words came to Cersei’s mind. So the Queen’s position was actually at risk, more than she ever had thought. The Dowager Queen shook her head, trying to assimilate the repercussions an annulment would bring.

"Joffrey, this is madness." Cersei reached out to grab her son’s hand. "If your marriage to Sansa is
annulled, the Starks will be ashamed and Prince Edwyle declared bastard... Is that what you wish?"

Joffrey nodded.

“I’ve no affection for the boy, Mother. Sometimes I even suspect Edwyle is not my son.”

“But he is so much alike you, Joffrey. Of course he’s your son. And are you willing to lose your heir?”

“That is not a matter.” Joffrey replied. “Lady Margaery is with child.”

*Of course she is.*

“A bastard child.” Cersei retorted, coldly.

“If I marry her, the child won’t be a bastard.”

“But Edwyle will.” Cersei replied, losing her patience. This couldn’t be happening. “How can you want this? You’ll infuriate half of the Seven Kingdoms. Besides, the Small Council will never approve of this…”

*And you’ll bring war to our doorstep.*

"I’m just following what my heart tells me to do. Can’t you, above all others, understand that?"

"We both know that's not your heart who tells you what to do."

Joffrey stood up to face Cersei from above.

"You sound just like Sansa, Mother..." He said, narrowing his eyebrows to show his distrust. "Are you working with her? Oh, you are… That's why you wanted to speed up Tommen’s marriage, so Margaery could leave the capital…"

"Yes." Cersei uttered, refusing to be bullied by her own son. "That whore has already caused too much damage, Joffrey. I can’t allow her to weaken our power so she can get a bloody crown in her head. Don’t you see that’s all she wants? She doesn’t love you. She loves power."

That was enough for Joffrey. In a fit of fury, her son grabbed Cersei’s arm and pulled her up from the chair. She had barely been up when he pushed her against the wall. With a cry of surprise, the Dowager Queen crashed against the cold hard stone and felt the pain spread through her body. Before she could recover, Joffrey was on top of her again, pressing his body to hers. His lips were dangerously close to Cersei’s, so close that Cersei could actually feel Joffrey’s breath against her skin.

"You won’t call Lady Margaery a whore ever again, Mother." Joffrey whispered menacingly. Cersei tried to move away from him, but his hand pressed her stomach, forcing her to stand against the wall. *What is happening?*, she asked herself, pain throbbing on her back. "And don’t misuse your power. If you are in this room, taking part in my Council, it’s because I consent it... But I can easily change my mind and ban you from the Small Council if that’s what it takes to make you obey.”

"Joffrey, I just want the best for you..."

"No." he said, interrupting her again. "You want what you think is the best, Mother. During all these years, I’ve let you take too many important decisions. The appointment of Lord Randyll as our Hand, making Tommen the new Lord of Castery Rock and even my marriage to Sansa… You’ve
ruled my life, as well as my kingdom. And during all that time I obliged, knowing you were doing your best for my interests. But today, I’m reminding you for the first time that I’m the king, not you. And for a change, it’ll be you obeying orders instead of me. So yes, you’ll do exactly how I command. You’ll convince the Small Council that annulling my marriage is the right decision for the realm and you’ll personally write to the High Septon requesting for an audience…”

Cersei had never felt so powerless.

"And what if I refuse to commit such madness?"

Joffrey laughed.

"If you refuse, my dear mother, I’ll get rid of you.” Joffrey came even closer, his lips almost touching Cersei’s. "Doran Martell’s wife died last year… I’m sure the Lord of Sunspear would be marveled to strengthen his friendship with the Iron Throne by accepting the Dowager Queen as his new wife.”

Margaery managed to lock Sansa in a tower and now she is after me.

"You wouldn’t dare do that to me, Joffrey..." Her voice trembled whispering those words.

"Oh, Mother, but I would." He said again. "So get rid of Sansa for me and I’ll let you keep your place at the Small Council and your quarters near Uncle Jaime’s bedroom… What do you think? Do we have ourselves a deal?"

Joffrey stepped back and straightened his coat. Looking to the terrified expression on his mother’s face, he threw his head behind to let out a laugh.

"Oh, Mother, you should see your face right now. You’re getting old.”

Gasping for breath, Cersei didn’t answer.

She merely stood there watching her son leave the Small Council hall.
Well, when I planned this chapter I wanted it to be a small one… But it turned out to be the longest of them all. Even so, I’m happy with the result. I loved to write Jon’s POV more than I thought I would. Like Arya’s chapter, this one has a lot of flashbacks. I will tell you about Jon, what he did during the six years of the time jump and what he’ll do now. Like I did in the Prologue, part of this chapter comes directly from an excerpt from the books… but with a few changes. In the next paragraphs I deal with most of the twists surrounding Jon’s plotline and create my own new twists. I’m looking forward to see your reactions!

My BetaReader is currently unable to read and correct this fanfiction. Does someone want to take his place for a time? I mostly need help correcting grammar errors and misspellings. If you are interested, please send me a private message.

Thanks to all of you who have left reviews and who have follow my story! Thanks, really. You’re the best! As I said, it’s very important to know if investing so much in this story is worth the time and effort… You’re feedback is proof enough to show that it’s worthy!

PREVIOUSLY ON THE WALL: We learn that Ned is making a plan to change things in the Wall. After he rides to meet a group of wildlings who are approaching the Wall, he saves Ser Alliser Throne’s life. Returning to Castle Black, Lord Commander summons him to his quarters to let him know that Jon died in a battle that took place at Long Barrow.

"Not far now..." Jon said, feeling his dry lips breaking again. The metallic taste of blood instantly flooded his mouth. Do not give up, he repeated. One foot in front of the other. That was it. One foot in front of the other. A simple move of his muscles to keep going forward. With his eyes half closed, he blinked again. Tears came tumbling down his face, frozen up by the time they reached his beard. "Not far now..."

Ghost remained a few feet ahead, leading the way and making sure the path was clear. During their journey toward East, through the edge of the Haunted Forest, they hadn’t found a single whight. However, they had met wildlings more than once. One of them had tried to attack them and had died with his neck ripped between Ghost’s fangs. The others had stayed behind, too hampered by the
cold, unable to keep up with Jon on his march for survival.

Not far now.

The Wall was not far away, rising above the treetops and shining in the dim light of dawn. Or was it evening? Jon couldn’t even sort out how much time had passed since he had left during the Battle of Long Barrow. As he had planned with his father and Uncle Benjen, he had left in the snow his cloak and the valyrian sword Lord Commander Mormont had given to him. After that, he had escaped through the chaos of the fight. Ghost, who had also slipped from the fight, joined him soon after at the Haunted Forest. There, inside a hollow tree, Jon found a warm blanket, a fur cloak and an old rusty sword. There was also a bag with some provisions for him to eat during his journey. He had tried to steal a horse, but that proved to be impossible, so he had to go on foot.

And so he had started his journey.

Behind him, everyone would believe he was dead. Uncle Benjen would find his cloak and sword and throw in the air the idea that Jon had died and that his body must have been burnt with other wildlings. Some would cry with this news. But Eddard didn’t want to reveal the truth to anyone, except Benjen and Cotter Pyke. Not even Samwell would know Jon was alive. He had a thing about keeping secrets... Meanwhile, Ser Alliser Thorne and Janos Slynt would certainly raise their glasses to celebrate. As for Ghost, Uncle Benjen would say the direwolf had disappeared in the forest, gone mad with grief.

However, now that he was approaching the end of his journey, Jon wasn’t sure if he could actually survive. He felt weak enough to faint under a blanket of snow in a blink of an eye. He would not survive another night sleeping in the snow, even with Ghost warming him up with his fur. Besides, the food had ended two days ago, since he had given most of it to the hungry wildlings he had met. The previous night, he had eaten the game Ghost had hunted. However, the meat had been hard and had made his stomach sick. No, if he didn’t reach Eastwatch-by-the-Sea in the next hours, he knew he would die.

"We can’t be too far away..." He repeated, blinking toward the Wall, searching for a sign.

It won’t be easy, but you can do it. His father’s words echoed through his mind and made him advance half a dozen steps more. But then the wind grew stronger, scratching his skin. A handful of snow came into his mouth. Suddenly, he was on the ground. He couldn’t remember how he had fallen on his knees, but opening his eyes, he realized he was no longer standing. Part of his body seemed to have frozen.

"Ghost, to me..." He whispered, softly. "Ghost..."

You know nothing, Jon Snow.

Jon fell down on the snow, his face hitting the frozen ground. Quickly, the cold settled down on his skin had started giving way to something warm. It seemed like a fire had abruptly started burning in his face. Could his beard be in flames? It felt like it was. Kissed by fire, he thought, allowing a smile to touch his lips. Ghost came up and put his nose to Jon's face, trying to help him up.

"I can’t..." Jon whispered, every muscle on his body giving up. "I can’t."

He just wanted to be with Ygritte in the cave they shouldn’t ever had left. He wanted to be again a boy at Winterfell and to believe the world existed only within those walls. He wanted to be Snow. Just Snow.
Jon Snow.

A fiery glow approached.

Yes, Yggrite had finally come to take him away. Feeling safer than ever, Jon closed his eyes and let his body succumb to fatigue.

The last thing he heard was Ghost’s howl breaking the dawn.

His body could continue lying in the snow in the Haunted Forest, but his mind led him on a journey within himself. He didn’t realize how or why. It was as if Bran the Builder had taken control of his mind and was rebuilding him, putting pieces together to reconstruct something that had broken down.

At the beginning of his dream, he was a boy again.

Jon had no more than six years. He remembered that day and the pride he had felt for ride his pony beside Robb and Theon. By then, it was still summer and the nightmares about the creatures and wildlings that lived Beyond the Wall were just stories told by Old Nan.

Eddard Stark was riding at the head of a small group of riders who advanced through the Kingsroad to a place called Wintry Village, a small town a few miles away from Winterfell. His father was much younger then and was still Lord of Winterfell. They were travelling to the village because the word had come that a deserter from the Night's Watch had been captured.

"It’s important for you to understand what will happen here today, boys." Lord Eddard had told them. They were now in the square in front of a decrepit brothel, waiting for the guards who would bring the deserter of the Night's Watch. "A man who breaks his word has no sense of honor. And do you remember what Uncle Benjen told you about the men guarding the Wall? A sworn brother can’t take a wife, can’t have a family and can’t leave his post from the moment he takes his oath."

"This man left?" Robb had asked, solemnly.

Lord Eddard had nodded.

"Yes. And so now he must pay with his life."

And so the guards brought the man. Lord Eddard uttered a few words that Jon didn’t really understand about a king named Robert. After that, he saw father raising Ice to quickly cut off the man’s head. A simple, merciful death. The brother of the Night's Watch, which couldn’t have more than twenty-five years, had been just a stupid lad. He died crying, screaming that he just wanted to fuck some girls. As soon as his head fell off his neck, his shrieks came to an end. Jon swallowed, seeing the blood painting the stone slabs of the square. Robb had no stomach to endure it until the end and ended up looking at his own feet.

"It's not easy to fulfill the king’s justice. But the man who passes the sentence must swing the swords." Lord Eddard had told them, passing his sword to Jory Cassel, who promptly started cleaning it. His eyes sparkled carefully in Robb’s direction. His heir was still staring at the floor. "But we must do it ourselves, to feel the burden of our responsibility."
"Why must we follow the king’s justice?" Theon had asked, still laughing about what he had just seen. “He’s far away on the south…”

"Because this is the only way we can secure peace and order." Eddard had said sternly.

Those words would be recorded forever in Jon’s mind. His father nodded proudly in his direction before turning back to Robb. He wasn’t disappointed with his heir. He was sad. Sad because a day would come when his son would’ve to carry out this bloody task called justice. And was he prepared? He seemed to think Robb wasn’t.

"Don’t look away. Father will know if you do”, Jon had whispered in Bran’s ears just before his little brother saw his first beheading. And proudly Bran had stood up to the task.

That had been many years ago.

The sad picture of that day faded quickly among shadows to make room for other images from Jon’s past. He reviewed the moment he had knelt in the weirwood in the Haunted Forest to pronounce the vows of the Night’s Watch and officially become one of its sworn brothers. And he also revisited the night he had grabbed a torch in Lord Commander Mormont’s rooms to burn the dead body that had risen to attack them. And of course, he saw again the moment he had killed Qhorin Haldhand, winning over the wildlings’ trust and becoming one of them.

Those days with the wildlings passed before his eyes in a quick succession of flashes. A part of him had believed by then that he would give and break the words he had said in front of the weirwood tree. Becoming a deserter of the Night’s Watch, like the ones his father had beheaded. By learning how to respect Mance Rayder, he started wondering if returning to the Wall was actually worth it. He had questioned even more his loyalty after spending that first night in the cave with Ygritte, away from the eyes of men and gods.

*But how could I betray my honor?*

In the end, he had betrayed Ygritte instead. The mark on his leg, where her arrow had wounded him, would bring him pain until the end of his days. But it was a pain he could bear willingly, since it was also proof of his love for Ygritte.

Again, fleeting images flashed through his broken mind.

In his dream, he was passing now through the gates of Castle Black. He could see himself riding a horse while men of the Night’s Watch flocked to the courtyard to help him dismount. Eddard Stark had been among them.

"Father." He had whispered, reaching out to touch Eddard’s face. His father had by then shaggy hair and deep wrinkles around his eyes, as if he had in fact aged years since he had marched south. He was already all dressed in black and seemed to carry all the burdens of the world on his shoulders.

"You’re safe now." Eddard had answered before Jon closed his eyes.

Only later, when he had woken up in Maester Aemon’s room, did he recall why his father was on the Wall. He had been falsely accused of plotting against the Iron Throne. Yes, before leaving on Mormont’s Great Ranging he had received the news from King’s Landing. Lord Eddard was seated beside his bed, waiting for him to regain his consciousness.

"It’s good to see you again, boy." Eddard had said with a smile on his exhausted face.

"Father, the wildlings …" Jon had told him, slightly feverish. "The wildlings are coming."
Lord Eddard seemed stunned by those words but understood the urgency in Jon’s voice and merely nodded.

“Yes, yes… The wildlings.”

Within minutes, Donal Noye, who had taken command in Castle Black since Mormont’s demise, appeared in the room to hear Jon’s testimony. Mance Rayder was marching against their gates. Quickly, Donal Noye began preparations to defend the castle while ravens flew out to Winterfell and King’s Landing asking for reinforcements.

In the following weeks there hadn’t been much time for Jon to reestablish the ties with his father. The time and distance seemed to have dug an abyss between them. Silence filled most of their conversations. None of them seemed to care about words any longer. Eventually, Eddard started making an effort to cross the distance separating him from his son. He helped Jon making his recovery, helping him train his walking on Maester Aemon’s room and bringing him dinner every night. When Jon said he wanted to fight, he hadn’t questioned his decision and had merely nodded.

The Battle of Castle Black now occupied his dream.

The fight had begun, as expected, when the Magnar of Thenn appeared from the south with more than two hundred men to try to capture the castle in a surprise attack. Thanks to Jon, the castle was prepared and resisted. Most wildlings perished under arrows shot by the Night’s Watch. The fight was quickly over after the stairs connecting the castle to the top of the Wall burnt down, killing most of the Thenn.

Ice and fire, the wind whispered in Jon’s mind. The fire seemed to glow with a special bright in his dream. The snowflakes fell down like diamonds. Ice and fire, the voice repeated.

And there he was again, in his dream, this time in the aftermath of the first battle.

He was still in a really bad shape. By then, Jon had a scraggly beard and grayish skin. In addition, the wound on his leg was still causing in pain and was forcing him to use crutches. Putting aside his bow, he called out for Satin to help him down the roof. He needed to see the courtyard with his own eyes.

"Bring the torch," he had asked Satin. "I need to look for someone."

It had been mostly Thenns on the stairs, so he had hoped that some of the free folk had escaped. Especially Ygritte. She might have been one of the survivors. So he climbed down past the bodies of the men and wandered through the dark with his crutch under one arm, and the other around the shoulders of the boy.

The stables and the common hall had burned down to smoking cinders by then, but the fire still raged along the Wall, climbing step by step and landing by landing. From time to time they’d hear a groan and then a craaaack, and another chunk would come crashing off the Wall. The air was full of ash and ice crystals.

He found Quort dead, and Stone Thumbs dying. He found some dead and dying Thenns he had never truly known. He found Big Boil, weak from all the blood he’d lost but still alive.

“What are you doing?” Eddard had appeared coming from the gates, where he had stood during the fight. Looking to Jon and Satin, he quickly understood there must be a reason for his son to be wandering among the dead.

“I’m just looking for someone.” Jon had simply said. He didn’t want to tell his own father the truth.
Thankfully, Eddard didn’t ask anything again. He simply nodded and sheathed his sword – at the time an old rusty thing provided from the Castle Black’s armory. “Satin, you may go. I can help him in stand.”

“Satin is perfectly able to help me…”

But Eddard wouldn’t listen to it. Satin cast a gloomy look toward Jon and quickly released his hold as Eddard took Jon’s arm around his neck. Reluctantly, the boy turned his back and hurried up through the dead, as if one of them would suddenly rise up to attack him.

“Who are you looking for?” Eddard asked when they resumed their walk.

*A girl kissed by fire,* he had wanted to say. Instead, he kept his mouth shut and continued.

Not soon after, they found Ygritte sprawled across a patch of old snow beneath the Lord Commander’s Tower. An arrow was gleaming between her breasts. Ice crystals had settled over her face, and in the moonlight it looked as though she wore a glittering silver mask. The arrow was black, Jon saw, but it was fletched with white duck feathers. *Not mine,* he had told himself, *not one of mine.*

But he felt as if it were.

Without questioning, Eddard helped him knelt in the snow beside her. Ygritte’s eyes were open, staring back at him.

“Jon Snow,” she had said, very softly. It sounded as though the arrow had found a lung. “Is this a proper castle now? Not just a tower?”

“It is.” Jon had taken her hand.

“Good,” she had whispered. “I wanted t’ see one proper castle, before... before I...”

“You’ll see a hundred castles,” he promised her. “The battle’s done. Maester Aemon will see to you.” He had touched her hair, without caring about what his father would think of him. “You’re kissed by fire, remember? Lucky. It will take more than an arrow to kill you. Maester Aemon will draw it out and patch you up, and we’ll get you some milk of the poppy for the pain.”

She just smiled at that.

“D’you remember that cave? We should have stayed in that cave. I told you so.”

“We’ll go back to the cave,” he said. “You’re not going to die, Ygritte. *You’re not.*”

“Oh.” Ygritte cupped his cheek with her hand. “You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

And then she had died in his arms. He just held her for a few more minutes, feeling the snow settle around him and ice crystals forming in his beard. He would’ve stayed with her, just holding her, if eventually his father hadn’t placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered.

“Come with me, Jon.”

Even though he had no intention of following Lord Eddard, the truth is that he eventually did. He left behind Ygritte’s body to be burned with the others, and let his father guide him to the Flint’s Barracks. By that time, there was no one in the dormitory. There wasn’t even a fire burning in the fireplace.
Jon felt completely hollow inside, the battle’s adrenaline leaving his body and the cold finally settling inside him.

"Here." Eddard had passed him a cup of mead. It was cold as the air outside, but it burned through his throat like fire, warming him up. "Are you better?"

Eddard, after taking a cup for himself, seated beside Jon on the bed. The light coming from outside was the only thing keeping the darkness at bay.

"Did you love my Mother?" Jon asked, extending his cup so Eddard could fill it up again.

Lord Eddard obliged his son's request, but didn’t replied straightforwardly to the question. He just kept silent during a few more minutes.

"Yes, I loved her."

"Good." Jon replied, letting the cup fall on the floor. It smashed soundly.

Without another word, he grabbed his crutch and stood upright to leave the barracks. Eddard stayed on the bed, watching his son leaving back to the courtyard, to his brothers, to his duty. There was no room or time to mourn.

Now that he was revisiting all those moments, Jon realized that even if Ygritte’s hadn’t died it would never be easy for him to adapt to his new life as a sworn brother of the Night's Watch. The place was not as safe as he had remembered. The funeral pyres were still burning when Ser Alliser Thorne and Janos Slynt reached Castle Black, coming from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, and demanded that Jon was arrested for being a traitor.

"We now know that it’s in the nature of Lord Snow to betray his brothers!" Ser Alliser had yelled before all who were then in the Castle Black’s courtyard. "See how his father, the honorable Lord Eddard Stark, is now among us for betraying our king!"

"You can insult me all you want, ser. But must I remind you that if Castle Black is still standing, it’s because Jon told us the wildlings were coming?" Eddard protested, moving to stand in front of his child. Since Donal Noye had perished in the battle, Eddard was the only one there with courage enough to defend Jon. "I believe his loyalty was proved during the battle."

"Yes, Ser Alliser. Arrest me if you will." Jon said, staring eye to eye to the old master of arms. "Arrest me for following orders coming directly from my superiors."

Jon didn't have to say another word in his defense. Quickly, all around him, many members of the Night's Watch surrounded him to form a human shield. They pulled their swords to fight against Ser Alliser, if necessary.

"Well, do as you want. But I guess eventually we'll see where your loyalty truly lies." Ser Alliser replied, furiously turning his back.

*Loyalty and honor*, whispered again the voice in the wind, blowing away the moment.

The Fields of the Dead now appeared in Jon's mind.

The wildlings had emerged from the North and were attacking in full force. Giants and mammoths decimated hundreds of men. The snow became red for days. The fire burned while the snow fell. The Wall cried, long tears of melted ice coming down from his great structure. And it wasn’t the only one. Women and children cried, running away desperately trying to return to the homes they had left.
Wounded men were left, lying in the snow, waiting for death to take them away. If they were lucky, they would die quickly. But some lasted for long, feeling their bodies frozen up under the snow.

At the end, they managed to be victorious. Thanks to Robb’s army, Mance Rayder had no chance of winning. The King-Beyond-the-Wall was found dead on the battlefield, with an Umber ax buried in his skull. And when their leader was proclaimed dead, the wildlings revolted to chaos. Some started fighting with each other, while many of the survivors retreated to the Haunted Forest and to the villages on the depth of the North.

During every moment of the battle, Eddard remained like a shadow behind Jon, even there in his dream. He watched him closely, as if to evaluate him. The only time Eddard left Jon alone, leaving him in Robb’s hands, was to be at Benjen Stark’s side. Uncle Benjen had been found in the Weeping Man’s tent. He had been taken prisoner during almost a year and cruelly tortured at the wildling’s hands.

"He’ll be fine." Robb had assured to Jon, hours after Benjen was taken to Maester Aemon’s room. “Father says Uncle is physically weak, but that he’ll be fine."

Robb was no longer the child who didn’t have the courage to see a man losing his head. He had grown, was now Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North and had a lady wife from the Riverlands. However, whatever had happened in the South, it had definitely left a mark on him. He had something gloomy about him. Maybe it was the sister he had lost to Joffrey. The title he had received earlier because his father had been unjustly accused. Or maybe it was the wife he would never love.

"We’ll all be fine." Jon had said, not believing in his own words.

Robb smiled, also acknowledging the falsehood in those words.

"Yes, I know we will."

Not long after, all sworn brothers of the Night's Watch were called to attend the election of the new Lord Commander. It was that the vision which took form next. That meeting had everything to be written down as a turning point in the Night’s Watch’s history. Never before had they suffered such a heavy attack coming from the wildlings. And for centuries the living dead and the Others had just been scaring stories. The new Lord Commander of the Night's Watch needed to be a strong man, a man who had seen closely the terrors beyond the Wall and that could convince all Seven Kingdoms that winter would bring worse things with it than cold winds.

"You should be the one leading the Night's Watch." Samwell had confided to Jon, before the meeting. His friend had returned recently to the Wall, bringing one of Old Craster’s daughters and an infant child with him.

"I don’t think I’ve the support." Jon had said firmly.

Still, when the Night's Watch met to vote, Jon found out he had more support than he had thought. No matter his age, many sworn brothers paid their respects to him, praising the way he had fought during the Battle of Castle Black. Besides, he had been the choice of late Lord Commander Mormont.

_Could I actually be elected?_

Ser Alliser, faced with that same idea, find a way to quickly decimate him.

"Snow, what will you do with the wildlings if you are elected Lord Commander?"
Jon had thought about it several times and knew it was a delicate question. With Mance Rayder dead, it was impossible to negotiate with the wildlings. Even if they were to elect someone to lead them – Tormund Giantsbane, for instance, had been one of the many to flee back to the Haunted Forest -, it would be hard to negotiate peace with them. Even so, they had to try. Winter was coming.

"The dead are rising." Jon had said, before his brothers. The room was crowded with men, many men of whom he had never seen. Many had come from Eastwatch and Shadow Tower to be part of the election. "We’ve to garrison all the castles we can along the Wall. Lord Stark is available to help us defend some of those castles... But I believe the wildlings can also help us."

Immediately, a series of protests began among the brothers of the Night's Watch. Only a dozen of them remained silent. It seemed none of the men who had just praised the way he had fought seemed aware of his position toward the free folk.

"The more wildlings dying out there..." Jon had pointed his arm toward North. "The more dead will rise up against us! The wildlings are just men, men like us who hope to survive the winter and the terrors that come with it..."

"Robbers, rapists and murderers!" Someone had shouted from the crowd. "That's why our ancestors built a Wall! To keep them away!"

_No, it wasn’t._

"The Wall was built during the Long Night to protect us from the Others! The wildlings are men like us, men who didn’t have our luck and were on the wrong side..."

"I say we kill all of them!" Janos Slynt had cried. "I don’t believe this bullshit about the Others and the dead rising..."

_of course you don’t believe._ Janos Slynt was, and would always be, too green for the Wall. He had not seen the dead rise up as Jon had seen. But to his surprise, brothers around him began to shout in Slynt’s support.

"We will pursue the wildlings and kill every one of them!"

"Close our gates!"

"Robb Stark's men are the only ones we need to defend the Wall!"

"Yes, brothers. The wildlings are the _threat_ now." Ser Alliser claimed soundly. "Don’t Lord Snow and his father scare you... They're only traitors and wildling’s lovers."

And that same day, after two votes resulting in a tie between Bowen Marsh and Ser Dennys Mallister, Alliser Thorne decided to withdraw from the race and throw his support to Marsh, thereby giving him the victory. It was a bitter victory for Ser Alliser, but at least the 998th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch was someone who was on his side and that could be easily handled.

"Fighting the wildlings is wrong." Jon said, hours later, after meeting his father at the top of the Wall. He hadn’t received more than ten votes. "They're too weak to fight us..."

"I know." Eddard had responded. "But opening our gates so suddenly would never work. It would be difficult to maintain order among wildlings and Northerners. Besides, Robb would lose the support of some of the northern houses if he was to allow the Night's Watch to open its gates to the enemy..."
"The question is… They don’t need to be our enemies."

"Jon, I know. I truly know." Eddard replied, raising his voice. He seemed impatient and angry at something. "But you can’t change the beliefs of all Seven Kingdoms from one day to the other. If you try, you’ll be seen as a traitor and men like Ser Alliser will have your head."

Jon swallowed and kept his eyes fixed on the distant trees of the Haunted Forest.

"Your Uncle Benjen also talked about the dead… The men who accompanied him were slain by the dead, deep in the Haunted Forest." Eddard said, grimly. "I know winter is coming, Jon, and yes, I know we must fight the true enemy… But first we must be careful among our own."

"What do you propose then?"

Eddard sighed.

"If we keep together, we can change things at the Wall. We must be careful, and play within the rules for a time… We’ve still our honor and duty to the realm. But as someone taught me long ago, when we get ourselves into games of power, we must be careful because we can only win or die. Yes, this is a game of power now. And to achieve a victory, we first need to plan carefully."

"Plan? Father, are you sure? We must do something now. Wildlings are dying out there…"

“No.” Eddard replied, coldly. "For now, we can’t do anything. We must be obedient and show we are loyal. Convince Ser Alliser and Lord Commander Marsh that they’ve won… By the time they are comfortable with their victory, we’ll have a plan and allies to change things once and for all. But first, we must be patient."

"Patient? So we let the wildlings die?"

Eddard shifted beneath his cloak.

"I don’t like the idea also, Jon." He said without taking his eyes from the horizon. "But if we act hotheaded, we run the risk of being accused of treason. Then who will be here to defend the Wall from his true threats?"

Jon swallowed. Once again, only now that he was reviewing the conversation from afar, did he understand the wisdom of Lord Eddard’s words. As much as it had been difficult to follow a long-term plan, he now realized that any move made hastily would probably have resulted in their death.

I'm glad I've you here, father, Jon should have said that at the time. But the words hadn’t left his lips. Instead, he had remained silent again. The silence between them was becoming more important than words. It was comforting to know they had each other in the battles to come. They had also Uncle Benjen and Robb, of course, but between the two there was now a kind of bond that had they hadn’t formed with anyone else.

"I'm happy to know you've known love.” Eddard gulped after a minute, his eyes still locked on the horizon. Jon shifted beside his father and felt tears prickling his eyes.

You know nothing, Jon Snow.

"Yes." Jon replied simply.

"Jon…” Eddard said almost at the same time. His eyes turned to face his son. "I think the time has come for you to know the truth about your mother.”
Jon turned his head, his mouth slightly open.

"Now?"

“Yes.” Eddard continued. “I’ve been meaning to tell you the truth, since you returned to the Wall, but I’ve never found the right moment. But I think now is the best time for that conversation.”

Eddard pointed toward the Haunted Forest.

"I hear there are weirwoods not far from here... I think it’s safe enough to ride out there, don’t you? The air would do me good and I miss paying my respects to the Gods.”

"You want to ride to the Haunted Forest?"

Eddard nodded.

"And you'll tell me... you'll tell me who my mother was?"

"Yes. You heard me right."

This was totally unexpected, although Jon understood now why Eddard had chosen that moment to tell him the truth. In his dream, he saw himself and his father to descend back to Castle Black in the winch elevator. The silence between them was now more uncomfortable than before. After all, something was about to change in their lives forever.

It wasn’t easy to convince Bowen Marsh to open the gates to let them ride to the Haunted Forest. There could be wildlings hidden among the trees, preparing a counter-attack. Ironically, the help had come from the most unexpected man. Ser Alliser Thorne, amused, had come down to the courtyard to see what was happening.

"Let them go, Lord Commander. What could happen? If they join the wildlings, they will only prove what I’ve been saying... and they will die soon. Otherwise, if they are attacked, you could use them as an example. Yes, let them go pray their respects to the fucking gods."

Jon was too nervous to even think about answering to the provocation. On horseback, father and son left Castle Black through the tunnel and galloped through Fields of the Dead, until they reach the groove on the forest’s edge. Jon greeted the old white tree with its blood red leaves, as if it was an old friend. Eddard dismounted his horse and approached the tree with more reluctance, fixing his eyes on the face carved in the wood. With his gloved hand, he touched the tree’s trunk white as bone and let out a long sigh.

"I had to swear my vows in the sept at Castle Black." He revealed, looking sideways to Jon. "It was too dangerous to leave the Wall."

Jon nodded and rubbed his hands together.

Without saying another word, he sat on a wooden trunk lying on the ground and waited. His heart was beating at great speed in his chest and something seemed to have frozen inside his stomach. He kept his eyes locked on his boots, unable to lift his face one inch to face his father.

Eddard Stark, still with a hand on the tree’s trunk, whispered something very softly, a prayer to the Old Gods. Jon didn’t want to interrupt or to listen to what he confided to the secular tree. However, he heard some of the words the wind carried.

"It's time to break the promise..."
When Eddard seemed pleased with his prayers, he finally sat next to Jon. Around them, the Haunted Forest was surprisingly calm.

"Many years ago when I rode to the Red Mountains of Dorne to face the last knights of the Mad King’s Kingsguard and rescue my sister, I was not expecting to receive much opposition from them." He began quietly. "All of them knew the war was over. Rhaegar had died long ago in the Trident and Robert was already sitting on the Iron Throne... So why wouldn’t Ser Arthur Dayne let me reunite with my sister and surrender? I tried to convince him, as well as I did with Ser Oswell Whent and Lord Commander Gerold Hightower... But they refused to hear me."

"And when you fought them, you won." Jon interrupted, frowning. He knew that story since he was a child. What could have that possibly have to do with his mother? "You told this story several times."

Eddard nodded and kept his eyes on the horizon.

"Well, when we ate last defeated the three kingsguards, only me and Howland Reed had survived. Without taking any time to mourn our friends, we advanced to the Tower of Joy. I remember… I remember I had barely reached the stairs when I heard the screams…"

"Aunt Lyanna’s screams?" Jon asked, intrigued.

Father had never spoken much about aunt Lyanna and her death. All they knew was that Eddard had found in her deathbed. No one dared to ask many questions about that unfortunate incident. They assumed Lyanna Stark had been attacked, or that she had been sick or, in the worst scenario, that she had tried to kill herself in an attempt to put an end to her abduction.

"Yes, Lyanna..." Eddard had replied, tears reaching his eyes. "I hadn’t seen her since Rhaegar Targaryen took her after the Tournament of Harrenhal, provoking Robert's anger and the war that followed... But there she was, feverish and in pain, not believing that I was actually there. She had just given birth… Her bed was full of blood and beside it was a jar with blue wilted roses…. The scent of the flowers had been aggravated by the heat and filled the entire room to the point of becoming nauseating..."

"Did you just said… she had given birth?"

"Don’t you see now, Jon?" He asked, placing a hand on his son’s knee. "Why do you think the Kingsguards protected so fiercely Prince Rhaegar Targaryen’s mistress? Why would they keep fighting if House Targaryen was supposedly extinct? Don’t you understand, Jon...?"

Jon shook his head and leaned back, away from Eddard. The truth had finally hit him and was bitterer than he had thought. He expected to hear the name of some prostitute from the Riverlands or the name of a noble lady who had been too much ashamed to recognize him as her son. But he had never expected what Eddard was implying.

Lyanna Stark.

He remembered the statue in the crypts of Winterfell and the gentle expression on her stony face. No, it can’t be true, Jon repeated to himself, shaking his head. He felt something revolting inside his body, all his previous life being sucked into an abyss.

Rhaegar Targaryen.

The dragon prince who had kidnapped Lady Lyanna. The man who had started a war for a woman. The very same man who had died crushed by Robert Baratheon’s hammer. No, it couldn’t be. He
moved away from Eddard Stark’s hand and stood up. He began to walk from one side to the other. The tree followed him with its bloody eyes.

_Ice and fire, repeated the wind in Jon's dreams. You came from ice and you came from fire._

"Your mother loved Rhaegar Targaryen." Eddard assured, as if that information was important. "In fact, I believe she voluntary eloped with him. A sad mistake... She would never have done that if she knew she would be condemning the lives of thousands with her love."

"Father..." He had whispered, trembling. At all costs, he was looking out for arguments against Eddard. He was clinging too much to one of the only truths he had taken for granted in his life. "This can’t be true... Why would’ve you lied to Lady Catelyn about me all these years? She hated me… And she never forgave you for fathering a child... Why would you lie to her? Why would you shame yourself before all the North with... with a bastard?"

Eddard smiled sadly and hastened to explain.

"Robert, even though he was my best friend, would have killed you the moment he found out you had a drop of dragon’s blood in your veins." Eddard said quietly. "Didn’t you hear what happened to Aegon and Rhaenys Targaryen? Both my sister and I feared you would end up the same way... So she made me promise I wouldn’t tell her secret to anyone. Not even Benjen. On my return to the North, I brought with me Lyanna’s body and a child in my arms. I assumed you as my bastard before the whole world and buried my sister. And so life went on, Jon... Even if you weren’t my son, you had my blood. So I kept the secret and sacrificed my honor for you. But now that Robert is dead, I think it is safe for you to learn the truth."

No, none of this made sense. How could it be true? Jon continued passing from one side to the other, scooping snow with his boots. He remained silent, ignoring the long looks coming from Eddard Stark.

"Your mother asked me to name you Jahaerys, after one of your father's ancestors." Eddard said, after a few seconds. "It’s your true name. But since it would be too revealing, I decided to call you Jon after my foster father..."

Jon stopped and fixed his eyes on Eddard, leaving his mouth open in surprise and outrage.

"Don’t call me that again."

Eddard blinked, surprised by that abrupt answer.

"My name is Jon Snow, father." Jon said, trying to keep his voice steady. All the information in his brain left him exhausted.

_You know nothing, Jon Snow_, the wind whispered with Ygritte’s voice.

"This is the only thing I know." He continued. "I'm a Snow, not a Stark or a Targaryen. I don’t care if I'm the son of Lyanna Stark, Rhaegar Targaryen, Lord Eddard or some random woman... None of that matters. I'm Jon Snow." He repeated, feeling tears swelling again to his eyes. "I'm a sworn brother of the Night's Watch and have a duty to perform towards the Wall. This is the truth that I know and that I’ll know until my last day in this world."

Without waiting for his father's answer, he mounted his horse and prepared to return to the Wall. He needed to be alone, away from all this pain. However, as soon as he mounted on top of his stallion, something moved through the trees.
A pale figure approached them at full speed.

White Walkers.

"Father!" He had shouted, removing Longclaw from its sheath.

He didn’t hesitate a second to climb down the horse to defend the man who had lied to him all his life. Lord Eddard had also risen up and pulled out his sword, prepared for what was about to appear from the trees.

Ghost.

The direwolf with his white fur and red eyes appeared in a twirl of snow and leaves. For a few seconds, he stood on his hind legs observing them. His eyes were fixed on Jon, as if he wanted to ask him where the Seven Hells he had been lately. That one long look, however, was enough to break Jon. Everything he had endured in the last months, finally hit him, as if someone had fired into his chest the same arrow that had killed Ygritte. Letting the sword fall on the ground, he ran to the direwolf and fell on his knees. Greeting his loyal friend, Jon immediately hid his face between Ghost’s pelts and started to cry.

"Oh, I've missed you." He said, wetting the direwolf’s fur with his tears. He cried for Ygritte, for his mother and for himself. He had separated from Ghost before climbing the Wall with the wildlings. Since then he had wondered when he would find the direwolf again. The fact they had reunited at that moment of truth seemed like a sign.

The wolf and the dragon, once again the voice in the wind whispered cryptically.

Eddard’s hand landed on Jon’s shoulder.

"We must return to the Wall, Jon." His voice had also been choked with tears.

"Yes, we must." Jon had replied, suddenly so calm.

The dream changed again, flicking through a sequence of images. His promotion to a Ranger at the hands of Lord Commander Marsh. The raids beyond the Wall to attack wildlings who tried to approach the many castles now manned with northerner men. The discussions with Robb about the dead rising up with the winter’s winds. And the encounter with old maester Aemon, a few days before he left with Sam to Oldtown. He had thought about seeking the old maester’s guidance, knowing he had dragon blood in him. He wanted to talk with him about the rumors about the Dragon Queen freeing slaves in Essos. My aunt, he thought awkwardly. But no, he couldn’t gather the strength to admit he was more than a bastard. That was only random thoughts that crept quietly to his mind during the night. If he admitted his origins, he would be taking a step toward someone he didn’t want to be. At the end, he decided to remain loyal to what he had sworn to Eddard Stark. No matter who his mother and father were, he was just a Snow. A sworn brother of the Night's Watch. The only family he needed was one who fought beside him.

I’m Jon Snow and the only thing I know for sure is who I am.

The new wildling attacks eventually brought him closer to Lord Eddard. Their conversation on the Haunted Forest wasn’t brought up again. It was a secret and, by Jon’s wish, it would continue to be so. In the meanwhile, he held no resentment against his father. At first, a strange sensation had settled between them, but that didn’t last long. Jon understood why Eddard had lied to him and, if anything, he knew he should be thankful and not angry with him. After all, he deserved his life to Eddard.

And that was it. Life had to continue.
As Eddard had predicted, keeping hold of their emotions and obliging to every order coming from Lord Commander was enough to disassemble some of the mistrust Bowen Marsh had toward them. Even though Ser Alliser continued to insult them any way he could, they finally achieved what they wanted.

So they finally started making secret alliances among their own sworn brothers.

Many of them had begun to show their doubts about the direction Marsh and Thorne were taking. Grenn. Edd. Pyp. Ronnel. Cotter Pyke and most of his men in Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. They were all on their side, determined to do something for the Wall. But they had even more supporters. According to Uncle Benjen, at least a hundred sworn brothers of the Night’s Watch were on their side and ready to rebel against the Commander. Still, they waited.

Eddard kept on saying that the moment to strike hadn’t come yet.

The years passed quickly in Jon's dream.

He saw the castles along the Wall garrisoned with Robb’s men. He saw with a sinking heart the wildling attacks starting to become increasingly shy. He saw children freezing at the gates of the Wall, begging for shelter. And, above anything else, he saw Bowen Marsh and his entire clan remaining firm in their decision to continue to attack and kill all the wildlings that had enough courage to approach the gates.

Finally, the dream stopped on the vision Jon knew must be the last one.

It had happened only a month ago.

By that time, everyone in Castle Black was talking about the wildling group allegedly commanded by the so called New Lord of Bones that had begun to gather an army near Long Barrow. He had giants and mammoths with him, as well as more than three hundred men and women ready to fight. Lord Commander, as it was believed among the men, was preparing a battalion to reinforce the defense of the castle currently in the hands of Greatjon Umber.

One night, when Jon was eating his soup with Edd and Sam - who had returned a Maester, from the Citadel, the week before - Eddard entered the hall and asked to give a word alone to his son. Taking him to a corner near a fireplace, he whispered to him, loud enough to be heard above the fire.

"You must ride to Long Barrow with your Uncle Benjen." Eddard said simply, as if that was enough to convince Jon to go.

"Why?" He asked, deducing there was a reason behind that odd suggestion.

"I believe it’s finally time to put our plan in motion..." Eddard said, with a severe face.

Finally, Jon had thought, not knowing what his father was about to say.

"But you won’t be part of it." Eddard revealed quickly. When Jon opened his mouth to express his surprise and indignation, Eddard made a gesture to stop him. "Don’t argue with me on this, Jon. It’s a necessary precaution we must make. If something goes wrong, we need someone able to continue our work."

Jon shook his head and laughed.

"Father, I won’t let you risk yourself all alone. If you believe I will, you must be mad.” Jon couldn’t believe that after all those years he could still be treated as a child. “If something goes wrong, I'm
sured others will continue what we start... We can leave Uncle Benjen out, for instance. Or maybe Ronnel Harclay... But please, not me. I must fight."

Eddard nodded.

"Yes, I know." He replied, still determined by his decision. "But Jon, it's clearer for me, now more than ever, that your fight isn't here. That's why I need you to go to Long Barrow, my son. During the battle, you must escape to the Haunted Forest. Uncle Benjen will help you make sure everyone thinks you are dead... Then, you must walk to Eastwatch. It won't be easy, but you can do it. I've written to Cotter Pyke and he is already making arrangements for you."

In the light of the fire, none of those words coming from Eddard Stark’s lips made sense to Jon’s ears. Why would he fake his own death and make a journey on his feet through the cold and snow to a castle in the far west of the Wall? How could that help their cause?

"Father, I won’t do anything like that."

Eddard put a hand on his son’s shoulder.

"You’ll, Jon." He said, with the same voice he used to utter the sentences of the guilty men he had to behead on behalf of the king’s justice. "It’s time for you to accept who you really are. You can save the Wall, and possibly all the Seven Kingdoms, but first you’ve to accept your inheritance, my son." Doubt gave way to understanding in Jon’s eyes. "Winter is coming... But so is fire."

And then darkness burnt away his dream.

He felt light over his eyes and opened them.

He woke up in a narrow, smelly bed. A single candle burned in a chandelier lying on the floor. At the foot of his bed, the great mass of white fur that was Ghost was laying in silence, with his red eyes on a constant vigil. Jon looked around, looking for any sign that would allow him to find out where he was. His eyes adjusted quickly to the dim light of the room. A window allowed him to foresee the dark sky outside and the outline of the Wall.

*I'm alive.*

Even though he couldn’t remember how, someone should have found him in the snow and taken his body to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. By the sound of the waves hitting fiercely out the window, it wasn’t hard to find out he near the coastline. Yes, he definitely had survived his journey. He moved under the heavy warm blankets on his bed and closed and opened his hand consecutively. It didn’t seem to have suffered any damage from the cold. His legs, however, seemed a little rigid. His muscles seemed petrified and the wound on his knee was again in pain. Besides that, no part of his skin seemed burnt due to frostbite.

How could have he had such luck?

Footsteps in the corridor made him sit on the bed. He needed to find someone who could bring Cotter Pyke to his room as quickly as possible. Fortunately, when the door opened, it was the commander of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea who greeted him. Cotter had small, close-set eyes, a broken nose and a pox ravaged face. Lean, hard and wiry, he wasn’t known by his good humor, although he
had a heart gentle enough to smuggle in any wildling woman and child who came to his gates.

"Good, you're awake." He said in a gruff tone. "I don't know how you survived, boy. If it hadn't been for this wolf of yours, you would now be buried in snow. The beast came to our gates, howling loud enough to awake the entire castle... But well, he saved you. That's what matters, isn't it?"

Jon ignored him and tried to stand up on his feet.

"Here." Cotter said, extending an arm to help him up. Jon accepted his offer and quickly stood up. His legs were in clear pain, but, slowly, he managed to move them. "How do you feel?"

"Never better." Jon lied. "I suppose we don't have much time...?"

Cotter nodded, confirming his suspicions.

"Yes, we don't. *The Titan's Fury* arrived from Braavos yesterday morning and will leave for Pentos in a few hours... I don't know how I held them so long. I mean, I do know... There's nothing gold can't buy. But for the sake of my purse and your life, you must get on board of this ship as fast as possible. I managed to hide you from my men, but if someone sees you and recognizes you, Lord Commander Marsh will have my head and your father's..."

Jon nodded.

"Yes, I can leave today."

"Excellent." Cotter Pyke said. He pointed to a chair, where washed clothes waited for Jon. A blue and gray costume, the kind a wealthy braavosi merchant would wear. They were not especially warm, but since he was departing to a warmer place, he wouldn't need furs for much longer. "I'll give you an hour, so you can wash and cloth properly. Meanwhile, I'll ask Maester Harmune to prepare the papers you have to take with you and the gold your father asked me to lend you... and then you can go on this secret mission of yours."

"Yes." Jon replied, still feeling every muscle of his body aching.

Two hours later, Jon and Ghost were on board of *The Titan's Fury*, starting their journey to the place now called Dragon's Waste.
You’ve asked for Daenerys and here it is. When I wrote the Prologue, I hadn’t planned anything for Daenerys. How could I explain a time jump of six years… and her not having sailed for Westeros yet? So I started running ideas and I come up with what you’ll find in this chapter. I must say I’m surprised with myself with the final result. It turned out to be something I didn’t expect. I killed off some characters, brought others, created a few new ones and followed mainly Daenerys’ plotline from the books. Most of you who are big fans of Daenerys probably won’t like it, but I hope some of you will. Let me know in your reviews.

“My bright, sweet queen, the dragons can be tamed.”

_A new war is boiling in the city and Marwyn brings me another witch?_

Daenerys drummed her fingers on the arm of the wooden throne. If she was irritated, now she was even more. The old woman, who claimed to be named Sraysta, reminded her of Mirri Maz Duur. With gray hair and a large body, she was wearing a silk green tunic similar to the one of the Green Grace Galazza Galare of Meereen. Her nails were long and black, her eyes a strange mixture of gray and blue.

Probably noticing how Daenerys was not focusing her eyes on her, Sraysta clicked her fingers, making a wisp of black smoke rise from the palm of her hands, conjuring a black dragon made of smoke.

“And I can show you how, if you let me.” She twisted her fingers to make the dragon dance in the air.

Daenerys returned her eyes to the woman.

She had heard the same thing from sorcerers and priests coming from Volantis, Ibben and the Summer Isles. However, three times had she flown to the ruins on the other side of the bay, and three times had she flew back without Viserion and Rhaegal behind her. Her children refused to follow her commands. The advice of the red priest hadn’t worked. The whip the black witch of Ibben had given her had burned away. And even when she had walked fearlessly among the smoking ruins, leaving Drogon behind, she hadn’t managed to calm the dragons and made them follow her. In fact, her loss that day was still a burden in her soul.

_The dragons must have a rider each._ Once again, Marwyn words rang in her head. _If they must have three riders, where are the other two?_
“You can show me?” She asked Sraysta, slightly amused.

What kind of trick would the woman do next? Present her with a magical saddle for dragons? Or a cheap wine that would allegedly give any man the ability to ride a dragon without being burnt? Daenerys sighed and struggled to keep her face serious. She was sure now that all these alleged dragon lore’s experts Marwyn had brought lately were just his way of making a point.

Sraysta smiled, showing her rotten teeth with red stains.

“Through blood, my gentle queen.” She said, hastily. “Everything we need to learn about ourselves is in our blood.”

**Blood magic.** Yes, she was too much alike Mirri Maz Duur to do her any good.

As if hearing her thoughts, the witch took a step further toward the throne. On the great ruined tower looming over the Throne Hall, Drogon lifted his neck to see the woman approach. He snapped his jaws, menancingly, forcing the woman to take a step back.

“I’m afraid he doesn’t like strangers.” Daenerys replied, without moving her eyes.

Sraysta bowed and nodded, her legs trembling. Exchanging a glance with Ser Barristan, Daenerys gave him a silent order. He didn’t have to ask her what to do next.

“Your audience is over.” He said, as suspicious as Drogon. “Let me escort you outside.”

Sraysta’s eyes widen as she started shaking her head. Controlling her fear, she lifted her chin and managed to speak again.

“Oh, but I’ve to draw a drop of blood from our gracious, lovely queen.” She explained, pulling out a bone needle from a pocket concealed into a sleeve of her dress. Again, she looked directly to Daenerys. “Let me taste your blood, my queen, and I’ll tell you how you can control the dragons.”

“Let’s go.” Barristan said, taking a step further toward the witch. He knew what Daenerys thought about blood magic. *As does Marwyn,* she remembered, slightly furious. She would deal with the Maester later.

The woman refused to go. Instead of following Ser Barristan, Sraysta opened her arms, the needle still in her hand. With her head tilted toward the sky above them, which was hidden behind a cloud of smoke and cinders, the witch started screaming.

“My queen, you’re making a mistake… I can show you the way. *I swear!*”

“I don’t deal with blood magic.” Daenerys answered, coldly. “And I recommend you to find other craft if you want to stay in the city. As you may’ve heard, I’ve banned all sorts of blood magic. Anyone caught practicing it will be detained and judge for their crimes. Am I clear?”

Barristan grabbed the woman by her arm. She didn’t even blink. Her eyes descended from the sky, passing through the tower where Drogon stood, to rest on the black wooden throne. There was madness in her eyes. Madness and famine.

“Well, then you must kill me now.” The woman said, defiantly.

Even before Daenerys could understand the meaning of those cryptic words, the woman plunged the needle into Ser Barristan’s neck. Caught off guard, the Lord Commander of the Queensguard yelped and released her. Grey Worm, who had stood at the oak doors watching, advanced forward,
followed by Ser Archibald Yronwood.

As if the attack hadn’t been enough, the woman threw her arms around Ser Barristan’s, clutching him against her body for less than a second. That gave her enough time to flick her tongue on Ser Barristan’s neck, like a viper, to lick the blood gushing from the wound. He quickly pulled her away, throwing her to the floor. However, Sraysta seemed satisfied with herself. A victorious smile reached her lips covered in blood. When Grey Worm’s spear descended to rest on her chest, forcing her to stay on the floor, she kept on smiling. Meanwhile, Ser Archibald had gone to Ser Barristan to inspect his wound and lookout for any sign of poison.

“Shall I kill her?” Grey Worm asked, turning his face to Daenerys. The spear was claiming for blood.

Daenerys stared, with eyes wide open. How could that have happened?

_Ser Barristan is definitely getting old_, Daario would’ve said if he was still alive. Her lover had died on her last excursion to the ruins of Meereen. She was sure that if anyone could ride one of the other dragons, it would have been Daario. He was eager to obey her command, especially moved by the idea of ruling by her side with a dragon. But she had been wrong about that. Viserion had turned him into ashes right before her eyes, proving he was not the man who would ride him.

_Three fires must you light… one for life and one for death and one to love._

Her dragons.

The slaver cities.

Daario.

She had lighted all her fires. Even though she wasn’t sure she had loved Daario as she had Drogo, she had definitely felt something.

“No, don’t kill her yet.” Daenerys replied, staring at the woman. Weakness crept again through her body. It seemed she was losing control again, just like had happened at Meereen with the Sons of the Harpy. _Riots in the city, dragons untamable and now even my guards start to fail._ “You’ve a clear wish to die, don’t you?”

Sraysta laughed and the sound of her laughter made Daenerys’ stomach revolve. Blood trickled down through the witch’s chin.

“I’ll die soon.” She said, confident about her words. “It’s now clear to me.” Her tongue licked the blood still on her lips, drinking it as if it was the sweetest thing in the world. “Yes, the dragon will soon rain his fire over me.” The woman prophesied, unperturbed to talk about her own death. Her eyes sought Ser Barristan. “Oh, the taste of your blood, ser. I can tell you everything will happen from the taste of it. Oh, yes… How strong your blood was, Ser Barristan Selmy of Harvest Hall. How bold it was, yes… And how weak it’s now. Oh, and I see you’re not afraid for your life, are you? You await death like mercy. You were ready to die at the Battle of Meereen. You actually wanted to die after you lost the scribe girl, who is now nothing more than a pile of ashes in a frozen land. And yet, here you are still standing.”

Ser Barristan grew pale, covered in his own blood. His cloak, so white and pure, had red stains on it.

“Don’t listen to her.” Daenerys ordered, standing up. Above her, she could feel Drogon moving again to watch them. On the gallery, the Council of the Freemen who ruled the city with her seemed uncomfortable.
“You fear for your Dragon Queen now.” The woman called again, screaming. “I can taste your fear… And your disappointment? Yes, disappointment. How bitter it is.” Sraysta turned her eyes to Daenerys. “My sweet queen, you are no longer the ruler he saw in you all those years ago.”

“Enough with this nonsense!” Ser Barristan was completely embarrassed, his face flushed thanks to the lies that had just left the woman’s lips. He pulled out his sword and, shaking off Ser Archibald, advanced to shut the witch’s mouth once and for all.

Sraysta laughed and looked again to Ser Barristan.

“You’ll die in a fiery storm with a sword in your hand and your cloak painted red with your queen’s blood. Remember that.”

“You dreadful woman…!” Losing control, Ser Barristan descended his sword to the woman’s chest. Grey Worm was quicker and stopped the Lord Commander of the Queensguard in time.

“No. The Queen wants her alive.” He retorted.

Ser Barristan, wheezing like an old man after a sprint, remained silent for a few seconds before sheathing his sword.

“Take her to the Sandstone Cells and make sure she can’t escape.” Daenerys commanded, her eyes locked not in Sraysta but in Ser Barristan. You’ll die in a fiery storm with a sword in your hand and your cloak painted red with your queen’s blood. Could those words be true? She didn’t need another prophecy bringing her nightmares during the night. “She’ll be taken to Meereen in the next ship. If she says she’ll die by fire, we’ll let her die by fire… But not here.”

Every two days, a ship with cattle was sent through the bay to the smoky ruins of Meereen to keep Viserion and Rhaegal fed. It was the only thing she could do to make sure they wouldn’t fly to attack Bhorash or other neighbor city.

Grey Worm and Ser Archibald, each one grabbing the woman by an arm, dragged her out of the room. Her screams echoed through the walls and the open sky above their heads. Fortunately, the city noises were loud enough to muffle her screams. Above her, still on the great tower, Drogon moved again, his wings flapping quickly, as he stretched again his neck to lie down on the white stone.

“Your Grace, the woman lied.” Ser Barristan advanced toward her, a concerned look in his face. “It’s true, I fear for your well being, but I’m not disappointed.”

And now it’s you who are lying, Daenerys thought sadly.

She couldn’t know if most of what the witch had said was true or would one day happen. But from what she had interpreted, she was sure of at least two things. First, that Missandei was dead. She suspected for long that her little scribe had lost her life. From what Ser Barristan had told her, the Naathi girl had been sold as a slave during her time lost in the Dothraki Sea. The other thing she was sure was that Ser Barristan was indeed disappointed with her.

Since she had settled at Bhorash, the Lord Commander of her guard seemed more and more impatient to sail to Westeros. He kept on urging her to take the army of Unsullied, Dothraki and sellswords to invade the Seven Kingdoms. She had enough ships since she had freed the slave’s cities, as well as gold to hire more swords to her cause. Besides, a new secret alliance had been made with Dorne, even though things hadn’t worked out well for Quentyn Martell.
Everything was ready except for one thing.

How could she leave Dragon’s Waste without her children? She could control Drogon, but the other two refused to follow her. Ser Barristan was one of the few who insisted she could take the Iron Throne with one dragon. But what would happen to Bhorash? The City of the Unchained? Viserion and Rhaegal would bring a second doom over the city, killing the millions who had sought the safety of the city walls and a chance to rebuild their lives. So yes, every time Ser Barristan talked about sailing to Westeros, she had to turn him down and see the disappointment gleam in his eyes.

And now it was becoming evident that he was no longer able to defend her. He had done a fine job training the men who formed now her Queensguard, telling her everything he could remember about Westeros and helping her form the Council of the Free Men that ruled the city. But now he was growing older and weaker. You’ll die in a fiery storm with a sword in your hand and your cloak painted red with your queen’s blood. What kind of new charade was that?

Daenerys shook her head, as if to clean her head from those foul thoughts.

“You shouldn’t worry about what the woman said.” Daenerys spoke, pressing her lips. Her purple eyes stared at Ser Barristan’s neck. “Maester Marwyn, can you tend to Ser Barristan’s wound?”

“You needn’t worry about it.” Ser Barristan replied quickly, hiding the wound with the back of his hand. “We shall convene with the Council to discuss the events of last night…”

Daenerys shook her head and cast a look toward the fifteen men and women in the gallery. Each one represented the interests of freemen coming from different places all over Essos. It was a strange mixture of tongues, cultures and beliefs that were proof of how the city didn’t have a common identity but so many of them.

“The Council was adjourned, ser.” She replied, impatiently. Wasn’t he getting the same information all her other advisers were receiving? “The Ambassador of Volantis can’t be found anywhere, so we must postpone our meeting until tomorrow.”

“Oh, yes.” Ser Barristan scratched his wound. “Yes, I remember now.”

“You shall see to that wound and rest.” She looked behind her shoulder to Marwyn, who was standing near the door that led to the ruined tower. Just like a shadow. “Maester, please, can you take care of Ser Barristan or not?”

Marwyn had a thick neck and a strong jaw. He was short and squat, with enormous hands, a thick chest and a hard ale-belly. His nose had been broken more than once and his teeth were stained red. A few years ago, he had come from the Citadael to ask for a place in her household. Daenerys had accepted fascinated to have at last a Maester at her side, not knowing by then that he was different from what a Maester was expected to be. Even so, he knew a lot about magic, having studied it at the Citadel and other places all over Essos. Thanks to all that knowledge, he had been a great help finding her all kinds of experts who could help her control the dragons.

And fools like this stupid Sraysta. It was his way, she suspected, to show her that no one could help her here. She had to do what he truly wanted her to do in order to get answers. Just like Qaith had said long: To go forward you must go back and to touch the light you must pass beneath the shadow.

Stupid prophecies.

“Yes, Your Grace.” He muttered, clearly displeased.

When they disappeared through the door, the Council of the Freemen were also waived out. In a few
minutes she was left alone in Throne Hall. Not truly alone, she remembered. Outside in the passageway leading to court, eight Unsullied men were standing guard, as well as three Dothraki warriors. If only I could return to Dragonstone, she said to herself, standing up. Not the same Dragonstone where her family had lived. No, she was thinking about the hill in the Dothraki Sea, where she had lived for some days alone with Drogon, before being found by the Dothraki. Outside the other door, the one leading to her chambers, other guards were standing in position.

She took off her golden crown and placed it on the seat of the black wooden chair carved in the shape of a large dragon. The crown had also three dragons’ heads. Another lie, she thought angrily. It was ridiculous how powerless she felt. Breaker of Chains, Mother of Dragons, Bringer of Fire. Only words now. Letting out a sigh, Daenerys looked around.

The Throne Hall was anything but conventional. Long ago, that place must have belonged to a high valyrian lord. It stood on a cliff looking toward the limpid water of the bay and to the whole city now stretching near the water. After she had returned to Meereen to destroy everything under fire, killing the Sons of the Harpy, her husband and the slaver masters who had reclaimed the city, she had looked for a new place to live. By then, she had intended to sail to Westeros. However, Viserion and Rhaegal had completely gone rogue, burning much more than Meereen and her enemies. The winged creatures took their wrath over to Yunkai and Astapor, razing every pyramid to the ground. Unable to hand them, she had decided to settle on the other side of the bay, on the old ruins of a city called Bhorash. While searching for a way to control her dragons, she had brought life to the city again, inviting all freed slaves to join her.

The ruined palace fitted perfectly to her needs. The Throne Hall was the largest hall of the palace. According to Maester Marwyn, it was almost as great as the Hall of the Hundred Hearths at a place called Harrenhal, at Westeros. All of it was built in white marble, with tall pillars along the walls. The roof had fallen long ago, allowing anyone to see the sky above their heads. That was why they could see the ruined tower looming right behind the hall. It was there, on its top, that Drogon had established his nest. He used to look down to the city and directly to the Throne Hall when Daenerys was holding court, imposing his respect.

She left the Throne Hall through the door in the back and climbed the steps to her quarters on the base of the ruined tower. Ser Ergolith, a Volantane freeman who had been trained by Ser Barristan, was waiting for her in the corridor, as well as Arlaq, a Dothraki warrior. They followed her in silence until she arrived to her private chambers.

“Come in with me.” She commanded, before opening the door. “I'll need your services.”

Both of her guards nodded.

Her new Dothraki handmaidens, Illi and Rimir, were sitting on a bench near a window hearing Septon Taelen reading from The Book of Holy Prayer. Following Ser Barristan’s recommendation, Daenerys had included a septon in her new household. As Viserys had told her once, the Faith of the Seven was the one with more devotees on the Seven Kingdoms. Thus, it was in fact a good idea to start establishing relations with the Faith if she hoped, one day, to be accepted by the realm. She was afraid that most of them would see her as the Mad Queen, the one who had burnt down entire cities like her mad father had once threatened to do.

“Yes, Your Grace.” The septon exclaimed, watching her enter. With a grim expression, he closed his book with a thump. The handmaidens suffocated their laughs behind their hands. They didn’t believe in anything septon Taelen preached. The only God they would ever know was The Great Stallion. “I was not expecting you so early.”

“Obviously not.” Daenerys replied, digging her nails into the flesh of her hands. She knew the
septon would come directly to her room. That’s why she had made plans earlier. “Illi, bring us some refreshments, please.”

“Yes, Khaleesi.” Her handmaiden, a plump little thing with thirteen years old, stood up and left the room quickly.

“And Rimir, can you go to that place I sent you in the morning and ask for another one?”

Rimir blinked and smiled. She was a distant cousin of Irri, her previous handmaid who had left her service to marry. Understanding what her Queen meant by those words, the girl bowed and hurried after Illi.

Septon Taelen had come directly from Oldtown, just like Marwyn, although that was the extent of what they had in common. While the Maester believed in the power of magic and the occult, the septon abhorred anything that disrespected the Gods. In fact, since he had arrived at Bhorash, Taelen had done much more than teaching Daenerys more about the Faith of the Seven. He constantly talked to her about the religious reforms the Seven Kingdoms needed, about the corruption in the Great Sept of Baelor and how the High Septon was a fool bought with Lannister gold. And he wasn’t done with that. He believed it was Daenerys’ mission to convert all freemen to the one true religion. He used to tell her about how Baelor the Blessed would be proud to see her bringing down all the false gods.

*I’m done with making my ancestors proud,* she used to think to herself. However, even though she hadn’t agreed to be a herald for the Seven, she was beginning to think she had given too much liberty to Taelen. Things had gone too far.

*And only now are getting worse.*

“I suppose you are here because of the riot.” Daenerys replied to the septon, pointing toward the balcony. Silk curtains danced in the warm wind, forming strange delicate patterns. The smell of smoke was stronger now that they were higher.

“Yes, Your Grace.” Taelen answered, following her quickly. “Dreadful thing.”

It was warm outside, even though the winds were growing colder. Eight months ago, Illyrio Mopatis had sent her a letter saying that winter had been officially declared at Westeros. Here, the weather was changing, but so far the temperatures were high as usual.

“Yes.” Daenerys replied, placing her hands on the balcony rail. “Although three hundred men killed in one night are more than dreadful, I daresay.”

She stared down at Bhorash. From the balcony, she could see the whole city at her feet. The bay waters bathed the coast to the east, with its clear waters. Hundreds of ships with sails displaying banners of noble houses of places throughout Essos billowed in the wind. Volantis and Braavos, Qarth and Pentos, Myr and Norvos and even some from Old Ghis. Each one of those cities had broken their chains after the Doom of the Harpy and sent hundreds of ships as a peace offering. Some places were still resisting her orders, like Qohor and Yi Ti, but would soon bend their knee. She had sent the Second Sons, the Stormcrows and the Windblown, as well as a small battalion of Unsullied, to fight in those distant lands.

And of course that a place called Vaes Toreyllos, Rheysa, Ilviris and The City of the Freemen would attract released slaves from all over Essos. However, with the stream of freed slaves arriving every day through the gates, unwanted guests had come with them. Many of those intruders had committed crimes in the name of the late Slave Masters. For a week or two, a small group of slaves loyal to their
dead Masters had re-enacted the Sons of the Harpy and killed dozens of innocents. Nonetheless, those threats had slowly faded out.

Now, the freed slaves were fighting among themselves.

“Three hundred, Your Grace?” Taelen faked his astonishment. “Well, you know what I’ve to say about those…” She knew he saw most of the freemen as savages. Even so, he managed to restrain his tongue in time, finishing his sentence with another word. “Those infidels.”

“Infidels?” Daenerys scowled, don’t believing what she had just heard. “According to my scribes, it seems that the fault is on your side, father. It was two of your devotees of the Seven who started the brawl with a red priestess. And then dozens of them got involved until someone lighted a fire inside the sept your men are building. The rest you saw, as well as the whole city.”

The fire started by the followers of R’hllor had grown wild enough to burn down not only the sept but many of the houses built last year. Hundreds had died on the streets, others had simply died in their beds, suffocated with the smoke. A fire started not by a dragon, but by a freed man. The Masters would be laughing if they were alive.

“If what you say it’s true, Your Grace…” The septon continued, fumbling. “Those faithful to the Seven were at fault… But it was those demons who worship the Red God who started the fire. I hope you’ll punish them. Rebuilding the sept from the start will cost us a fortune… Gold which should have been invested in a sept on the south slumbers! What do you intend to do? I urge you, please, to ban the red priests once and for all…”

Unlike Westeros, here it was the faith of R’hllor who had more devotees. Even though septon Taelen and his novices had converted hundreds of slaves to the Faith of the Seven, it wasn’t enough to become a majority. Besides, most of the city believed that she was the Azor Ahai, the champion sent by the Lord of Light to save the world. The association with fire was evident, but Daenerys, if she was a champion, couldn’t actually feel like one.

“I’m afraid I won’t do such thing.” She replied, directing her eyes to the septon. What would become of the city if she were to ban the red priests? More war. Taelen looked at his feet, without courage to face her directly. “Do you know what my informants also reported, septon? That you’re going behind my back again. It’s true you’ve begging brothers recruiting men to form the Faith Militant?”

Septon Taelen pressed his lips.

“Well, Your Grace, we need to protect ourselves from…”

“I expressly command you to not start your own militia.” Daenerys reprehended him, feeling the fire inside her. “I agreed to let you build a sept and to preach in the streets, as I did with the red priests. But both of you promised to respect each other, do you remember? I won’t force any religion to a single free man. That is the concept of freedom. They can choose the God they want to follow, as I’ve chosen to follow the Faith of my ancestors. Forming a militia to instigate a religious war inside the city won’t do us any good.”

“But Your Grace, you saw what they did to our sept! How can you judge us for defending ourselves?”

Daenerys snorted.

“I believe you want more than to defend yourselves, father.”

“Your Grace, I swear to you that…”
“You’ll use the Faith Militant to convert freemen to the Seven by force.” It seemed more than obvious to her. “And I won’t have you doing that.”

“You’re betraying your Gods then.” Taelen retorted, aghast. “The true Gods!”

“Maybe I am, father.” Daenerys replied. “But if I remember well my history lessons, the first Targaryen rulers never had much interest in the Faith. Aegon the Conqueror allowed it in the Seven Kingdoms, but he was never a true believer, was he? And other religions are today still allowed at Westeros. The Old Gods of the North and the Drowned God of the ironmen. So why other religious practices shouldn’t be allowed here?”

“You’re hear too much to those nonsenses Maester Marwyn is whispering in your ears.” He retorted angrily, the crystal balancing in his chest. “If you want to lay with red priests and sorcerers, do as you please, Your Grace. But you’ll never be accepted at the Seven Kingdoms if you consort with those infidels. See what happened to Stannis Baratheon, who turned his back to the Seven…”

“Enough.” Daenerys interrupted, controlling herself not to outburst. “Ser Ergolith, please, take septon Taelen to the Glass Tower.”

“The Glass Tower?!” Taelen asked, confused. “Your Grace, if you arrest me, the red priests will prosecute each one of the slaves I’ve converted. And what about the sept? Who will overlook the construction?”

Ser Ergolith was already approaching, coming from the room.

“You won’t be arrested, septon Taelen.” Daenerys explained. “You’ll be confined for a while until the city calms down again. The construction of the sept will be suspended…”

“Suspended?!?”

“And I’ve already appointed one of your novices to take charge of the freemen you’ve converted.”

“This is preposterous, Your Grace!”

“You’ll be comfortable, father.” She assured, a smile touching her lips. “And you’ll be alive.”

Ser Ergolith, all clad in gold, took the septon by the arm.

“You’re condemning this wretched city, Your Grace.” Taelen screamed, while Ergolith dragged him out of the balcony. “You’re playing right into the red priests’ hands!”

She turned her back then, tired of hearing him.

*If I look back, I’m lost.*

Who was she trying to fool? She was already lost. Looking far ahead to the bay, as if she could actually see the cities standing on the other shore, she longed again for her children. Everything would be different if she had her dragons with her. *Everything.* Instead, here she was, with a giant army, thousands of ships and even nothing at all. Oh, how she would give anything to have Jorah by her side. Or Drogo. Or even Missandei. Instead, she had a fanatic septon, an old senile knight, a crazy maester and a city without identity. Oh, and a lot of prophecies eating her from the inside. The ones from Qaithe, the visions she had saw in the House of the Undying and now Seystra’s.

*To go north, you must go south. To reach the west, you must go east. To go forward you must go back, and to touch the light you must pass beneath the shadow*
Yes, she knew the time had come.

Illi appeared minutes later, bearing a tray with two chalices and a jug of dornish wine. Prince Oberyn Martell had brought ten barrels of wine during his last secret visit.

“Oh.” Illi’s eyes sought septon Taelen.

“I’m afraid our dear septon won’t be paying us visits for a time.” Daenerys managed a smile. Her handmaid giggled while placing the tray on the balcony rail.

“He a funny man.” Illi said, giggling again. “I like the tales about the Mother and the virgin girl and the man who bends iron… But they silly. The Great Stallion is the greatest god. It is known.”

“Yes, it is known.” Daenerys smiled back, wishing to be as innocent as the girl “You may go now. Thank you.”

Illi bowed and left the balcony, disappearing through the silky curtains.

She tasted the sweet wine while looking again to the city.

Dorne was by her side and ready for an invasion. Prince Doran had played a smart game, keeping loyal to the Iron Throne while plotting revenge for his sister Elia, Rhaegar’s late wife. Even though she hadn’t met him personally – it seemed he was a sickly man – she had met twice with his brother Prince Oberyn, with his daughter Arianne and with Trystane Martell, the heir of Sunspear. She had refused again a marriage proposal, but had agreed to take Ser Archibald Yronwood on her Queensguard and to give a place as Hand of the Queen to a Martell when she finally conquered the Iron Throne. She suspected the Martells would insist again on a marriage proposal eventually, but for now she was not ready to marry again.

She had to find out the answer to the charade.

Who are the three heads of the dragon?

Daenerys looked above her, to the top of the tower, to see the black tail of Drogon spiralling around the marble structure.

To reach the west, you must go east.

She had emptied her chalice when Maester Marwyn, as she had hoped, joined her. He advanced silently through the window curtains, moving softly like a shadow, and grabbed the wine jug to pour some of it in the second cup.

“I just passed by poor septon Taelen.” He commented, in a murmur. “He screamed something very improper to me.”

Daenerys pushed her cup through the rail so he could fill it up. With a wicked smile, Maester Marwyn obliged.

“When have you decided to arrest him, Your Grace?”

“The moment I woke up to the sound of the bells.” She replied, carefully.

“Well, it was a wise decision.”

“I don’t need you to tell me if it was wise or not, Maester Marwyn.” Her voice, once again was cold as ice. “The proofs against him were clear. He’s causing too many troubles… as are you.”
Maester Marwyn laughed.

“Me, Your Grace? Do you also intend to put me in a cell in the Glass Tower?”

Daenerys smiled, taking one more gulp of wine.

“Yes.”

Once again, Marwyn laughed.

“I hope this isn’t because of the witch…” He replied, tasting his wine calmly. “I was just doing what you asked me. You wanted solutions about the dragons and I’ve searched for them. This woman was the best I found in the city last week, I didn’t know she would do such a spectacle but…”

“Blood magic, Maester?” Daenerys snorted, trying to fake amusement. “Really? I know you’ve brought me more than fifty experts, but you know perfectly well what I thought about blood magic.”

“Well, yes, indeed, but the woman seemed to have talent.”

“You’re lying. I know why you brought her.” She replied, slightly infuriated.

“Well, if you know, I hope you act accordingly.” Maester Marwyn was still smiling wickedly. “And I’ll gladly take a cell in the Glass Tower, Your Grace, if you allow me one with a nice view over the bay.”

“Are you mocking me now?”

“No, Your Grace.” He said, quickly. “I just want to be the first one to know when you come back to the city.”

It was Daenerys turn to laugh now.

“I won’t leave the city.”

“Well, now it’s you the one who are lying.” Maester Marwyn said, amused. “Why are you detaining me? Because I’m such turning mobs into fanatics, like septon Taelen? I’m just your advisor and have your best interests at heart. I’m not forming up a militia to bring havoc to the city. No, you’re detaining me because you don’t trust me enough to let me near the Council of the Freemen while you’re away and…”

Marwyn stopped in the middle of a sentence to inhale a breath of air. A smile took form in his lips, the same clever smile Daenerys had learnt to respect and fear.

“And?” Daenerys insisted, amused.

“And you want me close, so I can’t escape the city if you don’t come back.” Once again, Maester Marwyn seemed to have read her mind. “I’ll gladly take my place at the Glass Tower, Your Grace, and wait for your return. As I’ll gladly die as a traitor, if you don’t come back… Because if you don’t, there is nothing in this world you can do to control your dragons and find answers.”

If I look back, I’m lost.

She tightened her grip over the cup and took another sip.

“If you’re betraying me and I don’t come back, I’ll make someone cut each one of your limbs and throw the rest of your body in the streets.” She couldn’t believe the words coming out of her mouth,
but she meant them. “You’ll be alive when the cats and rats crawl from the pits at night, to softly eat you while you feel each pain…”

“Your Grace, suffering for you would be an honor.”

*He seems really confident.*

Daenerys nodded, settling the matter.

“Before I go… can I ask you what made you change your mind?” Marwyn asked, narrowing his eyes.

That was an interesting question. For years he had insisted she should leave the city, taking her dragon to fly away in search of answers in the only place of the world where she could find them. And every time she had turned Marwyn’s proposals down following instead Ser Barristan’s advice. But what had really changed her mind that day?

“What made me change my mind?” She repeated, still thinking. “Nothing.”

“What?”

“I’ve everything and nothing at all.” Her eyes turned to the city. “And if I don’t do anything, I’m afraid I’ll even lose this nothingness I’ve.”

Marwyn nodded, again the wicked clever smile on his lips.

“I understand.” He plunged his hand into a pocket and took out something dark that seemed like a candle but was clearly not made of wax. “You must take this with you. It’s an obsidian candle.”

She grabbed the candle, warm against her skin. She had seen it before in Marwyn’s room, burning like a true candle, with a flame full of secrets. By that time, she had remembered what Qaithe had said about how the glass candles were burning. According to Marwyn, until a few years ago, lighting a glass candle had been impossible, but not now.

Something was awakening in the world.

“What should I do with it? I don’t even know how to light it.”

“You’ll know when the time comes, Your Grace. I promise.”

Maester Marwyn smiled one last time and bowed.

“Safe travels, Daenerys Targaryen.”

When he left the balcony willingly, Daenerys followed in silence, carrying the candle in one hand and the chalice in the other. The Maester went directly to Arlaq, the Dothraki warrior who was standing near the door.

“Take me to the Glass Tower, if you please.”

Arlaq, obviously confused with that strange remark, lift his eyes to receive orders from Daenerys. She nodded.

“A cell must be already prepared for him.” Daenerys explained, trying to keep her voice steady. “I sent Rimir with instructions more than half an hour ago. But make sure he has a good view to the bay, Arlaq.”
Laughing, Marwyn left the room behind the Dothraki.

Left alone with Illi, who was seated at a corner, making a straw basket, Daenerys took her place in the small table and, after asking her handmaid to bring her parchment and ink, started writing three letters. One to Ser Barristan, another to Grey Worm and a last one to Ser Archibald. The contents of the letters were similar: she explained why she had left the city quietly and gave them instructions about when they could hope for her return. Keeping her word about what she would do to Marwyn, she explained how she wanted the Maester to be executed. She also addressed the incarceration of the septon and what she believed should be done to calm down all the religious talk in the city. At last, she wrote one last letter to the Council of the Free Men, giving them full powers to rule according to the guidelines of her closest advisers.

Night had fallen by the time she ended her letters. She placed them on her table, under a goblet full of wine. After refusing to receive Ser Barristan, who wanted to talk to her about the incarceration of Septon Taelen, she dined with her handmaidens. Like a silly girl, she told them about Drogo and how they had made love near the Womb of the World. They giggled, asking more questions about the arts of love, with the same curiosity she had at their age. Illi was already experienced, but Rimir, only eleven years old, was still a virgin.

“It hurts the first time.” Daenerys confided, laughing. “But then the pain gives way to the most beautiful sensation in the world.”

After being stuffed with enough fruit and cheese, Daenerys stood up and kissed both girls in the forehead. I’ll come back, she said to herself, while changing from her white dress to a more comfortable one, made of black leather. She put on long kneeled boots and asked Illi to braid her silver hair.

“You meeting someone, Khaleesi?” The girl asked, with bright eyes. All the talk about love had made her more curious than usual.

“No.” She replied. “I’ll just check on Drogon.”

The girl was drunk enough to believe in that lie. Finally ready, she clasped Daario’s dagger at her waist, the only remembrance she had of her lover, and managed to put the glass candle in a small pouch also hanging from her belt. A few golden coins and an old map were also concealed inside the pouch.

Minutes later, she had left the room and was climbing the steps to the tower top. Ser Archibald followed her, silently, believing this was just a routine visit.

If I look back, I’m lost.

Drogon was awake when she opened the trapdoor to the roof. There was almost no room for her, since the dragon occupied most of the space. Drogon was giant, bigger than his brothers. With his black scales gleaming in the pale moonlight, he lifted his head to focus on her with the red pits that were his eyes. Daenerys stretched her hand to touch his head. The warmthness beneath his scales was comforting.

The dragon blinked twice and started standing up in his hind legs. His tail curled around Daenerys, inviting her to climb up to his back. Without second thoughts, she grabbed the blood red horns along Drogon’s spine and started mounting, climbing as if it was a staircase.

Ser Archibald took a step further, startled.
“Your Grace, what are you doing? You said you only wanted to see him…”

Daenerys ignored him and continued to climb through the scales, holding each horn firmly until she was near the part where his neck joined the torso. It was the best place to ride Drogon, since she could support her feet in the clavicles of the dragon’s wings.

“Your Grace, this is madness!” Archibald screamed, throwing his arms in the air. That was the extent of what he would do to try to stop her. He could be a big man and a fine fighter, but he had a good memory. After all, he had seen his friend Quentyn die trying to approach a dragon. “Please, come down!”

*If I look back, I’m lost.*

Without even saying a word, Drogon stretched his wings. More than thirty feet from tip-to-tip, his wings flapped three times before taking off. Daenerys didn’t need to give him any command.

They were one.

“Fly.” She muttered, tightening her legs against the black scales.

And so they blended into the night sky.
AUTHOR’S NOTE: I haven’t given up on this story. Sorry for the late update. I had this chapter half written for a long time and only now managed to finish it. I’m making some changes in my life, moving from city to go to college and start my Masters degree, so everything is in a mess right now. But I hope to start update again this fanfiction on a weekly basis very soon.

PREVIOUSLY: On King’s Landing, there is a rumor that Prince Edwyle fell from his horse and is now dead. Queen Sansa is locked up in her tower, with her Mother, after rallying her men to retaliate against the Tyrells, who she blames for the Prince’s accident. Meanwhile, Randyll Tarly is the new Hand of the King, some of the Great Houses are arriving to the capital to the Tournament and Cersei Lannister is dealing with the threat made by her son: find a way to end his marriage with Sansa or wed herself to Doran Martell. Arya, in the city, is alone after Gendry’s departure to the Westerlands.

When Needle flew from her hand and the sound of metal hitting the floor reached her ears, Arya Stark knew she was pretty fucked up. The tip of the gold cloak’s sword rested immediately upon her chin. The man, whoever he was, had refused to remove his helmet. He laughed, amused, staring at her.

Night had long fallen and here, in a dark alley somewhere in Flea Bottom, she had fought for her freedom and had lost. Now, staring back at her captor, Arya saw for the first time there was something odd about him. His eyes gleamed with a color she had never seen before. Purple.

“I told you this was a waste of time, didn’t I?” The man retorted, with a musical voice. “But maybe now you’ll come with me.”

Arya bit the inside of her cheek.

Fear cuts deeper than swords.

History was repeating itself and she couldn’t do anything to stop it. For a few days she had believed to be safe, hidden among thieves and the usual scum you could find at Flea Bottom. Ignoring Gendry’s last advice – of leaving the city soon immediately to return to Winterfell – she had stayed, certain she could do something for her family and prove to Robb what she was capable of.
Otherwise, she knew her brother would never let her out of Winterfell the moment she entered its gates.

Seven days. Sansa and Mother had been locked up in a tower seven days ago. The rumors said the Wolf Queen had ordered her guard to detain Margaery for attempting to murder Prince Edwyle. The boy had miraculously survived, but Sansa had been sure that it hadn’t been an accident. Joffrey, of course, had not stood up to support his wife or even his son so the plan had failed. Instead of arresting the Tyrell whore, Sansa had been the one put under arrest.

The thought of Joffrey hurting her family again, putting them at risk as he had done to father, had been the main reason why she had stayed. She had been sure she could do something. Smuggle into the Red Keep. Rescue Sansa, Mother and the Prince. Maybe kill Joffrey on the way. Because who would’ve thought that a little girl like her could use a sword?

But no.

Here she was at the end of a gold cloak’s blade, just like had happened six years before. She had failed and now would be escorted to the Red Keep to be thrown in a cell an possible die.

“Go with you where?” She asked, her face red with anger. From the corner of her eye, she saw the glint of the sword so close to her chin.

“I’ve already told you, girl.” The guard insisted. “We’ve a friend in common who wants to see you.”

“The Starks have no friends below the Neck.” It was the same answer she had given him half an hour ago, when he had found her in a warehouse inhabited by orphan children. She hadn’t stayed to hear his reply: she had started running for her life, hoping to lose him in the dark. “So, I don’t think I’ll follow you.”

“No friends, hum?” The guard repeated, trying to fake his disbelief. “Well, I know things look grim for the Starks, but they always had people loyal to them.”

Which friend would send a man of the City Watch to escort her? Probably Cersei Lannister. Or Varys, the Master of Whispers. Or worse, a Tyrell like the one who had taken her to the Red Keep to visit Mother. Still, a part of her wanted to believe this guard with purple eyes was a friend of someone like Dacey Mormont or Ser Wendel Manderly. The Queensguard appointed by Robb seemed to have disappeared, probably arrested in one of the dark cells.

No, Arya was almost sure there were no friends willing to help her.

“Put things in this perspective: come with me and hear what my master has to tell you…” The guard insisted, pressing his sword against her skin. The cold steel drew a little cut on her chin. “Or die. The choice is yours.”

She gulped, feeling the blood dripping to her neck.

I am of no use dead, she thought to herself, looking again into those purple eyes. She was not one to accept defeat. Nonetheless, she knew when to postpone her victory.

“Allright. I’ll go with you if you answer a question first.”

The man seemed amused, but conceded with a nod. He didn’t lower his sword.

“Are we going to the Red Keep?”
To her surprise, the gold cloak laughed and finally lowered the blade.

“Yes.” He replied, a smile flashing up underneath the helmet. “But not the way you think.”

“What do you mean with that?”

“Oh, no. I agreed to answer a question. Not two.”

Without taking his dark purple eyes from her, he picked up Needle from the ground and passed it to her. *What?,* asked Arya to herself, clearly confused.

“You don’t want it back?” He asked, seeing how reluctant Arya seemed to hold up Needle. It had to be a trap.

“You’re *not* supposed to give it back after you defeat me.”

“Why not? You agreed to come with me if I answered your question. Now I hope you’ll honor your part of the bargain. After all, your father is Eddard Stark, the most honorable man of the Seven Kingdoms. I must only hope that you share part of his nobility…”

*Honor forced him to take the black,* Arya thought to herself, accepting Needle back.

“Take it as a gesture of goodwill.” The guard insisted. “And a proof that friends still exist.”

Still not sure about that, Arya sighed and sheathed her sword. *I can still take him down,* she thought to herself, when they started walking down the empty alley. She was walking ahead of him, following the instructions he whispered almost silently.

“Turn to the right, now turn to the left, right again…”

She didn’t need to look behind her shoulder to see that the guard had his hand on his sword. *He still believes I’ll try to run,* she realized, looking forward. She was not completely sure she wouldn’t.

They marched in silence for what seemed to be an hour. The Red Keep loomed above their heads, growing bigger as they strolled forward. Around them, the city was asleep except for the usual crowds drinking their beer and ale in the pubs or fucking pretty whores on brothels. At least it wasn’t snowing, although the wind was cold enough to carve its way down their clothes.

“How did you find me?” She finally managed to ask, expressing her own curiosity. She had done her best to disappear. She had even dressed a gown! A servant’s gown, of course, but nonetheless a gown. It had been the perfect solution to mingle with the crowds of Flea Bottom. Among other children, she looked like the typical older sister, the one who had to whore herself or steal to feed her little siblings.

“Birds.” He answered. “Little birds.”

*Little birds.* Seven Hells, how had she been so stupid? Of course it had been the stupid little birds! She had been living in an orphan’s warehouse, surrounded by hungry little children.

“Our friend in common is not a friend of mine.” She replied, stopping in her heels. No, she wouldn’t walk directly into this trap again. “The Spider betrayed my father. His little birds were the ones who found me once and delivered me to the Queen. I will not be played again…”

She had already turned to face the guard and was preparing to take out her sword. He, however, didn’t move. He simply stared at her.
“Pull that sword out and your Mother you’ll be dead on the morrow.” It was a threat but it didn’t sound like one. His voice was sweet, almost worried.

“What?”

“Lord Varys is still your friend, Arya Stark. He is exposing himself, risking his own life… But time runs short.” He continued, maintaining his calm tone. “If you want the help of the Master of Whispers, you must come without questioning and hear what he has to say. If you refuse, I’ve orders to kill you right here, right now. Then, the Starks will indeed be truly on their own. On the morrow, Lord Varys will break all his allegiance to your sister to save his own skin. He’ll start by incriminating Lady Catelyn and then the Queen… Is that what you want?”

_Fear cuts deeper than swords._ A cold sweat came down from her brow. Was he telling the truth? He seemed to be… But how could she trust the Spider? Why would the Master of Whispers stay loyal to Sansa Stark, the queen behind bars?

“You are bluffing.” She said, her voice trembling.

“Draw your sword and we’ll see if I’m bluffing.”

They stared back at each other again for a few seconds. What would Father do? She gulped again and released Needle’s handle.

“Let’s go.” Arya said, turning again on her heels. “Must I turn left or right?”

They didn’t walk much farther. When they reached the river and started walking along the banks, Arya knew perfectly well where they were going. The stink of the muddy waters was almost familiar to her, bringing back again another set of bad memories about chasing cats and finding dragons’ skulls. Eventually, the sewer’s entry appeared on the horizon like a great terrible mouth.

"I believe this feels like home for you..." The guard said, trying to break the awkward silence installed between them. Someone had left a torch lighted for them on a wall.

“Yes, it does.” Arya replied, following him into the darkness. “Much more than the Red Keep ever did.”

After walking down a few corridors and climbing a long staircase, the guard finally led Arya into a door. Passing the threshold, she entered into an old storage room full of closed wooden boxes. The light was dim and the air reeked of something dead. Possible a mouse. As she started walking between the crates, toward the light far ahead in the room, she saw an open one. Inside were at least twenty flasks full a green liquid. Possibly wine, although the liquid seemed more greenish than usual.

A single lighted torch and was being held by a man standing right on the other side of the room, away from all the boxes. Lord Varys was wearing a dark robe that made him slimmer than he really was. He had boots instead of slippers and no powders on his face. For a moment, Arya didn’t recognize him.

“You’ve taken more time than I expected.” He said as a way of greeting. Arya stopped a few feet away from the Spider. Behind her, she could feel the guard closing the door, submersing them into a thick darkness. Only the light of the two torches revealed their faces.

“I’m a good runner.” Arya retorted, not trying to sympathize.

“Yes, she is.” The guard confirmed. “But I’m a better fighter.”
“Well, well, I see you two had your fun.” Replied Varys, forcing a smile. “But I’m afraid we don’t have time for games. I must return to my chambers within the hour.”

Arya focused her eyes on the Spider, remembering everything her father had told about him. He had started working as the Master of Whispers for the Mad King and, after Robert’s Rebellion, had sworn his fealty to the Baratheons in a blink of an eye. His loyalty seemed to flow wherever the winds of power blew. At least that was what it seemed. So again, why would he help her? She had to be careful.

"What do you want from me?" She asked, looking around. "If you wanted to deliver me to the Queen, I would be already in her chambers or on a cell..."

Varys laughed softly.

"You are here, my lady, because we share a common goal." Varys looked toward the guard. “And as my servant said to me once, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Servant? Well, well. Whoever the mysterious, purpled eye guard was, he was not really a gold cloak. Just another of Varys’ spies, probably posing as a man of the City Watch. That explained a lot.

"Enemy? Are you actually trying to say that Joffrey is your enemy?"

"*King* Joffrey is an enemy for himself.” Varys answered poignantly. “Even if he doesn’t come from the Mad King’s lineage, he would have made Aerys Targaryen proud, believe me. And I’m afraid that after the last Small Council meeting even Queen Cesei can’t control him anymore. The little lion cub cannot be tamed and will bring chaos to the Seven Kingdoms sooner than we expect. That’s why I’m doing everything I can to mend this terrible situation and look out for the future.”

“What are you talking about?" The way Varys spoke was confusing.

“I’ve been working with your sister during these last weeks.” Varys confessed, half of his face covered in shadows. “Unfortunately, my little birds didn’t bring me much information about the Queen of Thorns’ plans. And now it’s too late. Lady Margaery’s influence over the king is stronger than ever. The Tyrells did a fine job plotting their way to the throne and are hoping now that the Faith will dissolve the king’s marriage.”

“Dissolve?"

“So Lady Margaery can be crowned Queen instead of your sister. Well, I must recognize that the Tyrells made a fine job plotting their way to power... But the Realm will suffer the consequences of their triumph.”

“Stop with the charades. You’ve already said *that*, Lord Varys.” Arya couldn’t grasp what was the meaning of this meeting. “What do you want from me? I know your reputation and I certainly don’t trust you. Your allegiance flow to wherever the winds of power blow. You’re in the heart of the Red Keep, living among lions and roses. The direwolves are trapped in the North or in a cage. Why would you bring me here, tell me all this and talk in a way that seems like *treason*? Do you truly expect me to believe that you’ll betray the crown to help the daughter of a traitor?"

“Traitor?” Varys gasped. “You *truly* wound me, my lady. I’m only loyal to the Realm and to the people. And, as I said, I intend to secure a future. A *solid* future. That’s why you are here. I want you to help me free your sister.”

Arya gasped, taken by surprise.
“Why would you want to free my sister?”

The Spider smiled a wicked smile.

“We all know tat Prince Joffrey is unfit to rule.” Varys proceeded. “Easily manipulated, spoiled and with a strange and bizarre blood lust… How can we have a ruler like this? Soon, if he has his way, he’ll have a new wife and will be dead.”

“Dead?”

“I’m afraid there are at least three conspiracies to kill the king. It’s only a matter of time until someone kills him…”

“Well, if you want him dead, help me slip into his rooms and I’ll do the job for you this very night.”

“Oh, but only if it was that simple. The game we are playing is far more complex. Don’t you remember, for instance, how the conflict between Lannisters and Starks started a few years ago? Because your gentle Mother arrested Tyrion Lannister, accusing him for the attempted murder of your crippled brother.”

“Bran.” Arya said, angrily. She didn’t like when people called him a cripple.

“Bran, yes.” Varys corrected, with a sigh. He was losing his patience. “What do you suppose would happen if you killed the king tonight? Queen Cersei would act immediately. By this hour tomorrow your sister and mother’s heads would be on spikes above the Red Keep’s gates.”

I hate politics.

“So what are you trying to say?” Arya asked, grumpily. Her head was starting to hurt. “That you’ll kill Joffrey after Sansa is safe? Is that it?”

“Well, I’m not an assassin, my lady. But I’m sure that King Joffrey’s days are counted. As I’ve said, I’ve information that confirms me so…” Varys shook his head, refusing to continue on that matter. “But we must focus on rescuing Queen Sansa and Prince Edwyle, yes. They have to leave the capital before the marriage annulment is granted.”

“So the Faith is really accepting Joffrey’s request for annulment?”

“Queen Cersei is in negotiations with the High Septon, yes. And I believe that the Gods will be easily bought with gold.”

Arya couldn’t understand one thing now.

“But doesn’t that mean that if Sansa stops being Joffrey’s wife, and Edwyle is declared a bastard, they will be free to return to Winterfell? The problem would be solved.”

“Oh, how innocent you are.” Varys laughed, mocking her ingenuity. “Your sister will never be free, nor will Prince Edwyle… at least while they live. The Prince is the heir to the Iron Throne and, even if he is proclaimed a bastard, will always be a threat to other children the king were to bear. What if in a few years from now he tries to reclaim the Iron Throne? How many Houses will fight for the oldest grandson of Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon? For the man who has in his veins the blood of Tywin Lannister? Until his last breath the little prince can be used as a weapon against his father and half-brothers. The moment he is declared bastard, I expect he’ll be moved to Casterly Rock or Storm’s End… And will live there under vigilance until he is old or an assassin kills him.”
“An assassin?”

“Someone already tried to kill him.” Varys explained, as if Arya was the dumbest person in the world. “Do you think Lady Margaery, if she bears an heir to King Joffrey, will allow that another man can threaten her son’s claim? Oh, no. Prince Edwyle will die. Unless he and your sister leave the Red Keep and join your brother Robb. I’m sure that the Lord of Winterfell will fight for his nephew and will protect him until the day King Joffrey dies.”

“War.” Arya repeated, feeling in her mouth with a strange taste of bitterness. “That means war. Every play you suggest leads us to war. If Edwyle and Sansa die, Robb will march to war. If Joffrey dies, my sister will be executed for his death and Robb will start a war. And even if we can smuggle Edwyle outside the castle, he’ll have to fight for his place on the Iron Throne. The Lannisters and Tyrells won’t be happy to see Edwyle as a Stark, they’ll want to deliver the throne to someone else… Is this the future you imagine? War and chaos?

“Haven’t you been paying attention? We will have war. But at least, we can control its outcome. We can secure that a strong heir lives to replace Joffrey. And then peace will be secured.”

“Will it really, Lord Varys?” Arya asked. “What if I tell you that I know what your real plan is? I’ve lived with this strange memory all these years and now it makes sense. Many years ago, on this same cellars, I heard you talking to another man about the Targaryens, even before Daenerys Stormborn was known as the Mother of Dragons. Do you remember? Well, I remember what you said… So I must ask you again: what are you truly planning? Are you just boiling a war between the great Houses so that the Targaryen invasion will be quick and swift? Is that it?"

Varys’ eyes glinted toward the door of the storage room.

"Well, well. I’m surprised. You could have been one of my little birds, my lady." He said, more sternly than before. "Hearing private conversations, I see... But what can I say? That was long ago, when I believed that a Targaryen could sit again on the Iron Throne. Today, the Dragon Queen has proved to be as mad as her father. No, I’ve other plans for our Realm." The fire of his torch was almost out. "And I think I’ve told you the much as I can, my lady. The future is in your hands now. Save your sister and nephew or await for their deaths. War will come either way.”

The Spider moved, preparing to leave the room.

_Fear cuts deeper than swords._

She had to decide now.

Her heart was beating very fast inside her chest, ready to explode.

"How?" She asked, before the Spider reached the door.

"How?" He repeated, intrigued.

"How would we free Sansa? And why do you need me?"

The guard barked a laugh and Varys looked again at her, confident.

"On the first day of the tournament, the Red Keep will be almost empty for an hour or two. The King will open the tournament on the fields outside the King’s Gate. Every eye will be focused on the palisades, the defenses of the castle will be lowered… And since Queen Sansa will soon lose her crown, she will not attend the tournament. In fact, I believe the King intends to present his engagement before all the Great Houses... "
“Sansa will be in her room.” Arya realized. “And the Red Keep will be empty.”

Varys nodded.

“I need you to lead your sister’s guards into a quick attack. I’ll help you smuggle into the castle and I’ll even poison the guards on patrol that day. According to my plan, you will be able to remove the Queen, the Prince and your Mother from their chambers in less than an hour… And why do I need you, you asked me? Well, it’s the only person in this damned city whom I can trust to escort the Queen to Winterfell.”

“You care of her.” It wasn’t a question. Only now she understood that Varys truly cared for Sansa. More than a piece of his game, Sansa had Varys’ affection somehow. Why?, Arya asked to herself, intrigued. That was a mystery she had to solve on her own.

“I do.” Varys replied, quickly. “And so do you.”
AUTHOR’S NOTES: Well, if I had to describe this chapter in a word I would say it’s “strange”. I really like Myrcella as a character, and now even more after what I’m doing with her in this fanfiction. I hope you guys like it. Let me know in your reviews, as usual. In the meanwhile, I’m looking again for a Beta Reader. I really intend to focus on this fanfiction on the next months to finish it before Season 7 airs. However, I need someone to re-read some of the first chapters and the future ones. Grammar and linguistic errors, mostly. If you’re interested, send me a PM.

“Yes, my lord.” Ser Arys Oakheart voice echoed through the room, solemnly. “I was outside, escorting Lord Robert to his room, when I heard the screams coming from the Princess’s chambers. When I arrived, Lady Lysa was leaving the room. I don’t know what happened between the two of them, but the Princess was clearly distressed and her face was red. As if she had been slapped right before I entered the room. And it’s my duty to report that those private encounters used to happen frequently. I have never denounced them because Princess Myrcella asked for my silence.”

The buzz of whispers filled immediately the Great Hall. The Gates of the Moon had received more than a hundred lords and ladies from all over the Vale, all of them answering to the summons sent by Lord Nestor Royce. Tradition demanded that a member of House Arryn, if any crime was committed, should be judged in front of Gods and men.

On the dais, the Keeper of the castle was conducting the trial, right beside Lord Robert Arryn and his new adviser, Lord Baelish. All of them seemed worn out, too tired to maintain this spectacle before so many guests. Even Littlefinger seems defeated, thought Myrcella, hiding her nose behind her handkerchief.

She sat in the first row of seats, trying to look her best. Her mother-in-law was a few feet away, chained up as a criminal and wearing the same soiled gown she had used the night of her arrestment. She seemed at least ten years older. Her eyes were red and her skin pale like snow. Meanwhile, her hair seemed grayer than before and so weak that it was easily falling. The way her hands trembled was also disturbing, but no so upsetting as the smell of piss and shit that was forcing Myrcella to cover up her nose. Lady Lysa Arryn, daughter of Riverrun, hadn’t even received the decency of a hot bath and change of clothes.

He is going too far, Myrcella noted, her eyes focusing not on Littlefinger but her husband. Robert seemed to have grown up a little during the last few weeks. He had cut his hair short and, although he was still weak from his last spasm, he had a cruel glint in his eyes. An appetite for blood Myrcella
had never realized in him before. *Just like Joffrey.* Littlefinger was partly responsible for that. It had been him the one who had convinced Robert to put his own mother under trial, a request he had obliged quickly. Too quickly.

“Yes, I remember.” Robert replied, refusing to look toward his mother. She was on her knees, crying, her lips moving in a silent plea. Even if she wanted to scream, her voice had been suffocated thanks to the cold icy cells. “Lady Lysa wasn’t herself that day…”

“No, no… It’s a lie!” Lysa tried to defend herself again. “Please, my sweet Robin, please…”

“However, for how much Lady Lysa ill-treated the Princess, I don’t think she ever threatened her life seriously.” Continued Ser Arys, raising his voice to be heard above Lysa’s. “At least, not until that night. I believe Lady Lysa must’ve drank too much wine and wasn’t completely aware of what she was doing. But she did it, my lord. When I heard again screams, and I entered this very same Hall, I saw the dagger in Lady Lysa’s hand and…”

“Oh her hand?” Lord Nestor asked, intrigued. “I thought the dagger was on the floor when you entered…”

“Well, no.” Arys retorted, quickly. *Please, don’t mess this up,* prayed Myrcella.

“The dagger was on her hand…” Aerys continued, trying to overcome his mistake. “She threw it to the floor the moment I opened the doors. Then she started laughing like a maniac.”

Again, soft whispers started around the room. Lady Arryn a murderer? It was the scandal of the century.

“I believe that will be enough.” Lord Nestor replied, coughing to request silence again. Before continuing, he exchanged a glance with a scribe who was taking note of everything.

Ser Arys nodded and climbed down from the dais, returning to his place by the window.

“And we call now our last witness of the day.” Lord Nestor interposed, gesturing toward Myrcella. “Your Grace, would you please take your place on the stand?”

Myrcella stood up and advanced toward the dais, passing her mother-in-law on the way. The woman was a complete wretch. She didn’t even glance toward Myrcella. She only had eyes for her son, pleading for his attention. Trying to tell him how all this was nonsense. How he could trust her again.

Deep inside her chest, Myrcella felt a twinge of pity for the woman. She would never forget the years of terror and abuse at Lysa’s hands, but to destroy her mother-in-law like that, even knowing she has actually innocent, was something that would disturb her until the end of her days.

“Princess Myrcella.” Lord Nestor said, as soon as she took her place in the stand. She felt hundred of eyes weighing on her. Lord Yohn Royce, with a stern face. Lady Anya Waynwood, looking through slit eyes. And even Gilwood Hunter, with his bushy moustache. All of them wanted the truth. “I know a lady such as you shouldn’t bear the weight of such a trial, but justice must be served and your testimony is crucial. Do you swear before the Old Gods and the New, to say the truth and only the truth?”

Her eyes locked with Myranda’s, sat in the last row of chairs.

“Yes, I swear.” Myrcella replied, calmly. The scar on her arm burned with pain, as if reacting to the
lie coming out of her mouth.

Robert smiled, as if that was enough to give her motivation to speak up. She answered with another smile before turning her face toward Lord Nestor.

“Tell me, Your Grace, why did Lady Lysa attack you that night?”

Mrycella gulped and looked instinctively toward her mother-in-law. Lysa was still ignoring her, her eyes fixed on her son, her lips moving.

“Lady Lysa came to ask me if I was taking Moon Tea.” She replied, trying to seem horrified. Half of the room gasped in shock, even some of the man. Lady Anya shook her head, her mouth open with horror.

“Well, this is no news, is it?” Lord Nestor proceeded, with a long sigh. The scribe passed him a piece of parchment. “A servant called Dalla said in her testimony that Lady Lysa had asked her if you were taking Moon Tea a few days before the attack. It looks like the servant had bought the potion to herself, but was forced to admit it was for you.”

“What about it, my lord?” Myrcella asked back almost immediately. “If I remember right, Lady Lysa only got pregnant eight years after her marriage with Lord Jon Arryn.”

“Well, I guess that’s true… I’m sorry, Your Grace.” Mumbled Lord Nestor, who was clearly not expecting such a poignant response. “Tell me, please, about Lady Lysa’s visit to your chambers then.”

Myrcella nodded, her answer ready for that question.

“As Ser Arys has already told you, Lady Lysa visited me and slapped me in the face. This was usual, unfortunately, but I always remained quiet about it for Robert’s sake. However, this time Lady Lysa was more aggressive than usual. She asked me about the Moon Tea and then she said something about locking me behind doors until I was able to give an heir to the Eyrie…”

Robert banged his closed fist on the chair’s arm, furious with what Myrcella had just said. Not furious with her, but with his mother. Lysa whimpered and bent over herself, crying again.

“Well, that kind of treatment is shameful, Your Grace.” Lord Nestor said, frowning. “More than being the Lady of the Vale, you’re a Princess and should be treated as such. I’m sorry for what you had to endure.”

Myrcella didn’t have time to answer back. Lord Nestor was already talking.

“Now, regarding the attack, I find something odd about all that’s happened under this roof. Let it be known to all that I was present in this very hall a few minutes before the attack. I left only to carry Lord Robert to his chamber, after his indisposition.” He said, without taking his eyes from the parchment in front of him. “And I remember that before I left the hall, it was you the one playing with Lord Robert’s dagger…”
“What are you suggesting, my lord?” Myrcella asked, feeling panic and terror fill her chest. This was unexpected. “That I cut up my own arm?”

Someone in the room laughed, but no else did. Not even Robert. Everyone was staring back at her, suddenly so pale and distressed, just like her mother-in-law. Her nails dig into her hand’s flesh, so that the pain could overcome her fear again and give her control over her senses. She sniffed, held her chin very high and defiantly faced Lord Nestor.

“Lady Lysa tried to kill me, my lord.” She said, her voice cold as steel. “She accused me of not caring about my husband’s health. When I said I did, she looked to the dagger and asked me if I was trying to kill her…” Her eyes focused on Robert. He had his eyes on her, eager to hear more. “And then she was on top of me, pushing my hair, pulling the dagger from my hand and then… She tried to kill me. If I hadn’t placed my arm right in front of my chest, I would be dead by now.”

Lord Nestor opened his mouth again, a faint smile on his lips.

“Lady Lysa claims differently…”

“Lady Lysa is a mad woman.” Myrcella retorted, refusing to hear one word more in defense of her mother-in-law. She pointed a finger toward her, still bent over herself, moaning as if in pain. “Must I remind you all how reckless she ruled the Vale? How she incited the War of the Riverlands by submitting my uncle Tyrion Lannister to trial? How she manipulated Lord Robert over the years?” Her eyes were again on Robert, as well as her pointed finger. “And, please, my lords, let us all be honest. How many of you have lived in the shadows, whispering against Lady Lysa, plotting to bring her down and to free Lord Robert’s from her hands?”

There was nothing more than silence in the room after her words. Many of the eyes looking back at her gleamed now with respect, not suspicion. She had proved to all of them what kind of woman she was.

What kind of ruler I can be.

“Thank you for your testimony, Your Grace.” Lord Nestor replied, scribbling something. Myrcella nodded and, exchanging a last final glance with Robert, she climbed down from the dais. Only after she took her seat she saw the smirk on Littlefinger’s lips.

A few minutes of silence followed until finally Lord Nestor stood up to turn to Robert.

“All of the witnesses in the prosecution have been heard, my lord. I suggest that we adjourn now our session to proceed tomorrow with Lady Lysa’s defense…”

“No.” The word came from Robert’s throat and echoed through the room like a soft, silent whisper. “I believe that won’t be necessary.”

“Excuse me, my lord…?” Lord Nestor raised a brow, confused. Again, whispering started among the guests.

“Lady Lysa won’t need a defense.” Robert explained, his voice trembling again. He was still too weak. He had been abed five days before Maester Colemon had allowed him to leave his rooms. However, the cold air had left him weaker and with worse quivers than never.

“My lord, this isn’t how trials happen.” Septon Varnello, who had said prayers before the trial’s beginning, step forward. “We must give a chance to the accused to defend herself and to call witnesses. It’s the law of the Gods.”
“No.” Robert insisted, shaking his head. Lady Lysa whimpered again like a wounded animal. “I’ve heard all that’s necessary and I’m ready to give my verdict.”

“My lord, Septon Varnello is right about this…” Nestor Royce tried to say.

“Lord Robert, you can’t deny your own Mother a proper defense!” Anya Waynwood stood up now to step in defense of Lysa. The old woman was fierce and spoke as if Robert was nothing more than a little brat. Her eyes burnt toward Littlefinger, as if she condemned that he was sitting in such a place of honor. “I don’t know why on Seven Hells you believe this is how the law works, but to refuse an accused the chance to defend themself is unholy. Your people won’t be pleased with it.”

“Shut up, you old crone!” Robert bellowed, banging again his fist on the chair’s arm. “Shut up or I’ll arrest you. And you, Lord Nestor! And all of you who dare to question again my authority… I won’t ever again obey another’s instructions. Am I clear?!”

Here it is, the Lord of the Vale, in all his splendor, thought Myrcella, tasting something bitter in her mouth. Lady Anya bit her own lip and returned to her seat.

“Lord Nestor, close the trial, please.”

The Keeper of the Gates of the Moon seemed reluctant in following his lord’s orders, but after a while cleared up his notes and did as he was told.

“My Lord, the crimes committed by your Lady Mother were indeed grave. She ill-treated Princess Myrcella consecutively, she lied to forge false evidences against her, abused her powers as Lady Regent and, on top of all that, she tried to allegedly kill your lady wife. So I believe that, considering all we’ve heard up until this moment, there is nothing more we can do than to declare Lady Lysa guilty.”

It’s done, Myrcella thought. After all those years being bullied, after all those nights crying for home, after plotting every detail with her only ally, she had won.

“In the name of the King and the Seven, I suggest that Lady Lysa must be removed from the Vale as punishment. A Motherhouse in the Riverlands is willing to accept her in their midst, once she is striped from all her titles…”

“No!” Lysa cried. “No, please, no!”

Robert looked toward his mother for the first time, taken aback by the sound that had just come out of her mouth.

“Please, Robert… I demand a trial by combat. I demand a trial by combat!”

Who would fight for you?, Myrcella asked to herself, feeling again pity for her mother-in-law. No, she was done, like Littlefinger had predicted. Arrangements had been made for her even before the trial had started. A carriage was ready on the stables to leave to the Riverlands as soon as the sentence was pronounced.

“No.” Robert replied, making an effort to take his eyes from her Mother. “I’m the Lord of the Vale.” He said, as if to remind himself of his title. “I’m the Lord of the Vale.” He repeated. “And I won’t pardon you, Lady Lysa, for what you’ve done. The woman I love has done nothing to you. Nothing. You had no right in attacking her as if she were a criminal…”

“She is lying, she has been lying since the first day she came here… The Lannisters killed your father, my sweetrobin. And they send her here to kill you! You and the Arryn House!”
“Nonsense!” Bellowed Robert, standing up from his chair. “You’re the liar here! You!”

Silence fell on the room again. Everyone was looking toward mother and son, to this last confrontation between them.

“Lady Lysa Tully, you’re hereby striped from all your titles.” Robert claimed, as Myrcella had told him to do. “You are no longer welcome to…”

My home, recited Myrcella in her head, feeling the smile form on her lips. The Eyrie was finally hers. She could now claim her position beside Robert, just like Littlefinger had promised. Rule the Vale as the proud daughter of Baratheon she was. She would have actual power.

“You’re to be remembered as a traitor and a mad woman.” Robert continued, his voice trembling. “And you’re hereby sentenced to die.”

Myrcella gasped, shocked. Behind her, all the people present in the room reacted just like her.

“What?” Claimed Lord Nestor, standing up to grab Robert’s arm. Myrcella saw the man’s lips moving desperately, trying to change his mind. “This is madness, my lord. She is your Mother…”

“Silence!” Screamed Robert, pushing Lord Nestor aside. “I won’t tolerate dishonor beneath my roof. High as Honor is the motto of my father’s house… and I intend to honor it.”

“Robert, your father wouldn’t want this…” Interposed Lady Anya Waynwood. “Spilling your Mother’s blood…”

“Take her to the top of the Falcon Tower.” Robert ordered, ignoring anyone who spoke against him. “And make her fly!”

“No!” Yelled Lysa, throwing herself to her son’s feet. Two guards stepped immediately in front of Robert to keep him away from his mother. “My sweetrobin, my sweet, sweetrobin… Your mind is being poisoned!”

“Guards, take her away.” Robert sobbed, hiding his face with his hands.

“Robert!”

“TAKE HER AWAY!” Cried Robert, tears running down his cheeks. He turned his back to his mother and ran out of the dais, escaping through the aisle between the chairs. Maester Colemon followed him quickly, as well as three other guards and Lord Yohn Royce.

Myrcella was petrified, bound to her chair.

This isn’t supposed to happen.

“Petyr, please, you must do something!” Lysa, even though she was now being pulled up by guards, had directed her plea to her Adviser. Lord Baelish remained in his seat, hard as stone, looking at her with repulsion. “The Lannister bitch is poisoning his mind… Please, do something! Say something!”

Littlefinger turned his head away, showing at last his true colors.

Traitor, Myrcella said to herself, feeling her face burning up. He had betrayed Lysa and Myrcella in one swift move. He had assured her that he would convince Robert to send Lysa to a Motherhouse, not to her own death. Why had he lied? What could he gain with Lysa’s demise? There was a slight chance that Robert had done this by himself… But no. How could he? He needed someone to guide
him. To tell him exactly what to do. To whisper in his ear that it was alright to execute his own mother.

Something died inside Lysa in that moment. The screams and moans stopped immediately. Her eyes grew blank. All hope was definitely lost for her. Flanked by two guards, Lady Lysa Arryn was escorted from the Great Hall. Pity reeked in the air. Some ladies were crying, falling on their knees when Lysa passed them. Others were simply too shocked to accept what was happening. Their Lord had betrayed the law. What would he do from now on?

One by one, all of the guests in the Great Hall left their seats to gather in the courtyard. It would be from there, as used to happen with execution’s on the Gates of the Moon, that they would watch Lysa’s demise. Feeling sick, Myrcella remained in her seat, silently focusing her eyes on the empty dais right in front of her. She didn’t count how many minutes passed, but after a while she realized Lord Nestor had left with Littlefinger and the scribe. Besides from her, only a handful of guests had stayed behind.

“This is on your hands, Your Grace.”

A voice behind Myrcella startled her. She turned her head to see Lady Anya Waynwood approaching. The Lady of Ironoaks had gray hair and loose skin beneath her chin. However, no matter how old she was, she had a distinct air of nobility about her. A touch of motherly care gleamed in her eyes, as well as pity.

“I… I never wished for Lady Lysa’s death.” Myrcella replied, hiding her tears.

“Well…” Lady Anya took a seat beside her. “She was a mad woman. We all knew that, didn’t we? But I’m afraid our position is now worse. The Vale is at the hands of an unstable, sickly boy.”

Myrcella gulped, knowing she was walking into a trap. Lady Anya was smart enough to know who had power over the Vale. She only needed confirmation, but was Myrcella willing to give it to her? Tell her what she and Lord Baelish had done?

“I just wanted justice.”

“Justice? You got a little bit more than that.” Anya insisted. “Believe me, you’re in no better position than you were yesterday. You can call yourself Lady of the Vale, but you don’t have power and you’re a fool if you believe you do. Look at your eyes, so red… You can cry in front of me, Your Grace. I won’t judge you.”

“Lady Anya, I think this conversation is improper.” Myrcella cut, coldly, trying to look just as regal as her mother. “Please, excuse me…”

She tried to leave, but the old woman patted her knee.

“What happened today was everything except justice.” Anya said, ominously. “And we won’t stop until we finally have order again on the Vale, Your Grace. So here is an advice for you: pick your side wisely.”

Understanding the threat hidden in those words, Myrcella managed to nod reverently and to make her way out of the hall. The tears prickedled her eyes, but she did her best to sustain them. Walking into the castle’s entrance, she turned toward the stairs. She couldn’t join the others outside to see Lysa’s body crunching against the floor, staining the snow in red. Instead, she climbed the steps of the Falcon Tower, feeling the cold wind dishevelling her hair.

Wasn’t she supposed to feel victorious? Instead, she was scared and sick. What had Lady Anya’s
words meant? Who were the we she had spoken about? Could there be a conspiracy already boiling up among the Lords of the Vale? Should she join them against Littlefinger?

“Your Grace?”

Ser Arys appeared from the staircase, panting after running after her.

“I lost you down there…” He explained quickly. “Are you alright, Your Grace?”

Myrcella sniffed and looked around them. They were alone in the corridor. Voices and screams could be heard from the courtyard.

“Did you know?”

Ser Arys shook his head, looking gloomy.

“So Lord Baelish acted on our backs all this time.” Myrcella said out loud, feeling the urge to destroy Littlefinger. She could run down to the courtyard and stop this madness. Clear Lysa from all her charges. Put him to death instead. For a moment, she was sure she would do exactly that. But then what?

“My Grace, I know you are troubled, but you’ve achieved what you wanted. Lord Baelish lied to you about Lady Lysa’s outcome, yes, but now she is out of your way, just like he promised.”

*But I was nothing more than a pawn.* And what would be now of the Vale? Lords rebelling against Robert? War and conspiracy? She didn’t want to be the Lady of a land divided and under fire. She wanted to have power, to pass her sons a legacy worth of memory.

“Ser Arys, don’t you see what truly bothers me now? It’s not the lies Lord Baelish told me. It’s the fact that I was sure I had his trust and knew his plans, but I don’t. What does he intends to whisper on Robert’s ear now? What is his endgame?” She gulped, afraid. “What if I’m his next target?”

A scream echoed through the castle, the most horrible thing Myrcella had heard in her entire life. For a moment, the scream seemed very close to her. As if it had passed right outside the wall. And then, almost at the same time, a thump. Bones crushing.

It was done.

“She is dead.” Myrcella said, noticing how her hands were trembling.

Ser Arys nodded, confirming what they had just heard. He peeped through a window and took a step back quickly.

“Maybe it’s better if I escort you to your chambers, Your Grace… You should rest.”

Myrcella nodded, and started following Ser Arys. However, she was terrorized. The scream filled her ears, carving its way to every corner of her mind, making sure she would never forget it. Her imagination was also playing tricks on her. Making her see Lysa’s body on the snow, her face destroyed, her eyes rolling out of her skull. She could feel her stomach rumbling, some sickness waking up inside her.

She had done this and was now on her way to rest?

“No, this is nonsense.” She stopped on her heels.

Ser Arys turned, surprised, and saw her walking toward the opposite direction.
“Where are you going, Your Grace?”

But she didn’t reply.

A woman was dead because of her.

A woman was dead, so she could take her place.

Why should she go to her bedroom to sit by the window and wait for another move from Littlefinger? Or bloody Lady Anya? No, she wanted to take action immediately and to know why.

Reaching Littlefinger’s rooms, she turned the knob and found gladly that the door was open.

“Wait outside.” She ordered to Ser Arys, letting herself in. The knight tried to detain her, but she closed the door on his face.

Littlefinger had nice chambers considering he was only an Adviser and the Lord of some small, poor island somewhere in the Narrow Sea. He had a giant bed, bigger than Myrcella’s, and a great mahogany desk full of books and papers. The room also had two windows, one facing North and another facing East, which were covered in frost. A small fire was lit in a fireplace and, right next to it, was a small table with two cups and a bottle of red wine.

Hesitant, Myrcella approached the desk. She decided to wait for Littlefinger, but in the meanwhile would use her time alone to search for answers among his things. However, after a few minutes, she realized there was nothing relevant among Lord Baelish’s letters. Only requests from small lords of the Vale, writing to him about how they hoped to be present at the trial.

*He must have burnt any important letter*, she realized, disappointed.

After a while, she poured a cup of wine and drank it to calm herself. *I’m doing the right thing*, she said, pouring a second cup of wine. She needed to play instead of being played. And this had to be her first move. Sounds from the corridor told her someone was approaching. Hearing Ser Arys’ voice confirmed what she hoped: it was Littlefinger.

The door opened slowly to let Lord Baelish enter.

“Don’t worry, ser Arys.” He was saying, amused. “I’m sure the Princess’ intentions are good.”

He closed the door behind him and looked directly toward Myrcella, standing up by the fireplace with her cup of wine.

“Well, besides breaking into my chambers, I see you’re also drinking my wine. What is the purpose of this visit, Your Grace?” Littlefinger asked, unclasping his cloak.

“Stop with your games, Lord Baelish.” Myrcella retorted, feeling the anger inside her chest rising. “You’ve betrayed me and the entire Vale. Do you know Lady Anya Waynwood has already approached me to talk about some conspiracy?”

“Really?” Petyr asked, taking his place in one of the chairs next to the fire. “Well, she acts quick, old Anya.”

“And I intend to join her.” Myrcella blurted out, without considering in fact what that meant. “Robert broke the law following your advice. The Vale will never pardon him. They will see him as unfit to rule…”
“Is that supposed to scare me, Your Grace?”

“Take it as you like it.” Myrcella insisted. “I’ll tell everything you’ve done. Everything, Lord Baelish. Do you think they will let you stay here, whispering in Robert’s ear after that? Lord Yohn will strangle with his own hands…”

“Your Grace, I’m sorry to interrupt you… But you won’t do any of that.”

“Yes, I will.” She took a step toward the door.

“Your Grace, Lady Lysa had to die.” Petyr replied, then, his voice stronger than never. “Especially now.”

Myrcella stopped, her hand stretched to the door knob. She counted to five while processing his words. Lady Lysa had to die? Oh, Gods. The wine was making her dizzy.

“What do you mean by that?” She managed to ask, finally, turning slowly toward the fireplace.

Littlefinger stood up and placed his cup on the table.

“King’s Landing is on the verge of war.”

What? Anything was making sense to her.

“War?”

“War.” Nodded Littlefinger, now closer to Myrcella. He caressed her face with the back of his hand. It was warm and soft. “It seems that someone tried to kill Prince Edwyle. And it seems that Queen Sansa made a foolish move to arrest the Tyrells, sure they were the ones behind the attack. However, she failed. Your brother arrested her instead. Do you believe this? It seems like a joke, but it’s the truth. And the proof that love can cause more harm than hate. Well, but this is not even the worst. My informants tell me that King Joffrey intends to annul his marriage and marry Margaery Tyrell… This means something great is about to happen. Believe me.”

“Joffrey… Joffrey is mad.”

Your brother knows how to infuriate the North. I expect Robb Stark will answer him very soon…”

“But… What does this have to do with Lady Lysa?”

Petyr sighed, a wicked smile spreading over his lips.

“Lysa was a loose end on the plan I’ve devised for more than a year now.” He revealed. “I knew I would need your help to bring her down, but I had to lie to you, Your Grace. You would never agree to kill Lysa. You’re too gentle… yet. But now that she is dead, we can move forward. Lysa knew too much about something we did in the past, you see? She was a risk. I’m sure she would have told all of it, and ruined everything, if she knew what I intend to do next. So, she had to go.”

“Lord Baelish, I don’t understand…”

“I promised I would make you Lady of the Vale and here we are.” He said, his lips so close from hers. “But the Vale is nothing once compared with what you could have, Your Grace. I will make you queen.”

And then he kissed her and his lips felt like something she had never tasted before.
Power.
“I don’t intend to start a war.” Robb said, firmly. “I won’t commit the same mistake I did six years ago.”

Dawn was still breaking outside, although winter was now at the point when darkness persisted long before mid-morning. Around the table there were four faces lit only by the fire in the fireplace and a half dozen candles. Ser Rodrik Cassel, with his stern face and white whiskers, had taken a chair near the window. Maester Luwin, who had woke Robb just an hour ago to show him Arya’s message, had took his usual place next to the fire; and at last Jon Umber, invited to participate in this urgent meeting, sat next to Robb at the head of the table. The Lord of the Last Hearth had left the legendary Long Barrow, the castle under his care on the Wall, to ride to Winterfell with grim news about Jon.

And a new threat, Robb suspected, eyeing his sworn man with silence. The Greatjon was a big man and a savage one. He had a special talent to make noise, especially when drunk, but he had always been loyal to Robb and his father. A long ago, when he had decided to march to the Riverlands, the Greatjon had frightened him. He was nothing more than a boy by then. A boy trying to act like a lord. Now, however, he was truly the Lord of Winterfell and had proved his capacity. Or at least so he prayed. He would deal with the Greatjon without being bullied by his manners.

“My lord, even if you don’t intend to start a war, this are indeed worrisome news.” Urged Ser Rodrik, without waiting another moment. “The Queen is being treated as a criminal. You must do something to defend her honor.”

The knot inside Robb’s chest tightened. Remember, Robb, we mustn’t fight our own. Father’s words kept echoing inside his head, now more than ever.

“And I will defend her honor, Ser Rodrik.” Robb replied, lifting his eyes to stare to the Winterfell’s master of arms. He and his younger brothers had arrived the castle a few days after him, coming from their journey to Essos. “But Joffrey expects me to declare war and I don’t believe we can afford it. Not now.”

We mustn’t spill our blood, Robb said again to himself, watching the flame melting the candle slowly. Not again.

“My lord, you know I respect you…” Started the Greatjon, who had been unusually silent since he had been summoned up from his bed. “You called your bannermen to march south when your father’s loyalty was questioned and the Mountain started to ravage through the Riverlands. And we answered your call. And how glorious were those months? Even today I still believe you could’ve beaten the Lannister Bastard if Lord Eddard hadn’t pulled up that treaty with the Lannister bitch… However, the situation is different now. Your sister isn’t just a Stark now. She is the Queen. Putting her behind bars will only bring dishonor to your House, and ignoring that shows the Throne how we are just their little catspaws.”

“Lord Umber, if I could I would march right now to King’s Landing and fight my way into the Red Keep.” Robb retorted, trying to keep calm. He was being honest. The first thing that had passed through his mind while reading Arya’s letter was to call for his horse and disappear into the night.
“But I’m afraid that is what Joffrey wants. He has a thirst for blood. I daresay he wants us to leave the North to play his game. He must be bored or maybe he doesn’t actually understand the price of a war... But do you think it would be fair for our people to start fighting again? Especially during winter?”

“You’ve an honorable heart, my lord, but to me that sounds like a poor excuse to hide behind walls.” Insisted the Greatjon, raising his voice. “If you sister and mother are locked in some tower, it will only be a matter of time until Joffrey cuts off their heads.”

“What do you suggest then, Lord Umber?”

In that moment, the Greatjon and Ser Rodrik exchanged a glance. They had already talked about whatever the Greatjon was about to say.

“We have ten thousand men freezing up their arses on the Wall, my lord. Don’t you think it’s foolish to keep them in all those castles playing dice and betting when the wildlings are coming back? We didn’t take the black. We’ve wives and sons to take care in our homes... And we deserve to fight for a more dignified cause.” A vein started to pulse in the Greatjon’s temple. “We’re tired of fighting sickly wildlings who almost can’t raise a sword or shoot an arrow. Let the crows have them, my lord. Call your bannermen back. Give us another chance to fight for you, to teach that boy on the Iron Throne how we make justice…”

Robb was expecting something like this the moment he had seen the Greatjon entering the castle. He knew that after the Greyjoys’ invasion his men wanted to return to their homes. It was more than expected. But how could Robb tell them he needed them right where they were? He gulped, remembering again what the Greatjon had told him about his half-brother.

*Jon is dead.* He still couldn’t believe. His brother dead and burnt among other corpses. He blinked, feeling again the tears pricking in his eyes. What would Jon’s death meant to Father’s plans? He was getting tired of the same argument. *And of hiding the truth.* The three men seated around the table would only laugh at him if he spoke about the dead waking up beyond the Wall. In the whole castle, only Old Nan would accept his justification without thinking he had lost his mind. *And Osha, of course.*

“Lord Umber, haven’t you listened to what I just said?” Robb asked again, without giving him space to be questioned. “I don’t intend to start an unnecessary war. Six years ago I raised arms to defend the Riverlands from the Clegane’s attacks and rescue my father. But now the situation is quite different. No blood has been spilled and I refuse to be the first one to spill it. I intend to find a resolution to Sansa and my lady mother’s arrest through other ways.” The Greatjon scowled and, right in front of him, Ser Rodrik shook his head reproachfully. “Meanwhile, we must man the Wall until the Night’s Watch doesn’t require our help.”

“My lord, I must side with Lord Umber here. The Wall seems quite secure without our forces manning all those castles.” Ser Rodrik intervened, despair very clear in his voice. “And I’m sorry to contradict you, but I don’t think King Joffrey will accept any terms to release the Queen and your lady mother without war.”

“We must try first, Ser Rodrik. I know this is hard to accept, but believe me when I say we must turn our forces toward North, not South.”

“Yes, let’s keep fighting those fuckers who almost can’t stand up. We don’t have a Wall made of ice protecting us or anything like that, do we?” Screamed the Greatjon, banging his fist on the table. One of the candles snuff out.
And here is the bully, thought Robb, with a sigh. If only I had Grey Wind with me he could bite off another of the Greatjon’s fingers.

“My lord, you’re acting like a coward. The North is being raped under your watch and you remain there, with your arms crossed, ordering your men to stay in a fight that is not ours. Where is the Young Wolf who gathered the North and defied the Throne?”

“He is protecting the North, Lord Umber.” Robb raised his voice to match Lord Umber’s and to prove who was in charge.

“Is he?!” Lord Umber laughed. “Did he protect the North from the Greyjoys, when they took Torrhen’s Square? When the bloody krakens raped our daughters and wifes? When they cut our trees to build their ships? Did he protect the North then, my lord?!”

“You’re being unfair, Lord Umber. Must I remind you that thanks to my orders the North is safe from a wildling invasion?”

“That was five fucking years ago!” Lord Umber bellowed again. “Mance Rayder is dead. The battle is won. Let’s fight now for something else!”

“We will fight if peace can’t be achieved by other means. I assure you.” Robb replied, hoping to finish the matter there. Once again, he exchanged a glance with Ser Rodrik.

“I believe Lord Umber is also addressing the other problem, my lord.” It was Ser Rodrik’s time to intervene. “We have dealt with the Greyjoys for now, but we haven’t made any plans for the future.”

Not this again.

“We need to be cautious with the Greyjoys, yes.” Robb said for what seemed to be the hundredth time. Since he had left Torrhen’s Square, the Greyjoys had been on his mind constantly. The terms in which they had left were not good. However, how could they pose a threat? “Nonetheless, I don’t believe any ironman will attack us in the near future.”

“You don’t know, my lord..” This time, it was Maester Luwin, the eternal pacifist, who was speaking against the Greyjoys. “It’s true the the Iron Islands have suffered during the last years. However, they believe in the iron price. It’s in their blood to act like pirates. If famine and sickness persists, they will turn their ships again to where food and medicines are. They’ll do it without a second thought.”

“Theon would never betray us like that.” Robb said, hoping his friendship was strong enough. His friend’s last words still haunted him. Fuck you, Robb. An empty threat, surely, but still a threat.

“Even his loyalty could break in desperate times.” Maester Luwin said. “And Asha Greyjoy is more respected by the ironmen than Theon. She can lead an attack if she wants.”

Asha. Her touch was still too vivid in his mind. He still dreamt of the warm wetness between her thighs, the salty taste of her skin. And the way she had shoved the dagger into the little scribe’s skull.

Robb sighed, despair crawling inside his chest. Not again, he thought. Ruling was proving to be so much harder than it was a few years ago. Wasn’t he supposed to get better at it?

“No, none of the Greyjoys would dare to attack us, even if they were desperate. Theon would ask for help first and would prevent his sister to act like a pirate.” Robb insisted, ignoring the expression
on Ser Rodrik’s face. “In the meanwhile, I think the orders I gave when I arrived were very clear. Any ironman who attacks our coast will be treated as a criminal, even if it’s Theon and his sister.”

“Well, my lord, your word is the law.” The Greatjon replied, grumpily. Of course he wanted another course of action for the Iron Islands, too. But once again, to make war through the Iron Islands at the best of times was bad. During winter would be a bloody catastrophe.

“Now, can we return to the matter that brought us here so earlier?” Robb asked, massaging his temples. “We must end this mess with Sansa quickly and quietly. My sister is behind bars because she acted to protect her son. Joffrey blaming her for it it’s just stupid and reckless. I suppose our king is finally getting out of hand, to the point when even his mother can’t control him… So what I suggest is to get away from all that mess. Let the Tyrells deal with Joffrey, if they want. Ser Rodrik, I want you to travel to King’s Landing as soon as possible to negotiate Sansa’s release.”

“Release, Lord Stark? What kind of terms would the king accept?” Asked Ser Rodrik, doubtfully.

“Arya spoke about a rumor that is running through the city…”

“The marriage annulment?” Asked Lord Umber, frowning.

“My lord, that is just a rumor.” Maester Luwin said, tapping his fingernails on the table. “We mustn’t give it credit.”

“Well, rumor or not, Joffrey is bewitched by the Tyrell whore.” Robb continued. “I don’t think he’ll make such a fuss for releasing Sansa if that means he can marry Lady Margaery. I suggest we negotiate terms to…”

“Are you aware that such a plan can never work, my lord?” Maester Luwin, who had told him to find peace through diplomacy six years ago, looked at him with bitterness. “Even if Queen Sansa is released from her marriage and title, she will always pose a threat. Prince Edwyle will also be declared a bastard, but will have to be kept under the king’s supervision… Or dead.”

_Gods help me for what I’m about to say_, prayed Robb silently, looking directly into Maester Luwin’s eyes.

“Joffrey will agree with Sansa’s release if she kept under the Lannisters’ care.” As soon as those words left his lips he saw the pain filling Luwin’s eyes. The maester had been there, by Lady Catelyn’s bedside, every time she had brought a child into this world. To see one of those little children grow up to commit a dreadful act against another must be a terrible blow to him. However, it was the price, the only price, to maintain peace with the Iron Throne. At least for now. “I’ll propose to send Sansa to Storm’s End or even Casterly Rock with the Prince and my lady mother. Arya will accompany them as a punishment for disobeying my orders.” Let’s hope she doesn’t do something foolish until then, he thought before proceeding. “Of course we will demand the presence of the Queensguard to protect Sansa, but the Lannister will certainly accept that. And later, when the Prince is declared a bastard, I’ll even give the Throne total authority to marry the boy to whoever they want.”

The Greatjon shook his head and stood up when Robb finished.

“I refuse to partake in this council, my lord. You want to buy peace and to shame your House’s honor by selling your kin to the enemy? Well, do it without me, then. What will you do when Queen Sansa is found dead? When the Prince is killed? Will you let Illborn King play with their bodies, my lord? Just to make peace?”
“I’m not selling them!” Robb bellowed, losing his patience. “And you’ll respect me, Lord Umber or…”

“Fight!” The Greatjon banged his fist on the table for the third time. “I urge you, Lord Stark, for the last time… Turn your forces to King’s Landing and show them what we can do.”

For a moment, he imagined again what would happen in the next few years. He pictured Sansa wearing a gray dress, living alone in a castle she didn’t know, her red hair getting gray, her flame forever lost. Edwyle, who he always imagined like a little Joffrey, running through a castle, playing with his shadow, his only friend. A prince who had been turned into a bastard, a bastard who would grow up full of resentment. And, of course, his mother. Hadn’t she suffered enough? He could almost hear her prayers to the Seven, her lips constantly moving, asking for one more night with her husband, to see her sons again, to be free.

Could he really condemn all of them to that unhappy life? Just to maintain peace?

*Remember, Robb, we mustn’t fight our own.* Again, his father’s words ran through his mind. *Our true enemy is yet to come and we must be ready.* What would happen if he turned his forces south to make war with the Throne? How much time would the Night’s Watch resist holding their gates before thousands of wights started marching against them? What would be of the realm, of all of them, if winter brought the Long Night like had happened during the Age of Heroes?

So Robb shook again his head.

Almost at the same time, the Greatjon spat on his face.

“You’ve lost my respect, my lord. I won’t serve a coward.”

Ser Rodrik stood up immediately, his sword beginning to clear its scabbard.

“Ser Rodrik, *stop*.” Robb ordered, cleaning the spit from his face with the back of his hand. He wouldn’t give him to the insult and break a tie with one of the Houses sworn to him. “We must excuse Lord Umber for now. I’m sure he didn’t mean what he said.”

“I bloody well did.” Lord Umber replied, marching to the door. “Call for me again when you’ve grow your balls again, Stark.”

He then turned to leave the room, banging the door on his way out. The other three remained in silence for almost a minute. Ser Rodrik stood with his hand on the pommel of his sword until finally he decided to took again his seat again. When Robb finished cleaning his face, he look again to his advisers, determined to end this business quickly. He needed to get out of this room.

“I suppose you two share Lord Umber’s views on this matter.”

Robb couldn’t pick which one of them was more uncomfortable.

“My lord, I must admit I found your decision rather peculiar.” Maester Luwin spoke first. “Giving up on your sister and mother… I don’t think your father would ever have done that. Won’t you at least try to negotiate with the Iron Throne their return to Winterfell?”

“Maester Luwin, it was you who said a few minutes ago that Joffrey would never give up Sansa and Edwyle…”

“Maybe only the Prince should stay at the King’s care…”
“No.” Robb cut quickly. “Sansa has to stay beside her son. She would never forgive me if I separated them.”

Maester Luwin simply nodded, admitting his defeat with a sad glint in his eyes.

“But Lord Umber is right, my lord.” Ser Rodrik said. “We have enough men to take the king by surprise and force him to surrender Queen Sansa to us. I think it would be enough if we were to appear by his gates to scare him…”

“I won’t discuss this again, Ser Rodrik.” Robb said, feeling rather tired. “I will write my negotiation terms so you can leave today for King’s Landing. You must search for Cersei Lannister or even the Imp. They’ll be reasonable. Not anyone else, do you understand me?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Robb turned his head toward the window. The voice of the Greatjon barking orders to a stable boy came through the window. He was already leaving.

“And I think I must return to the Wall soon.” Robb said. “If what the Greatjon said is true, I’m afraid my bannermen will leave their posts if I’m not there.”

None of the others replied, making it easy for end the meeting. Not long after all of them left the room together, taking different paths. Maester Luwin turned toward his chambers while Ser Rodrik started climbed down the staircases to check Lord Umber’s departure and prepare to march south. Robb simply walked along the corridor, stopping by the door of the library and looked through a window.

Snow was falling softly covering everything in white. From that window, he could see the red leaves of the weirwood in the Godswood stretching their leaves toward the sky, as if asking for clemency. A flock of black ravens gathered in a nearby window, their beetle shaped eyes glinting as if they were amused with some strange joke about the universe.

Where is the Young Wolf? , they seemed to ask, repeating the very same question Lord Umber had first asked. Robb turned away from the window and started walking again through the corridor.

It was still too dark outside and he knew he should return to his bed, but the thought of spending another hour with Marissa made his stomach twist. He had been inside her two times that night and she had wept the two times. The prospect of returning to her side, to wake her up and to have to touch her again made him turn in another direction.

His marriage with Lady Marissa was growing more sour each day. She was desperate to get pregnant, as if that would change anything in their relationship. Secretly, he knew why she wanted a child so much: she was jealous of the bastard girl who lived in the kitchen. Even though Robb had sworn that the child was Theon’s, Marissa would never believe him. She wanted her own baby in a cradle so she could prove she wasn’t barren as the rumors were suggesting. He, on the other hand, was also in need of a son, or daughter, even if the child were to born with the weasel face of a Frey. The North needed an heir.

He had decided to walk to the godswood when the scream echoed through the castle.

The nightmares returned.

Quickly, he turned on his heels and started climbing the steps in the opposite direction. He stopped only when he reached Bran’s room. The door was already ajar and Hodor and Osha bent by the bedside, looking worried.
The years hadn’t spared Bran. Something else had broken inside his brother the day he had fell from the Broken Tower. Even though he had accepted the fact he couldn’t walk again, some part of him had descended into a fantasy that was slowly eating his sanity. Some days, Bran acted like a normal young man. He rode his horse with the special saddle the Imp had designed for him and he loved to pass time in the kennels, or in the godswood, with Summer and Hodor. Rickon used to joined them, taking with Shaggydog him.

But there were also days when Bran was completely lost. Since the visit from the Reeds, a few years ago, his behavior had worsened. He started raving about a raven who spoke with him through dreams, who had promised to help him fly and who had told him that he must travel to some distant place Beyond the Wall. Robb had never taken that nonsense seriously, at least not until the day Ser Rodrik had caught him and the Reed siblings trying to leave the castle during the night. They were on their way to the Wall. After that, the crannogmen had returned to Greywater Watch. From then on, Bran had started locking himself inside his chambers with Hodor and ordering Osha to bring him books from the library.

The things he said about the Three-Eyed-Raven, about the Children of the Forest and how he could sense things that were destined to happen were sometimes very disturbing. Maester Luwin believed that a part of it might have been true a few centuries ago, but not today. But was some part of it truthful? After all, dead men were walking again, a magic horn was on the hands of a madman and dragons were roaming the skies in the East. Maybe he should take seriously those dreams, for a change. Or maybe he should continue ignoring them, accepting them as the need of Bran to fill the void in his life with fantasies.

His body was now the proof that his mind was sick. His skin was pale as snow, his eyes bloodshot and he was more lean than a boy of his age should be. His hair was also long enough to reach the middle of his back. Laying on his bed, with sweat running down from his temple, Bran stretched his neck to look toward the door.

“Everything alright?” Robb asked him, standing by the door.

Osha was the first one turning her head.

“Yes, m’lord. Don’t worry. Me and Hodor can take care of him.”

“Hodor.” Hodor agreed, nodding his head with a worried expression in his face.

“I thought you hadn’t had nightmares for a long time.” Robb said, looking again to his brother. He was a small fragile thing. A bird without feathers.

Osha seemed nervous with that remark but instead of answering again for Bran, remained silent and made a gesture to Hodor. After a “Hodor”, he followed Osha to the corridor and the girl closed the door behind them.

“So?” Robb insisted, still waiting for an answer. Bran blinked his eyes, still sleepy and figuring out what he had saw on his dreams.

“Yes.” He answered, slowly. “The dreams returned a few nights ago. I think… I think the Three-Eyed-Raven is growing weak, Robb. He can only talk to me when I’m near.”

Seven hells.

Robb sat by the end of the bed. Outside, a direwolf started howling, possibly Summer. Soon after Nymeria and Shaggydog joined him, their howls ripping the dawn. Could they sense Jon was dead?
Could they know where Ghost was? Robb shook his head, feeling tears prickling his eyes.

“And what did he say to you tonight?” Robb asked. He needed to tell Bran what was happening at King’s Landing, not matter the impact it would have on him.

“He said Jon isn’t dead.” Bran explained, a weak smile touching his lips for the first time since the previous day. “I saw him tonight. He was alive, Robb. I saw him aboard a ship and... And the Three-Eyed-Raven told me my fate was bound to his. I don’t know what he meant by that, but he said soon after that I can mend our fate if... If I...”

“Bran, you are feverish.” Robb said, placing his hand on his brother’s head. “I understand your pain. But we mustn’t dwell on lies and fantasies now. Jon is dead. I don’t you to say otherwise in front of Rickon. He is grieving, as we all should.”

“Robb, I swear he is alive. He is travelling under disguise, wearing merchant’s clothes. Volantene clothes, I think.”

“I want you to stop with that now.” Robb insisted, trying to seem not too harsh. “Lord Umber retrieved his sword and his cloak from the ground, between the ashes of other corpses... He is dead.”

“He isn’t, Robb. He isn’t. Lord Umber is lying to you. Father is lying to you!”

“Brandon, I’m not warning you again.” Eddard would never inflict unnecessary pain on them. He would never lied to me after all the risks I’m taking for this plan. “I know this is hard for you, but you can’t grieve with lies. Why don’t you rest a little bit more? I’ll ask Maester Luwin to bring your sleeping draught and we can talk later.”

“Haven’t you heard what I just said, Robb?!” Bellowed Bran, the calmness in his voice being washed out by anger. “I can’t stay here. I think Jon is travelling to Essos and I must follow him, maybe join him and...”

“You’ve already travelled to the East, Bran.” Robb said, losing his patience. “You saw what’s happening beyond the Narrow Sea. There is nothing there for you. And if Jon was alive, he... He would be at his post, like a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch, ready to fight for the Realm.”

“Not if he is looking for help.”

“In Essos? What kind of help could he find there? The sellswords companies are all under contract to the Dragon Queen or the Free Cities. The freed slaves are still adjusting to the new order, fighting their old masters... And don’t even get me started on Dragon’s Waste.” Everything the little scribe had told him was still stuck inside his head.


Robb blinked. Had he heard right? He shook his head.

“What did you just say?”

“The dead men.” Bran repeated as if knew everything about them. “I know they are rising, Robb. You don’t need to hide that secret from me...”

“How did you find out? Has someone wrote to you?” Robb looked around the chambers, as if in hope of spotting any letter that gave any possible answer. But that seemed unlikely. Who could’ve told him about the dead men?
“The Three-Eyed-Raven shared this with me long ago.”

“Enough, Bran! I don’t know how you found out about the dead men but they are none of your concern.” Robb replied, harshly. “I don’t you to talk about them again.”

“Is it so hard to believe me?”

“Has Osha told you anything?” Robb asked now, remembering the wildling woman. She had once told a wicked story about how wights had followed her and her family. At the time, he had laughed privately hearing her story, certain it was all a bunch of lies.

“No one told me anything! The Three-Eyed-Raven showed me...”

“There is no such thing as a Three-Eyed-Raven.” Robb stood up and looked to his brother without making any effort to hide his fury. “Winter is here, Bran, and we don’t have time to play your stupid games anymore. I need you by my side. Rickon is too young to help me, but you aren’t. You can’t walk, but you are the smarter of all of us. So start acting like a man.”

“You don’t understand. If I don’t travel East, I...”

“Bran!” Robb knelt on the floor, feeling now more than irritated. “Shut up with all that nonsense! There is no Three-Eyed-Raven. The Children of the Forest are long gone. Father will never return to Winterfell. Jon is dead. And no, you will never walk or fly or whatever your mind tricked you to believe. Do you understand? The world is a horrible place sometimes, but we must accept the reality as it is.”

Bran was stunned by that, but not willing to accept defeat.

“Yes, we must.” He said, coldly. “And the only person here refusing to see reality is you, Robb. When the Long Night comes again, and you wake up from all your illusions, it’ll be too late. Do something now before you pass the point of no return. Please, let me go to Essos.”

He had already lost Father. Sansa was at the hands of Joffrey, as well as Mother. Arya was lost in King’s Landing, doing whatever Gods knew what. Rickon was too young to be of support. Theon was on bad terms with him, caring of his own people. And Jon was dead. He looked again to Bran, to his sickly face and eyes full of worry. Could anything of what he had just said have any part of truth in it?

*Everything is amiss.*

“Your place is here for now.” Robb finished, feeling the pain and resentment again boiling in Bran’s face. “I’ll return to the Wall tomorrow, I expect. And Ser Rodrik will leave to King’s Landing in a few hours. I need you to act like a man and to rule in my place. I need you to act as castellan of Winterfell.” Bran’s eyes glinted, curiosity mirrored in them. “And when I return, if you insist in travel to Essos, I’ll let you go, Bran.”

“You will?”

“Yes, I’ll let you go.” Robb promised. “I swear by the Old Gods and the New.”
Many of you didn’t like the previous chapter, so I think I must address those reviews before continuing. As I’ve said previously, when I started writing this story I knew I wanted to break some of the usual plots we see in fanfics and in the books. Thus, my characters have grown very differently from the characters we find in the books. Robb is no exception.

In Glory of Traitors Robb Stark has bent the knee to Joffrey, saw his family being divided and married to a Frey woman he doesn’t love. Besides that, he gathered his forces to defend the North from the wildlings, taking there the place occupied in the books by Stannis. Meanwhile, all of those circumstances made him grow in a particular way. He knows the cost of war. He knows what is to be unhappy. And he knows the threat that is coming from beyond the Wall. Some of you’ve called in a moron and an ass, but to me he turned out to be only an ass. Yes, he is an ass. He cheats on his wife, he is cold and he is not close to his siblings anymore.

But I don’t think is a moron. He is not the same boy who marched to the Riverlands. He is now the Lord of Winterfell, Warden of the North, and he is preparing for Winter, caring for his people and for a bigger fight than a petty dispute for the future of his sister. He knows a war with the Throne will bring blood, chaos and hunger. He knows that a war with the Throne will weaken his forces on the Wall. So why shouldn’t he make a smart move and try to find a way to protect his family, preventing war? Well, it doesn’t seem moron to me.

War will come very soon, but not the way you think. I’m doing my best to give you something new. I could have already started a war, but that would be boringly predictable. Meanwhile, you guys can’t imagine how hard it’s for me to write Robb, Eddard and Jon’s POVs. I feel I know so much better Cersei, Daenerys and Sansa than other characters, especially the ones dead since A Game of Thrones and A Storm of Swords.

This is the last chapter happening on King’s Landing before the Tournament of the King’s Hand. The next chapter will be from Eddard and then we’ll return to the capital for at least three chapters, maybe four. Since the events I’ve planned for that arc are huge - or so I believe they are - I’m considering writing them first to update them at the same time.

Hope you like this chapter. Once again, thanks to all of you who have reviewed.
“Come to bed.”

Cersei sighed and turned her head to look back at Jaime. Her brother was spread on the bed, half naked, his blond hair falling into his sleepy eyes. The blanket covered most part of his body, although his left arm fell from the bed, so that his hand was resting on the floor. Wearing only her dark red robe, Cersei shook her head. She couldn’t return to bed. Not now.

Jaime had made love to her three times in a row, as if they were sixteen again and exploring their bodies. She was not in the mood tonight, but she needed company and to be by Jaime’s side by the time he received the news. Someone would come to the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard eventually. It could be even minutes now before someone knocked on the door. To keep him distracted, so he wouldn’t note the fact she was nervous, she had satisfied his insatiable needs.

“I can’t sleep.” Cersei replied, maybe too harsh. She glanced again through the window. A glass full of wine was on her hand, although the drink was kept untouched. Her eyes quickly returned to the dark distant shape of what was the King’s Gate. The fire was still glowing in the windy night, but the roars and the clash of swords was long gone.

“How can I get them out of my head?, Cersei asked herself, tightening the grip around the glass. As if things weren’t already bad within the walls of the Red Keep, with Sansa locked up and Margaery living at Maegor’s Holdfast, disturbing news had come in the last few hours.

Joffrey’s actions were already seeding chaos throughout the Seven Kingdoms.

The High Septon had agreed to annul the royal marriage, but for the Realm’s sake Cersei had forced him to make it official only after the Tournament. She didn’t need someone to tell her what news like that could provoke, especially now that the city was full of guests with divided loyalties. A rumor like that would spread like wildfire.

And it spread, Cersei thought, looking again to the flames devouring the darkness.

The news about the annulment had leaked out earlier than it was supposed. Who had told it to Joffrey? Probably Cousin Lancel, who was now a septon close to the High Septon. Joffrey, of course, must’ve told to the Tyrell whore who must certainly have planted the news all over the city, as if it was her own private garden.

The riot between the Tournament’s guests had started a few hours ago. It seemed that Lymond Lychester, a lord from the Riverlands, had started an argument with the heir of House Rowan from the Reach. Ten minutes later a duel had transformed itself into a battle between men defending the Queen’s honor and others supporting the Tyrell’s cause. By the time the City Watch marched to the encampment to put an end to the battle, forty-two men had already died.

Was that a taste of what was about to come?

Cersei shuddered when Jaime’s warm lips started kissing her neck.

“Jaime, stop it.”

Jaime’s lips tightened to form a smile. She could sense it against her skin.
“You’re too much tense.” Another kiss. “You should relax.” And another. “Everything is in control for now.”

He was referring to the riot. The City Watch had arrested some of the inciters and divided the encampment in two areas protected by golden cloaks. It was all under control, yes, even though she would have preferred to send all the guests right back to their homes. However, since the Small Council had already spent so much gold with the Tournament, the event couldn’t be cancelled. The guards would have to double their efforts to prevent any other riots, and Joffrey would have to address the audience to calm them down - and perhaps do something he wouldn’t like -, but all of it could be done without problem. Or so she hoped.

Cersei pulled away before Jaime could kiss her again. Slowly, she walked off from the window, her face redden with anger.

“Not everything is in control.”

Control. She had lost her control. That was it, the one thing that was bothering her so much, that was making her so nervous. Maggy the Frog’s prophecy was shaping itself. The words kept echoing in her mind, haunting her. Queen you shall be, until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear. Again, she shuddered, shrinking inside her robe. If everything were to happen as she had planned, she could regain her power in the next hours.

Or lose it forever.

“It’s time to let Joffrey be responsible for his actions. If everything is not in control, it’s his own fault.” Jaime gave up on trying to seduce her back to his bed. He simply returned to the chair where his tunic lay and put it on again. “And what can you do tonight? We’ve done our best to prevent war. And believe me, Tyrion will also do his best. He is departing to Winterfell in the morrow to bargain with Robb Stark before he commits another foolish mistake like the one he did with the Riverlands. I’m confident that there won’t be a war.”

Tyrion had only agreed to travel North because she had promised him Casterly Rock. It was a fair price to pay if he and his little tongue managed to convince the Young Wolf that there was no need to make war. Yet she was not nervous because of that plan. That was in fact a good plan and the terms of Sansa’s future were very reasonable. The Queen could return to Winterfell and visit her son at Harrenhal from time to time. Edwyle would leave his title as Prince behind, but would become Lord of Harrenhal and, in the future, marry someone important in the Riverlands.

What could a king’s bastard want more?

A Throne.

That was the flaw Jaime was not acknowledging.

Edwyle couldn’t be a menace now, but he could be used against Joffrey in a few years. Well, if tonight’s plan were to fail, she had already a backup plan to achieve what the horse accident hadn’t. Kill my own grandchild to save my son. She would gladly become a Kinslayer to protect Joffrey. But again, none of that would have been necessary if the Tyrell whore hadn’t climbed into Joffrey’s bed.

“Everything was perfect before the Tyrells appeared.” Cersei gulped a bit of wine, feeling it burn down her throat.

“It’s too late for that.” Jaime nodded before leaning down to put his boots. “And there is nothing we
can do.” He stood up and approached her again. One of his hands touched her hip, clenching the satin to grab her flesh. *He is really insatiable tonight,* she thought. The other hand tightened around the glass. *And wants to deprive me of my courage.* “We’ve made our mark here, sister. I think the time has come for you to fulfill what you promised me a long while ago.”

*A life away from games.*

It had been long ago, when she was supposed to marry Rhaegar Targaryen. Between kisses, Jaime had told her his crazy plan of leave Casterly Rock, renounce his title and join the Kingsguard to be at her side in the Red Keep. The one thing he asked back was that one day, even if they were very old, she would run away with him, leave Westeros behind once and for all, so they could finally live their love as they should, like husband and wife. One day when she had granted heirs to the Throne. One day where his prowesses as a knight had started to fail. One day that would become the rest of their lives together as one. And yes, she had promised and wanted that.

But how could she ever walk away after tasting power as she had? King’s Landing was her game board. She thrived playing it and even now, that she was at a disadvantage, she knew she could do something to regain her position. The game made her feel alive.

“How can you suggest we leave now? Everything is in chaos.”

“A controlled chaos. Even if you can’t control our next Queen as well as you did with Sansa, we have Randyll Tarly on our pocket. He’ll defend our interests as if he was our own sworn man. What is more for you to do here?”

Pulling away from Jaime’s grip, Cersei took another gulp of wine. It was not what they could do, but what she had already done. Slowly, she walked again toward the window and to the city under its spell of darkness and snow.

“Nothing.” She lied, her eyes twinkling at some movement in the distance. It seemed like a column of horses were galloping through the King’s Gate. She almost could swear that the banner flapping in the wind had a gold spear piercing a red sun on an orange field.

“We can leave the city for a few weeks, at least until we know how Robb Stark will deal the annulment. We could visit Myrcella after that nasty business with Lysa Arryn… And if that northern moron decides to start a war, we’ll prepare our defense and fight him. And when we win, we’ll leave.”

“Jaime, I don’t know if I can ever leave.” Cersei replied, coldly. She had no patience to continue faking something she didn’t want. “In fact, you insisting on the matter isn’t helping right now.” She turned her back to him once again, feeling the cold flame inside her burn brightly. “And of course, there will be a war. If not now, then in ten years or so. Edwyle will never be content being a Lord when he could be a King…”

“Let Joffrey and the Tyrells deal with their own mess.” Jaime replied, anger creeping up on his voice. “We’ve dealt with the bloody Targaryens, with Robert and with the Starks. Now it’s time for us to rest. I don’t to be like father, working for the Realm until his last breath. I want to feel alive and to enjoy my time without having a sword on my hip every hour.” Cersei didn’t answer to that, merely staying with her back to him. “Cersei, I can feel the years weighing on my body. I’ve joined the Kingsguard to be at your side and I’ve honored my word willingly, out of love. But now it’s time for you to honor yours.”

“And what then? We leave our legacy to be torn apart by the Tyrells and the Starks? Is that what you want?” How could he not understand? She suddenly felt desperate and tired, too tired to have
this argument again. “I want to get away as much as you do, believe me, but there is something more important deserving our attention now.”

“Do you? Do you really want to get away with me?” Jaime didn’t raise his voice, but his tone was worse than a slap. Disillusion and sadness were attached to each word coming out of his mouth. “Sometimes I look to you and I can only see this overprotective mother, addicted to power… And not the woman I used to love.”

She was prepared to answer back when someone knocked at the door.

Cersei’s heart jumped a beat. She placed the wine glass on the window sill and returned to the bed, pulling a sheet to hide her body. She was shivering, but not because the room was cold. Her fate had come.

Jaime, his face still red, walked to the door and carefully opened it.

“What is it?”

The voice of Ser Meryn Trant echoed through the room.

“Lord Commander, you need to come. Something happened at Maegor’s.”

Cersei stood up, still covering her body with the robe. She approached the door, hiding behind it so Meryn Trant couldn’t see her. Jaime, if he turned his head, could look right to her. The cold in the pit of her stomach was making her sick. The same thrill she had felt years ago when she had uncovered Eddard Stark’s plans to overthrow Joffrey and start a regency.

This was the thrill of the game.

“Is the King safe?”

“Yes, Lord Commander. The King is safe.” Replied Meryn Trant, clearly nervous. “But someone poisoned some of the guests at his table tonight.”

“What? Someone poisoned the guests? And not the King?”

“Yes, Lord Commander. Some of the Tyrells are unwell.”

Cersei bit back her smile.

“Has Grand Maester Yandel already checked the King?”

“He did it more than an hour ago, Lord Commander.”

“An hour?! This happened an hour ago and you only came to me now?”

“We were following the King’s orders, Lord Commander.” Replied Meryn, raising his voice to overcome Jaime’s authority.

“I’m your Commander and, if I remember properly, there are five of you in the Keep at the moment.” Jaime answered quickly. “At least one of you should have come to me immediately. But we’ll have time for that later. Tell me what happened. You said there was poisoning?” Jaime looked toward Cersei, doubt flashing in his eyes. “That’s a dumb move to make.” He spoke directly to her. “Everyone knows Lady Margaery has a taster at her service. I’m sure he managed to feel the poison before she could ingest it.”
Cersei ignored the hidden accusation. She pressed her body against the door, eager to hear more.

“According to what Maester Yandel reported just an hour ago, it seems the poison was injected in the fruit, Lord Commander. Figs.” Continued Ser Meryn Trant. “The powder used is called Chimaera’s Mist, a rare and very expensive poison from the Summer Islands. The Grand Maester said it acted slowly, very slowly. The effects started to manifest only three hours ago. The taster died quickly, as well as Lord Garlan…”

Cersei was rejoicing in the inside. Qyburn’s plan had worked.

“They are dead?” Asked Jaime, alarmed. “And Lady Margaery? Is she dead too?”

“No, Lord Commander.” Ser Meryn continued, quickly. “But I don’t think she will survive the night. Maester Yandel is treating her right now, as well as her own private maester. She is feverish and had a horrible bleeding…”

“Bleeding?”

“Yes, Lord Commander. Hum… She was bleeding from… from her womb.”

_The bastard child is dead_, Cersei thought, relieved. The world didn’t need another bastard.

“The Queen of Thorns was also poisoned, as well as Lord Garlan’s wife, two of Lady Margery’s cousins and seven other guests who were invited to the dinner. Lord Tarly was there, but, just like the King, didn’t eat figs.”

_The roses are withering._

“The breach of security under our watch is astounding, Ser Meryn.” Jaime said, trying to hide his confusion. “I want you to reinforce the security on the Holdfast immediately. I don’t want to see a single guard on this tower, do you hear me? I want Ser Denys back to his post by the King’s side, as well as Ser Sandor. Meanwhile, you and Ser Boros will guard the entry to the Holdfast while ser Balon continues to keep an eye on the Queen and the Prince’s rooms. Am I clear?”

“But Lord Commander, the King is already acting to find the culprits.” Ser Meryn intervened, again trying to show off. Cersei pressed the ear against the door. “He has ordered Ser Sandor to question Lady Elinor Tyrell.”

“Lady Margaery’s cousin?” Jaime asked, outraged. “Ser Sandor has no right to start questioning before reporting to me.”

“The King believes Lady Elinor is the responsible, since she was the only Tyrell who didn’t touch the figs. He believes she envies Lady Margaery’s position.”

Cersei would’ve laughed if she was alone. Her plan had sorted out better than she had expected. She had decided to poison Lady Margaery to cut the problem by the root as soon as Joffrey had threatened her. Poison was her best choice, but it would be incredibly hard to poison the girl and to throw the suspicion to someone else that wasn’t herself or was connected to Sansa’s side.

The perfect solution would be if the poison had come directly from someone inside Margaery’s court. So, after careful analysis, Qyburn had managed to find a rare, slow and untraceable poison. Later, he had found the perfect vessel to carry it - the sweet figs the Tyrells loved to eat at the end of their meals - and had planted the flask with the remnants of the Chimaera’s Mist at the Blue Bard’s room, the singer at Margaery’s service. He was the perfect scapegoat, especially after the little tale weaved by Qyburn. His body would be found in a few hours with a note beside him admitting his
affair with Margaery and explaining why he had poisoned her: death was the only way they could be side by side as an equal. How he would commit suicide willingly, Cersei didn’t knew, but Qyburn had assured there was a way.

_Qyburn could’ve been a poet._

Lady Elinor being accused proved that Joffrey wouldn’t blame either his mother or his wife. She was safe and it was now a matter of time until Lady Margaery was dead.

The order would be restored.

“If the King suspects, I suppose he must have valid evidence”

“Yes, Lord Commander. I believe so.”

“We must return to Maegor’s then.” Jaime eyes flashed again toward Cersei, still hiding behind the door. “Ser Meryn, go ahead and stop Ser Sandor, even if the King insists. I’ll dress and follow you in a few minutes.”

Once the door was closed, Jaime looked immediately to Cersei.

“What have you done?” He asked, his voice cold as steel.

Cersei looked to him with the same coldness, a smile on her lips.

“I’ve done what was necessary.”

Jaime laughed, but the sound that came out of was not happy at all.

“If Joffrey finds out the truth, he’ll have your head on a spike without hesitation.”

“I knew the risks.” Cersei said. “I’m not a fool, brother. Check the Blue Bard room to end this quickly.”

She started walking back to bed, but Jaime was not done with her.

“I swear, Cersei, this was your last move. I’ll make you honor your promise. This city is eating you alive.”

She turned her head, smiling wickedly.

“Eating me alive? To me it looks the other way around. I may have solved everything.”

“Risking your own neck.”

“Like you did when you stabbed Aerys on the back.” Cersei retorted, stripping her red robe. Her naked body gleamed in the candlelight, the blond curls of her hair falling to her breasts. “This is us, brother. Don’t you remember? This is what makes us alive.”

She would never forget the look on Jaime’s face. It was filled with disgust, even though she was right in front of him, ready to take him again to celebrate their victory.

“No.” He said softly, turning his head to look at the door. “I never wanted this life, Cersei. The only thing I ever wanted was you. Every choice I made was mostly based on our future. You were always my priority.” Jaime shook his head, again the same kind of disappointment filling his voice. “But now I start to think I was never yours. Tyrion is right. I’m nothing more than an old knight, loving
my sister more than I should."
Eddard II

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the reviews for the last chapter. This chapter is smaller - in fact, the smallest chapter yet - , but great events will take place in next paragraphs. To tell you the truth, I surprised myself while writing this. I had different plans for Eddard and the Wall's plotline... But well, the story took control of me and led me to a completely different place. I want to know if you liked the new developments, so let me know. This chapter will be followed not with one happening at King's Landing, like I promised, but another one that will conclude the action starting in this one. At last, a special thanks to The Professor of Writing, for betareading this so promptly!

EDDARD II

Eddard waited in the dark, holding his place at the agreed meeting point.

He was at the entry of the Shieldhall, a gloomy feast hall long abandoned by the Night's Watch. Darkness surrounded him like a velvety cloak. Flakes of snow fell down all around him, covering everything in white. It was the perfect night for the risky coup they were about to put in motion. Ser Alliser was still abed, with two broken ribs and a nasty chest wound and Janos Slynt had left Castle Black to inspect Long Barrow after the battle that had taken place there. And, Lord Commander Marsh was currently ill with a cold and confined to his chambers.

So what more could they ask for? Bowen didn’t have his allies at his side and they, on the other hand, had men enough to take Castle Black. And women , he thought again, remembering what Cotter Pyke had revealed in one of his last letters. Everything would happen as planned. And if it didn’t, Jon would carry out the plan and bring the Dragon Queen with him to rain fire down on the Others.

The King’s Tower loomed farther ahead, the light at the chambers emanating through the windows. It was not strange that Bowen Marsh was still awake. Truly that would actually be better for them. They didn’t want to frighten the Lord Commander by breaking into his room during his sleep. The purpose of their little rebellion was another.

An owl hooted in the night. No, not an owl, someone whistling like one. It was the first signal. Eddard looked quickly toward the rookery. Sam was right there, hiding among ravens, ready to give the second signal. By Eddard’s calculations, it was now past midnight and most of the castle should be asleep. The owl whistle had been Ronnel’s signal to alert them to the fact that the courtyard was finally clear and he would go ahead.

One by one, the candles on the windowsill of one of the windows of the rookery were lit by Maester Samwell. Eddard could feel his hands trembling inside his gloves. Nor from the cold, although it was now colder than ever before, but from the fear. If tonight was a mistake, it wouldn’t only be his life at risk.
Thirty-two men at Castle Black knew about the rebellion. Most of them were placed at strategic points: five at the gates, ready to open them when the last signal was given; three guarding Flint’s Barracks, making sure no one of their rivals would get up and catch them in the act; and another two were placed at the top of Hardin’s Tower and the Grey Keep, with a bow and a few arrows, ready to fire if needed.

*But the Gods will smile on us tonight*, thought Eddard, still waiting for his cue in the dark.

As soon as the third whistle echoed through the night, this time coming from Edd. Ned counted to ten and gave the final whistle. He then started walking, towards the King’s Tower, covering his head with a hood. The door was open, as it was supposed, and unguarded. For now, everything was happening as planned. He pushed the door to enter and close it immediately when he saw the others faces.

Grenn was the one standing guard tonight at the Lord Commander’s Tower, which had made it easy for them to enter. He had simply unlocked the door. Ronnel Harclay, Pyp and Edd were all there, having each one whistled before marching down to the tower, entering each one at a time, as it was supposed. Eddard was the last one.

“We’re all here then.” Ronnel said, his face hidden in the dark. Only a torch was lit in the entrance placed at a sconce on the wall. The entrance, Eddard noticed, smelled like piss.

“We’ll do as planned.” Eddard said, almost in a whisper. “Edd and Pyp, you’ll stay here watching the entrance and making sure no one else comes in.” He looked now toward Ronnel and Grenn. “Meanwhile, the three of us will take care of the Lord Commander.” He glanced back at Edd. “Hobb has the horses ready, right?”

They had to rely on Three-Finger-Hobb, the Castle Black’s cook, to deal with the horses. It was the only useful task for him.

“Yes.” Confirmed Edd, nervously. “I hope this is the right thing to do, Ned.”

“What?” Ronnel asked, laughing mockingly. “Are you afraid *now*?”

Eddard silenced Ronnel with a serious look. He never had a sense of purpose, did he?

“We won’t commit treason.” Eddard assured them, even though he doubted himself sometimes. “He will only show him another point of view.”

*Kidnap Bowen and show him what is like to be attacked by a dead man. That will make him open his eyes once and for all.*

“Yes, right.” Pyp grinned, more calm than Dolorous Edd. “It sounds like treason to me, but the Old Pomegranate has it coming.”

“Stop being such pussies.” Ronnel insisted again, looking directly to Edd. “You only have to guard the fucking door and send us a warning if someone comes. It isn’t hard for someone who has already fought wildlings and bloody dead men.”

“We’ve to go.” Eddard interrupted. The more time spent on unnecessary talk, the less time they would have to do what had brought them there. “Don’t be nervous. We are doing this for the Realm.”

“Yes, for the Realm.” Replied Ronnel, trying to seem solemn.
For the Realm.” They all repeated at the same time.

For the Realm, Eddard swore to himself again, silently. Maester Samwell had found answers about the Others’ forces and the source of their power. He was positively sure that there was a way to stop the dead from returning, with their cold blue eyes and that inexplicable and insatiable hunger to kill. Something beside the obsidian knives they had found at the Fist of the First Men. However, to achieve that, to destroy that ancient evil, they needed to march Beyond the Wall. Start a crusade that would require the support of all Seven Kingdoms. Even if they were able to gather the attention of the seven great Houses, the chances of success would be very slim, with an army of the dead waiting for them and growing with each wildling that died unnecessarily at their gates.

So today he would prevent more killings. More bodies to feed the army of the dead. He would force Bowen to sign a treaty with the wildlings. And if the Lord Commander were to refuse to see reason, Ned, and only Ned, would kill him and commit the greatest act of treason. He knew he would lose his head, but if that was the price for the future, he was prepared to pay it. For the Realm , he said again to himself.

He started climbing the staircase silently, hearing the steps of Grenn and Ronnel right behind him. Those men inside the tower were the only ones he could really trust. Benjen was still stuck at Long Barrow, attending to the repairs on the gate and delaying Janos Slynt and Cotter Pyke and his men had already honored their word and provided help.

All around them the tower was silent. They slowly passed the dining hall, as well as the small room where Bowen Marsh’s squire must be asleep. They proceeded slowly, their hands on the hilt of their swords, ready to wield them if needed.

“He’s alone.” Grenn told them. “He was in his chambers when I started my watch, and Ulmer said the Commander’s cold was worse, so he was already abed.”

“I just saw a light coming from his window.” Ronnel said, whispering. Yes, Eddard had seen it too. “Do you think he is afraid of pissing himself in the dark?”

Grenn sniggered and Eddard had to tell them to shut up before anyone could hear them. Finally, they reached the door to the Lord Commander’s chambers and stopped on their tracks. None of them dared to make a sound that could denounce their presence. They spoke with each other with their eyes and hands. Gesturing, Eddard asked the other two to step back a few paces while he tried to listen if there was any sound coming from the room.

He leaned on the door, pressing his ear against the wood. Grenn had said Marsh was alone, and during the day sentinels had watched every movement happening inside the tower. It was all supposed to be as planned. Besides the fire crackling, there was not another sound coming from inside. Yes, the Lord Commander was alone, probably sleeping. From the slit under the door it was possible to see the light. Maybe Ronnel was right. Maybe Bowen Marsh was afraid of sleeping in absolute darkness.

After a few more seconds, Eddard exchanged a glance with Ronnel and, seeing the approval in his eyes, knocked at the door.

Silence.

“Do you have to be so polite?” Asked Ronnel, rolling his eyes.

“He still is our commander.” Eddard simply replied.
They didn’t hear anything from the inside. No movement or Bowen’s voice asking who was it at such an hour. Eddard gulped and waited. More than ten seconds passed before he knocked again, this time harder. Once again, no sound came from the inside. Behind him, Grenn whispered a prayer to the Seven and Ronnel moved, losing his patience.

“Are you sure he is inside?” Eddard asked Grenn for what must be the third time.

“Yes, he is inside.” He replied, very sure of himself.

Before Eddard could do or say something more, Ronnel advanced forward.

“Fuck this and your bloody manners, Eddard.” He said, extending his arm. Without ceremony, he turned the doorknob and pushed the door, walking directly inside.

Eddard followed him quickly, as did Grenn.

The Lord Commander’s room was just like as Ned remembered from his last visit. It was circular and quite simple. It had a large bed in a corner and, right next to it, a desk full of papers and a fireplace with a bright fire on it. There was also a bookcase with some books and scrolls leaning against a wall, very close to the cabinet with swords. *And there was also a bow the last time I visited*, he remembered, noting the weapon was not there anymore.

“What is that smell?” Asked Ronnel, covering his nose. “The Old Pomegranate must be shitting himself somewhere, Gods…”

There was a putrid smell on the air, but it wasn’t shit.

*Dead flesh.*

Immediately, Eddard thought the worst, even though there was no dead body visible. Could someone have killed the Lord Commander and hidden his body in his own chambers, lying to everybody else, saying the man had caught a cold? No, no. It was impossible. While his eyes inspected the room, looking for any sign of something dead, he realized that he had seen the Lord Commander just the day before.

“There is no one here.” Grenn said, after inspecting the privy room. “I was sure… Oh, Seven Hells!”

Grenn stopped on his heels and pointed one hand toward the tall black iron candlestick near the window. Six candles were lit, flooding the room with light. But among them, right at the center, where it was supposed to be a seventh candle, was a head. By now, the skin was extremely pale and rotten, melting down with the wax that had spilled from the other candles. One of the eyes was liquid, running down with the red flesh and smelly fat like a river. A wicked grin was frozen on the man’s lips and there was something peculiar about his nose. It had been broken at least once.

“Who is that…?” Asked Ronnel, just as horrified as the others.

“I think that’s…” Eddard took his time to recognize the face, but once he saw the broken nose and the skin ravaged with pox marks he knew the man’s name. “Cotter Pyke.”

“Impossible!” Exclaimed Ronnel, taking a step further. However, Eddard saw the realization coming to his eyes. It was indeed the commander of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, the very same man who had sent him a letter a week ago confirming Jon’s departure, the ally who had gathered men for him and save hundreds, maybe thousands, of wildlings.

“Someone told Marsh about us.” Eddard said, feeling pain aching in his chest. Here he was again, at
the same place he had been so long ago, just like it happened before the Iron Throne, when his ally held a blade against his throat. He had committed the same mistake again. He had trusted someone who had betrayed him. “I don’t know who, I don’t know how, but this is a trap.”

“A trap?” Grenn asked, taking his sword out of his scabbard. “Well, let’s finish with those fuckers then, shall we?”

Who are those fuckers? , Ned asked to himself, looking from the corner of his eye to Ronnel and Grenn. Could any of them betray him? He gulped and shook his head. There was no time for this. If someone knew they were coming into the Commander’s room, they must also know what Cotter Pyke had done and who was waiting right outside the gates of Castle Black. If so, everything was ruined again.

He stepped to the window and looked to the rookery.

Samwell was waiting for the last signal.

Could he have been the one who betrayed us?

No, no, no. He had to stop thinking about that.

He gestured and whistled again, three times in a row. The three candles Samwell had lit minutes ago were snuffed out immediately.

She knows what to do now.

“Let’s get out of here.” He commanded, refusing to look at the other two. Fear and deception made him look down as he walked to the staircase.

The first arrow hit him on the right shoulder, missing his heart by inches. His sword, Quiet Wolf, fell from his hand instantly. The sound of steel echoed inside the tower as a bell. Gasping in pain, he took a step back and fell on the ground. Ronnel, with his sword already out, grabbed one shield placed on the room’s wall and walked directly into the dark and the archer hidden somewhere.

“Ronnel, no. Grab a torch…” Said Ned, feeling tears coming to his eyes thanks to the pain spreading through his arm.

Grenn bent down beside Ned to help him remove the arrow.

“Grenn, close the door. Ronnel must return…”

He nodded and stood up quickly to obey his order, but before he could turn to the door, an arrow came right out of his throat. Grenn gurgled, blood spilling from his mouth as he realized he was slowly drowning in his own blood. He fell on his knees, grabbed the arrow and tried to push it out. When he did, bone and flesh came out with it and he died quickly after, right on Ned’s lap.

“Not him.”

Eddard looked up as he heard the voice at the door.

Edd.

Dolorous Edd, the man whom he had told almost all his plans – save for Jon’s part – was right ahead of him, looking with pity in his eyes. Why? , Eddard wanted to ask, holding Grenn’s head between his hands.
However, Edd was not the one holding the bow. It was Ulmer, one of the best archers of the Night’s Watch, with a wicked smile on his lips, stilling pointing an arrow to his chest.

“Ser Alliser wants the Lord Traitor alive.”
The Maester

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long, long, long delay. I don’t even know if you remember me. I still intend to bring this fanfiction to an end before season 7 airs (or maybe 8), but I’m doing my Masters now and at some points I don’t have time to write. Thank you to everyone who has favorited and followed! Please review, even if you don’t like it: I intend to re-read the first chapters to continue this fanfiction with all my strength, but as usual my motivation comes from your feedback.

This chapter has been on my desktop since September, but only today I managed to finish it. I don’t think you’ll like what will happen. I’m prepared to distance myself from the canon plot: the difference will become bigger every chapter that passes. Prepare yourself for a depressive, bloody and violent chapter.

PREVIOUSLY: Eddard Stark and a few men plotted to kidnap Lord Commander Marsh and bring him to a gathering with wildlings, so that the Night’s Watch can make an alliance with the Free Folk. However, Eddard Stark walked into a trap, was betrayed by one of his men and is now wounded. This chapter concludes the events started at Castle Black.

THE MAESTER

Maester Samwell had just snuffed out the three candles on the windowsill when someone broke down the rookery’s door. He yelped, turning on his feet quickly. Could something have gone wrong? Yes, of course, something had gone wrong. The last signal was supposed to be sent only in case of peril. All around the ravens started to caw, flapping their black wings as someone approached with a torch. Fidgeting with his chain, which was conveniently stuck in the sleeve of his robes, the Maester moved slowly to the staircase and looked down.

No one was supposed to be out of their beds at such a late hour.

“Maester Piggy?”

Samwell recognized the voice even before he could see who it was.

“Rast, what are you doing here?” He asked, unable to control his nerves. There was something about Rast that would always frighten him. And infuriate him. Even though he was now a Maester, a very important asset to the Night’s Watch, there were still some men, reminding him of the fat coward boy he had been years ago.

So much had passed since then, yes. He had survived the Great Ranging, he had faced his father to
make sure Gilly’s child would be accepted at Horn Hill as his bastard and, after all that, he had forged a collar with eight links at the Citadael. It was an achievement to forge a collar with such a length in only four years. And he could’ve forged many more links if he hadn’t decided to stop his studies. However, as soon as he found out about the Others, about the truth buried with the Children of the Forest, he realized the time had come to return to Castle Black.

Somehow that thought reminded him again of why he was here, hiding in the dark. He was fighting alongside Eddard for the Realm. He was fighting for the Night’s Watch. He was fighting for Jon and old Jeor Mormont and Maester Aemon and for all those who had perished at the hands of the dead. He was fighting for Gilly and for the summer and for the future.

But more than anything else, he was fighting to restore the world to his proper order.

To balance the unbalanced.

“I’ve come for you, you big fat swine.” Rast laughed, placing the torch by the door. The sound of steel echoed through the rookery. The ravens continued cawing desperately as if sensing something in the night. “Have you played your little trick with the candles yet?”

Sam stopped in the middle of the stairs and placed his hand on the dagger at his waist.

“My trick?” He asked, controlling the fear. He wouldn’t give in so easily.

“You heard me, you moron.” Rast explained, letting out a laugh. Sam looked down through the bannister. Rast was at the end of the stairs, wielding his sword and facing him with an amused expression. “Why don’t you come down, Piggy? Let’s finish this quickly, alright? I don’t want to miss the spectacle.”

_They found out_, Sam realized, turning his head toward the window. He gulped, feeling despair clawing inside his chest like an ice spider. _They found out, but it’s not over_, he repeated to himself, remembering the wildlings.

“I’m afraid I won’t go.” The words came out without a second thought.

Rast laughed again and the ravens laughed with him.

“They should have sent the other moron to deal with you.” Rast replied, even though he was loving the chase. “I could be really fighting someone, but here I am, catching a fat black pig.”

_I can kick him down the stairs_, Samwell realized, his eyes observing every detail through the darkness.

“Who… who should _they_ have sent for me?” Sam asked, trying to buy a few more seconds. He needed only to take a step back or two and then advance forward, taking Rast by surprise and pushing him down the stairs.

His sworn brother was very close now, his silhouette clearer in the semidarkness.

“The traitor.” Rast explained. “Well, the one who betrayed _you_. It seems the scumbag decided to remain loyal after all… Even though I guess he only made that decision because he is a pussy like you.”

If there was a traitor among their mist, it could only be one person. He had betrayed them not because he didn’t believe the cause they were fighting. No. It had been a decision made out of love and pain.
“It was Edd.” Sam said to himself, almost in a whisper.

“Yes.”

Sam should’ve known better.

Edd was having a hard time with Jon’s demise. None of them had taken it well, but it had taken a heavy toll on Edd, proving what Sam had suspected for a long time. His friend was in love with Jon. In the last few years, he had followed Jon most of the time and had looked at him with something more than respect. Affection. Those feelings were repressed, of course, but nonetheless they were able to explain why Edd had betrayed the plan: how could he befriend wildlings like the ones who had killed Jon?

“You don’t seem surprised, Maester Piggy.”

“I am not.”

Rast laughed again. He was very close now, close enough for Sam to feel his breath. Sam clasped the dagger and retraced a step.

“Don’t run now…”

Rast’s words were cut by the sound of a horn being blown outside. By the time they turned to the nearest window, in the hope to see something, a second blast was heard throughout Castle Black.

*Wildlings.*

“They are here…” Sam turned his head quickly to Rast. He needed to act as soon as possible.

“The wildlings?” Rast laughed again. That horrible sound, twisted in Samwell’s stomach as if a blade had been struck in his belly. “Do you mean the women army the wildling bitch hid near Mole Town? Oh, Maester Piggy, you may have all those links around your neck, but you are dumb as…”

Sam gasped, horrified, when a spear pierced Rast’s chest. Yelping in pain and surprise, the hunter was now the prey. Rast grabbed the end of the spear and tried to push it out, as if in hope to save himself, but in turn started coughing his own blood.

“Come, you fool!” Claimed a figure in the darkness, waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

*Hobb.*

“How… how can you throw a spear like that…?” Sam couldn’t process what had just happened. He was still in shock.

“We don’t have time for this. Come with me now.”

Hobb didn’t have to repeat those words.

“Please, help me…” Rast was on his knees, covered in his own blood and still grabbing the spear on the foolish hope to pull it out. For the first time something glinted in his eyes that Sam had never seen. Not sympathy for him, or even guilty for all those horrible things he had done to him in the last years.

No, he was simply asking for relief.

Sam gulped and placed a hand on Rast’s shoulder.
“I’m afraid, Rast, that your Watch is ended.” He whispered, sadly, as his dagger plunged Rast’s throat. He had learnt on the Citadael, while studying the Healing Arts, how to give a quick and painless death. It was the only thing he could do for Rast now. Before leaving, he retrieved Hobb’s spear. He suspected they would need it.

All around him, maddened by the smell of blood, the ravens were flapping their wings and cawing savagely. Feeling the blood dripping from the spear’s end into his hand, Sam ran down the stairs to join the cooker.

“Let’s go.” Commanded Hobb, running to the door and grabbing the torch Rast had left behind.

There was no time for questions. He simply obeyed Hobb’s orders and trailed him down another set of stairs. He kept his step steady, even when they turned a corner to find a bloody carnage. Six bodies were lying in pools of blood. Men with their throats cut, one of them with a nasty wound on his belly and another one, that Sam recognized as Albett, cut in half. His body literally separated from his legs.

Six years ago, he would’ve retched at such a horrible sight. But not now. He had cut dead flesh and submerged his hand into the entrails of men, women and children. Truth be told, he had done much worse than that.

They continued down another hallway to find more bodies. He recognized many of them. Satin, with his pants pulled down and three arrows fired right into his groin. Dennis Frostfinger, who seemed to have suffered a terrible blow to his stomach and who had been dragged along the floor, covering it with blood. And even Terrence Celtigar, who had always been so arrogant, with a dagger still stuck in his left eye.

“How… How can this be possible?” Sam asked, pale as snow.

Dead, so many dead. Men who were supposed to be in the barracks sleeping. Men who were supposed to be at the positions Ned had arranged for them. Men who had not even said their vows to the Night’s Watch. Dead. So many of them. And why? Eddard had devised a plan careful enough to prevent any death. They would kidnap Marsh, show him the White Walker the wildlings had captured and prove to him how it was time to forge an alliance with the Free Folk.

“This is pure carnage. Even if our conspiracy was found out, there was no need to this.”

“I’m afraid Marsh is no longer in charge.” Replied Hobb, without slowing his step. “But any discussion we’ve now is nothing more than a guessing game. I promised Sir Eddard I would get you out of Castle Black, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We need to protect you. You are the only one with knowledge about the Others.” Hobb insisted, slowing his step. The clash of swords coming from the courtyard told them the fighting was still happening.

“Protect me? I’m not a child any more. I can fight, Hobb. At least until the Wildling Princess comes with reinforcements.”

Suddenly, Hobb stopped and placed his hand firmly on Sam’s shoulders.

“Don’t you understand? No one will come for us. For all I know, fucking Thorne knew what we were gonna do for weeks. The wilding bitch and her stupid army must be dead. And Sir Eddard… Oh, the bloody idiot must be dead by now as well.” He seemed truly desperate. “A bunch of us are
still fighting in the courtyard, but Thorne has more men than we expected under his thumb. By
dawn, all traitors will be hanging on the gates. The only thing I can assure you now is that you don’t
hang with the rest of us. You can run, boy, run through the Wall until you find safety at Long
Barrow. I’ll escort you to the wooden stairs and will make sure you climb the Wall… And then you
run. You run as fast as you can to join Robb Stark. You’ll make sure he rallies his forces as he
should have done long ago and march to Castle Black to put an end to the Night’s Watch.” He
tapped his cheek, as if he was nothing more than a stupid child. “You hear me? The Watch must end.
It’s old, and tired and rotten. You tel’ him that. The time has come for the Realm to defend itself.”

The Watch must end. He felt something break inside his chest, maybe the last spark of hope. So this
was it. He opened his mouth to answer, holding the tears behind his eyes, but someone else spoke
first.

“Of course…” The voice came from down the corridor. “I should have known. The cooker is siding
with the fattest man on the Wall. Oh, Ser Alliser will laugh about this.”

When Sam turned to face the source of the voice, he saw Jack Bulwer, covered in blood and snow.
Right beside him was another man Sam identified as Red Jack Crabb. Both of them were wielding
their swords and proudly wearing smiles on their lips.

“Seven fucking Hells.” Snarled Hobb, turning to Sam. “You’ll have to run for your life, Maester
and….”

He grabbed Sam by the sleeve of his robe and forced him to turn toward the opposite side of the
corridor, but the plan was quickly shot down. Three other men were coming their way.

“No.” Sam replied. “I really can fight. Believe me.”

Chaos was installed quickly. Red Jack and Jack Bulwer, aided by the other three, tried to detain
Hobb quickly, but the cooker was quicker. He plunged the spear into one of the men’s faces, killing
him instantly while managing to attack the other with the wooden handle. Caught up in the mess,
Sam wielded his dagger and managed to bury it into the back of a man who was sneaking up to
Hobb when he started to fight with Red Jack Crabb.

The man shuddered when the blade ripped through his clothes and flesh, but the blow had been
effective once again. The man was dead before hitting the floor.

“Good shot, Maester!” Bellowed Hobb, still fighting Red Jack.

Taking back his dagger, Sam grabbed the man’s sword and prepared himself to join Hobb in his
attack.

But then someone knocked him in the hind head and the world was quickly lost to darkness.

*

It was snowing.

That was the first thing Samwell realized when he woke up.

The second thing was that he was freezing. Was he outside? The screams of men issuing orders and
the hooves of horses galloping through the snow confirmed his fear. The wind, cutting like a blade, was also a sign they were on open-air.

_Marching_, he realized, feeling the movement beneath him.

He shook his head, refusing to open his eyes. No, not refusing. For a moment he couldn’t open them. They were sealed with frost. Feeling his heart in his throat, he removed the ice from the eyelashes. Something bad was awaiting for him. He knew it.

And he was right.

Hobb was looking at him when he summoned up the courage to face reality. The cooker was sitting in a corner, with his hands placed on his lap, and ice dripping from his beard. His eyes were open, covered in snow.

He was dead.

“What the…?” The words died in his throat.

With a sob, he shivered.

_Seven help me, I am in a cage._

That detail seemed little compared to everything else. Trying to sit, he confirmed the worst: he was imprisoned inside a carriage cage pushed by two horses. The vehicle seemed to be at the tail of a train marching through the snow covered plains that stood a few miles away from Castle Black. Why were the brothers of the Night’s Watch marching through the night, facing snow and wind, after the dreadful events that had occurred at Castle Black? _Why?_ He shook his head, covering himself with his fur. The cold was cutting like knives, freezing the blood inside his veins. Soon the cold would kill him, slowly destroying his flesh, turning it black… The fur was not warm enough.

The panic started to settle in his chest.

_I’m going to die_, he realized, looking at Hobb’s body.

“What’s happening?” He asked, watching the words freeze in the air.

A man galloping beside the carriage laughed.

“Well, well… I thought you were dead.”

Sam trembled, grabbing the bars on the cage to lift his body.

“Where are we going? P-please… answer me.”

The man simply shook his head and laughed.

“We’re almost there, Maester. Soon you will see… and get warm.”

That was the best answer he got during the remaining of the journey. Even so, he hunted for every bit of information, trying to make sense of something that had no sense at all. It was not an easy task. He started by trying to remember what had happened since the fight at Castle Black. He supposed someone had carried him and Hobb into the carriage after knocking them down. Were they the only traitors alive?

_Is this a nightmare?_
With effort, he turned again inside the cage. A look at the column marching down the icy hills told him there were other two cages with prisoners ahead of him. In the meanwhile, the brothers continued marching through the snow, obeying to whoever was in command. There were hundreds of men partaking on the march, all of them dressed in the dark robes of the Night’s Watch. Since there were so many unfamiliar faces among them, Sam supposed most of them had come from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and Shadow Tower.

*Almost as if we were about to elect a new Lord Commander.*

But why were they travelling? *That* he couldn’t understand. During what seemed like an hour, they continued their mysterious journey. Most of the men were shivering on their horses, sharing bottles of wine to keep themselves warm and laughing as if something extremely funny was about to happen. Sam managed to control his own panic and, when the cold proved itself to be unbearable, decided to strip Hobb from his fur to cover himself with it.

The men halted when Sam started to doze off.

“Prepare the prisoners!” Bellowed a man, galloping from the head of the column. Sam recognized the voice immediately. *Janos Slynt*. Wasn’t he supposed to be at Long Barrow? He looked victorious on top of his horse, confident enough to have replaced his black cloak for a golden one with the colors of his house. He continued galloping, returning to the head of the column.

It was Ser Mors Westford, also known as The Butcher, who had come to escort Sam. The man was not known to be friendly and that night he lived up to his reputation. Without a word, he opened the cage and helped Sam get out, chaining him by the wrists.

“Let’s go.” He ordered, tugging the chain like a horse pulling a carriage.

Taking a last glance at Hobb’s body, who had now his face hidden beneath a blanket of snow, Samwell moved slowly behind Mors. With his head low, he walked through the snow, ignoring the brothers climbing down from their horses. Many of them threw ice and mud when Sam passed, others simply laughed. Jack Bulwer pushed him hard enough to make him fall on the ground.

“Come on, Maester. Don’t make this any more difficult to you.” Mors pulled the chain again, encouraging him to get up.

“Here, let me help you.”

Someone got down on his knees.

Sam didn’t look up, but he knew it was Edd the one helping him. As soon as he was back on his feet, Edd turned his back and walked away through the crowd was heading to some point ahead of them.

*See what you’ve done, Edd,* Sam said to himself, pressing his eyes on Edd’s back. *Feel the blood in your hands.*

Mors led him to what seemed to be a town square. If one of the buildings hadn’t been destroyed, Samwell would’ve recognized quicker that they were in Mole’s Town, on the part of the village that was built above the ground. However, something must’ve happened. The building was charred, as if a fire had destroyed him not long ago.

The men of the Night’s Watch were gathering in front of a long wooden pole that had been placed on the middle of the square. It was as if they were expecting a troupe to appear behind a curtain and present a spectacle. Behind the pole, Sam noticed, was a big pile of snow, taller than himself and
larger than seven men placed side by side.

_No, it isn’t snow_, he realized with horror.

It was a pile of dead bodies.

Dozens of bodies were piled up shamelessly, the snow blanketing them from the horrors of the night. Most of them had their eyes open, lifeless, an expression of terror frozen up in their faces. Their clothes had been removed, exposing the black wounds on their torsos and their hard-frozen breasts. They were dead for at least more than a day. And they were mostly women and children.

_The wildling army_, Sam understood, a sense of defeat shutting down all his body. He fell on his knees, averting his eyes from the carnage behind him. Why had Thorne, or whoever was in charge, committed such a heinous crime? Mors pulled Sam to get him close enough to the pole so he could chain him to it.

One by one, the other prisoners were brought and chained at his side. There was Jeren and Todder. Glymmir and Mathar. Duncan and Ketter. And, of course, Eddard. His heart jumped when he saw the leader of their rebellion being escorted by Janos Slynt. Eddard was not in good shape, with a wound on his shoulder and frost covering his beard. Even though he had his eyes open, he seemed to be hollow inside. When no one else joined them, Sam assumed the others were already dead.

_We will all be together soon._

He knew he was supposed to be ashamed and scared. When the Brothers of the Night’s Watch started throwing rocks and snow to the prisoners, laughing wickedly like drunk men after a battle, Sam knew his name would never be part of history. If any mention was made, it would be to tell them how a Tarly had betrayed the Night’s Watch and burnt at the stake. _A Tarly, not even Samwell_. A bloody inkblot on a forgotten parchment.

The snow was falling heavily over them. The torches held by some of the Brothers were flickering or burning out in the wind. _This is pure madness_. Every second that passed, they were more vulnerable under those conditions. Not only the prisoners, but the whole Watch. _Why are we here? Why?_

His heart stopped when Ser Alliser Thorne emerged from the crowd. Immediately, all men fell silent as the master of arms walked further, still relying on a crutch and on Slynt’s arm. He stopped at the middle of the square, between the traitors and his sworn brothers. Casting a glance toward the conspirators, he greeted them with a twisted triumphant smile.

_“Men of the Night’s Watch!”_ Bellowed Ser Alliser, opening his arms as if to embrace the crowd. “History is in the making tonight. By now, most of you know what happened.” His eyes glinted devilish with the fire coming from one of the torches. “For a long time, most of you’ve known that one of our enemies is arising Beyond the Wall. Yes, you’ve known _that for_ a long time. I, myself, marched once to King’s Landing to present to the Imp a rotten hand cut from one of those dead walking bodies. A fucking rotten hand, yes. Of course, the Lannister fucker laughed at me… What would he do? Give me more prisoners from the Black Cells? I may have left defeated from the Red Keep, but I learned a very important lesson that day. I realized the Throne would do only one thing for us: nothing. It would fall on us, the Night’s Watch, the sole task of defending the Realm from the greatest menace of our Age. But not before we dealt with another menace.

_“The moment I returned to the Wall I found pure chaos. Our Lord Commander had been killed, the Free Folk were ready to attack us and a bastard who had been living among wildlings was commanding the defenses of Castle Black. There was some talking in the air about making a truce with the wildlings, about give them _our_ lands in the Gift and use their men and women to fight the_
dead. And for weeks I dreaded about what would’ve happened if I hadn’t arrived at Castle Black in time to stop this madness. Fortunately, I did.”

Sam lifted his head, feeling the cramps on his neck. He didn’t look to ser Alliser, but to Eddard. Was this their punishment? Humiliate them before killing them? Ned continued apathic, his eyes fixed on a distant point in the horizon.

“After putting to rest a conspiracy to elect the bastard or his traitor of a father, the Watch was led into the right path. We’ve fought valiantly against the wildlings.” Ser Alliser continued, after a pause of a few seconds. “You were promised blood and you got it. Yes, I’ve to admit that due to Lord Stark’s help we were able to garrison most of the abandoned castles along the Wall. However, we made one crucial mistake: we closed our eyes to what was happening right under our noses.

“You see, in exchange for the aid they were giving us, the Starks gained more power over the Wall and, somehow, over ourselves. And when Robb Stark started questioning the Night’s Watch decisions about how we must deal with the wildlings, he started conspiring with his father, half-brother and uncle.” Alliser pointed his crutch toward Eddard. “And once again, they started to talk about letting the wildlings enter our lands.”

Most of the brothers raised their arms and roared. Once again, snow and rocks were thrown to the traitors. Their fear was transforming itself into anger. An anger strong enough to inspire them. To give them courage. Oh, yes, Alliser knew how to conquer supporters to his side.

“It has come to my attention a few days ago, that the Stark Alliance started to plot against the laws in which the Night’s Watch is built.” Ser Alliser continued, loud enough to be heard over the wind and snow. “During the last three years, while we were losing good men fighting the wildlings, the Starks side by side with Cotter Pyke built and hid an army of wildling children and spearwives not far from our gates. I’ve questioned Cotter Pyke myself yesterday and he admitted the truth of everything: how he rescued wildling women and children, letting them pass through the gate at Eastwatch and how Eddard Stark devised the plan to use them to strike against the Watch.

“But strike us why? None of this made sense to me. Why would the Starks rebel against the Night’s Watch after granting us the men to protect the Wall? Ser Janos believes their reasons go deep into their ruffle with the Lannisters. A strategic move to provoke havoc in the North and attract the Crown’s forces above the Neck during Winter. A plan, brothers, that would bring the Night’s Watch directly into realm intrigue. Yes, the Starks have lied to us, they’ve tried to conquer our trust by giving us a helping hand… But they don’t give a fuck about our duty. They never did.”

Thorne was now pointing to the ruined building at the square.

“Do you see what the wildling army has already brought to our people?” He asked, incapable of hiding a smile. “Those spearwives Eddard Stark recruited started marching toward Castle Black days ago, climbing down from the caves where they were hiding with the Mountain Clans. On their way, they’ve destroyed Mole’s Town, killing every single one of his inhabitants. This is the peace Eddard Stark wanted to bring to the Seven Kingdoms.”

Sam let his head down immediately, predicting another rain of stones.

“But don’t fret.” Declared Thorne, lifting his arms to call back the attention to him. “The time has come for the Night’s Watch to make history again, as so many heroes did before us. We have two enemies: the dead and the wildlings. You can’t forget that. And you mustn’t forget that to solve a problem you must not simplify the other. Do you want to become heroes? Do you want your actions to be sung as legends in the times to come?”
The Brothers of the Night’s Watch pulled out their swords and lift them toward the sky.

“For the Watch! For the Watch! For the Watch!”

Ser Alliser smiled, triumphant. So, this was it: Thorne was planning his election to Lord Commander as well as history. This was truly the stuff of legends, yes. Sam almost could imagine the Maesters reporting the events of that night. The Great Council of Mole’s Town. The Night of the Heroes Reborn. The Ascension of Thorne the Purist.

“Our work begins tonight.” Thorne continued, gesturing toward Janos. His companion and a group of men started walking toward a carriage nearby, covered with a dry cloth. “Tonight, we’ll rid the Night’s Watch of those who’ve betrayed us. These men, led by Eddard Stark, killed Lord Commander Marsh and tried to organize a coup.” Ser Alliser’s voice was now even louder. “If we hadn’t stopped them, Castle Black could be in the hands of wildlings by now.”

No more stones were thrown, but the men were claiming for blood now, for their heads, for their deaths. Thorne thrived on those words, his smile gleaming with the victory so close.

“Thankfully, the traitors are bound in chains and the wildlings have been captured.” Ser Alliser managed to say when the crowd calmed down. “And tonight not only justice will be served, as we will also show what we truly do to our enemies. Ser Janos, bring the thing.”

Sam swallowed, horrified, as the carriage advanced pulled by the group of men. He knew what was hidden beneath the cloth even before Slynt removed it. Trapped inside a cage, was a dead man. The creature didn’t have his left arm, and half of his bare chest was rotten. Besides, at least five arrows were stuck at different points of his body. Even so, the man was moving, his eyes glowing with a blue light, grabbing the bars of the cage menacingly.

“This is a wight.” Explained Alliser, amused, looking toward the crowd. “Many of you hadn’t had the chance to see one of them, so I thought it was a good idea to show you what they are… This fine creature was captured by the wildlings and was among their treasures. Eddard Stark planned to release it inside Castle Black tonight.”

No, no, no.

“IT’S A LIE!” Bellowed Sam, tugging his chains.

The silence fell on the square for a moment, interrupted only by the whimpers coming from the chained prisoners at his side and the snarls of the dead man.

“Ser Eddard only wanted to show it to Lord Commander Marsh.” Sam revealed, taking advantage of the silence. Thorne was changing the facts at his own will. “The plan was to capture Lord Commander, take him to a hideout and show him how the dead are already walking this side of the Wall. We didn’t plan a coup…”

“Says the very same man who was lighting candles on the rookery’s window to summon the wildlings…” Retorted Thorne, snapping his fingers. “Mors, shut him up.”

Without announcing himself, Mors Westford delivered two blows into Sam’s stomach, making him vomit on the ground and lose his breath. The silence persisted for a few seconds in the eerie night. Part of the enchantment Thorne had cast with his glorious speech seemed lost among the crowd.

At least until Jack Bulwer returned from the shadows dragging a wildling woman by the hair.

The woman screamed, trying to claw her way out of Jack’s grip, but he was stronger than her. She
was a beautiful woman, and a ferocious one. With long blonde hair and a skin pale as snow, she had a horrible red dress, probably belonging to one of the whore’s of Mole’s Town.

*The humiliation has no end,* Sam thought, spitting on the ground.

The woman must be Val, the princess of the Free Folk. The woman was brought to Ser Alliser and the chains holding her delivered to Janos Slynt. Laughing, Ser Alliser slapped the woman, making her whimper, and grabbed her by the hair.

“This is the sister-in-law of Mance Rayder, the bitch who gathered this farce of an army.” Thorne glanced toward the pile of dead right behind them. “If we can call that an army…”

The laughter that followed made Sam vomit again.

“Do you see what you’ve done, Sir Eddard?” Janos Slynt yelled, amused, walking toward Ned. “This is all in your hands.”

Samwell tried to see if Eddard would answer, but he seemed completely defeated, maintaining his head low. Jeren, on the other hand, tried to remove the shackles around his wrists to face Janos, but was quickly detained when someone kicked him on the head.

Ser Alliser Thorne was not finished. Still holding his place where he could be seen by everyone, the master of arms kept holding the wildling princess at his side. The woman was completely broken, her eyes wide open in shock and her mouth closed, contorted into a fine line.

“This is how we deal with the wildings.” Ser Alliser said, a laugh hidden in his words. “We fucking kill them. The question now is: what happens when we kill the fuckers and they return like that?!” He asked, pointing his crutch to the wight. “The dead, you see, can’t be stopped with arrows and swords. We need something more efficient for them.”

He gestured toward a boy who must be his squire. Fearfully, he advanced slowly toward the cage with the dead and, after receiving a nod from Thorne, placed a torch on the cage’s floor. The dead man growled, taking a step back from the flame, but the fire quickly spread through the cloth covering the floor. Quickly the fire grew, consuming the creature. The thing emitted a scaring cry before collapsing.

“Fire, yes.” Ser Alliser nodded. “But this fire is not strong enough for an army. How can we fight hundreds of these things with torches or flaming arrows?” The master of arms of Castle Black placed a hand inside his coat and took out a flask the size of a finger. It was filled with a greenish liquid. “This is wildfire.” The whispers started quickly among the sworn brothers. All of them knew the legendary powers of wildfire. “I’ve negotiated with the Alchemists’ Guild of Lys and the pyromancers sold us a thousand flasks of wildfire to fight the dead.”

“Wildfire?” Someone in the crowd asked. “Didn’t the Imp blow the Baratheon fleet with that shit?”

“Yes.” Ser Alliser confirmed quickly. “And it saved King’s Landing from the Baratheon usurper. So, this is what I say: we don’t need more men to fight the dead when we have such an army in our hands. The dead must be destroyed with fire. So, let them come to us. The moment they reach our gates, we’ll make wildfire rain on their heads and see them burn. It’s quite simple. In fact, I brought you here tonight to show how effective it is.”

He passed the flask to Slynt who, after uncorking it, started spilling the green liquid over the bodies. *This is pure madness.*
“Stop this!” Sam yelled. He had to do something. Thorne wasn’t risking only their lives, but of all men gathered there. “If you start a fire, the wildfire will explode. You’ll blow us all.”

The silence that followed was deafening. All the men present turned their heads to Sam, hesitation mirrored in their faces. After all, most of them seemed to recognize the authority of knowledge.

“I’m not a fool, Maester Piggy.” Ser Alliser retorted quickly, facing the audience. “We’ll shoot a flaming arrow from afar…”

His words were cut short when someone screamed.

Thorne looked toward the sound, as did some of the men. Janos Slynt was one of the few who continued, oblivious to what was happening at the end of the crowd. He was spilling the contents of a second, larger flask of wildfire over the pile of dead bodies.

“What’s happening down there?” Thorne asked, taking a step further.

The silence that followed was one of the worst sounds Sam had sensed in his life, because it was followed by the words no one wanted to hear next to pile of dead bodies.

“Dead! The dead are waking up!”

“What?” Janos Slynt stopped spilling the green liquid over the bodies. He turned his face to look for Sir Alliser, as if surprised by that remark. Thorne seemed as surprised as him.

“That’s impossible.” He cried, firmly. “The dead don’t walk this side of the Wall.”

However, every second that passed proved that something was happening. The wind carried the sound of swords clashing back at the end of the crowd where they had left the carriages and horses. Sam looked through the hair falling into his eyes, feeling the taste of vomit in his lips. Yes, there was something strange in the night. It seemed the sky had grown darker, as if all the stars had fallen and the Long Night had started.

Someone blew a horn. Quickly, the brothers of the Night’s Watch moved nervously, clasping the pommels of their swords, fear and hesitation gleaming in their eyes. Were they supposed to fight? Was this a prank, part of a test?

Ser Janos Slynt threw away the empty flask of wildfire and advanced quickly toward Ser Alliser.

“Did you lie to me, Thorne?” He didn’t seem so happy now. “What the fuck is happening?”

“Shut up.” Thorne retorted, very bluntly.

A second blast echoed through the night, shaking Sam’s bones. Bulwer pulled out the sword of his scabbard, as did so many of the others. The fear was shaping itself into something real. They were preparing themselves to fight, even though they hadn’t much more than the clothes on their bodies and the sword at their waists.

“Is this true?” Asked Mors, taking of a cleaver from his belt. “Do you understand what you did, Thorne? Were you stupid enough to bring us the dead to show us how to fight them?” Mors took a step forward. “To fool us with your pretty fucking words? Oh, no, no. You can’t play with us like that, you fucker… Where were you during the Great Raging? Where were you the day we flew from the dead shitting our pants?”

“This is not a fucking test!” Snapped Thorne, taking his sword out. “I didn’t…”
When the third blast confirmed there were dead walking nearby, Mors didn’t hesitate a second more and buried his cleaver in Thorne’s head.

*Is this really happening?*, Sam asked, not sure if his eyes were betraying him.

But by the time Thorne’s body fell on the ground the brothers of the Night’s Watch were already running, wielding their swords.

“Come on, brothers! Let’s march against the dead!” Cried Bulwer, his voice trembling. “For the Watch!”

“Hurrah!” Bellowed many of them, following Bulwer into a run to whatever was waiting them at the carriages. Their screams filled the night, as if they could hide behind a scream how fearful they were.

Soon, a flame rose in the dark sky when a carriage was put under fire.

*Hobb*, thought Sam to himself. It must have been his body the one causing havoc.

He looked again at the wildling’s bodies a few feet away from him. Every single one of them remained quiet, with no sign of being reborn. But for how long?

And then he noticed Slynt, approaching with a torch.

“No, no… You can’t do that…” Sam whispered, not sure if Janos Slynt would hear him. “You can’t…”

Slynt ignored him. The man seemed determined to destroy the bodies before they returned as wights. Sam prepared himself to what was about to happen. He moved as much as his chains would let him, managing to turn his back to the row of bodies, and when he heard the hiss of a flame, the flash of green light and…

The explosion threw him in the air, splintering the wooden pole and everything around it.

He is flying and it was painful.

And then he fell on the ground, feet away from the column of green fire that was raising from the spot where the dead wildlings were. The pole had broken, the prisoners had been thrown through the air in a mess of chains, rocks and splinters of wood. The smoke was mingling into the night, and so was the fire.

Cries of pain could be heard from everywhere. A few feet away from him, he saw Jeren, a body burning in the snow, trying to roll over on the ground to put the fire to an end. After a second or two, he made an effort to sit. He was sensing something tingle in his legs and was curious to look at what it was. A smile formed on his lips as soon as he saw how the flesh was burnt. The wildfire had destroyed his left leg, devouring through cloth, skin and flesh. And it was so cold that he couldn’t feel pain any longer.

“Seven Hells.”

When Edd’s face appeared right over him, looking like a demon with green light bathing his face, Sam thought it was a miracle.

“Edd… Mother bless you. Spare me from…”
Edd fell on his knees and started unlocking the chains around Sam’s wrists.

“No.” He said. “Sam, we have to leave now. The battle is happening by the carriages… There are so many dead, Sam. So many of them. I don’t know why… I think is the dead people of Mole’s Town, I don’t know…”

Sam shook his head. He didn’t care for that any longer.

“Edd… You have to kill me. It’s the last honorable thing you can do for me.”

“No!” He screamed, grabbing Sam’s by the armpits. “You will help me mend this, Sam. You will save us… You and Ned.”

“It’s… It’s too late for me.”

“No, it isn’t.”

Edd made and effort to pull Sam up, but he was too heavy.

“Fuck. I’ve to find Ned or someone else to help me carry you…” Edd said, placing Sam again on the ground. “Can you stay here? I’ll come back, I swear.”

“Edd, I won’t last long. Let me tell you how all is supposed to end…”

“Save your strength, Sam.”

“No, I need to tell you…”

“No.” Edd retorted. “You’ll tell us later. Please, let me mend this… Please.”

Edd didn’t give him a chance to speak again. He stood up and started running through the chaos.

Alone in the freezing ground, watching the sky bathed with the green light, Sam smiled. At least his death would be a painless one. The cold was starting to slowly conquer his body once more, to completely shut him down, bury him in a grave of snow. His burnt skin was covered in ice his flesh was transforming itself into stone and soon we would be asleep forever. The knowledge inside his head would be lost, the realm would be lost and…

“You are the crow the wolf told us about, aren’t you?” It was Val. She looked dreadful, and someone had ripped her red dress, but she still seemed fierce and feral. “You are the one who knows the mysteries of the world.”

She approached him, slowly, and knelt beside him.

“Yes…” Sam replied, relief settling him. He laughed, but the sound was cut short by the cold stopping his lungs. “I’m the Maester.”

The wildling princess looked at him with pity and her fingers, carefully, examined the wound on his leg.

“You know what will happen next.” She said, caressing his face with her right hand. “Don’t you?”

“Yes.” He replied once more, smiling. “Can you help me…?”

She nodded.
“Can you burn me?” He asked immediately after.

She looked over her shoulder toward the flaming green column.

“The world will burn tonight, crow.” She said. “But yes, I’ll burn you.”

Sam smiled again.

“T-thank you… And please, tell them… Tell them to look far North.” He said, every word passing through this lips more difficult to say than the one he had whispered before. “It’s all about the Children” He whispered, his lips frozen in a smile. “Ned knows, he knows… The Children were the ones who disturbed the Song of Earth, they were the ones… the ones who let evil enter this world. And it must be them…”

“Shhh, don’t say another word.” Val replied, placing her hands over Sam’s throat. “Close your eyes and think about someone you love. Can you do that?”

He didn’t reply. His thoughts were already far away. The smell of smoke vanished in the night. Instead it was the scent of Gilly’s breasts that filled his nostrils, the soft lullaby his Mother used to sing replaced the screams of dread and the snow touching his skin felt like a kiss.

A wolf howled in the night.

Was it Jon?

Oh, he would know very soon.

He fell asleep one last time and never woke up again.
I told you a few chapters ago I was preparing a major King’s Landing Arc. I had this planned since the very beginning of this story and I’m proud to say it’s here: five chapters published at the same time so you can read all the events that happen in the capital. For all of you who’ve waited, and followed, and reviewed: thank you. I think these chapters will put an end to a part of this fanfiction. The characters here portrayed (at least the ones who survive) will get new plots, new journeys and new intrigues. I’ll share some notes with you at end of the last chapter of this sequence.

PREVIOUSLY: A web of lies has been woven around King’s Landing, as a game of intrigue and deception is played. The Tyrells have plotted to conquer a crown for Margaery Tyrell, betrothed to Prince Tommen and mistress to Joffrey. However, when the Tyrell’s plans threatened directly Queen Sansa’s place at court, conducting Joffrey to order the annulment of his marriage, the Wolf Queen started to get worried.

After the Prince suffered an accident, Sansa suspected someone had tried to murder him and blamed the Tyrells for it, retaliating against them using her own Queensguard. She failed and was locked inside her chambers like a traitor.

Meanwhile, with the Queen locked behind doors, the Tyrells’ power bloomed at court: Lady Margaery announced her pregnancy and Joffrey dared to act against his own mother, forcing her to get an annulment to his marriage. If Cersei fails to get what the Kings asks of her, he will force to marry Prince Doran Martell, dispatching her to Dorne. However, this is the moment Cersei decides to take matters on her own hands to get her son back under her control: she poisons the Tyrells, finds a way to blame another for the crime and prays for Margaery to die. If so, she is certain Joffrey will reconsider his decision about his marriage.

I’m being played like a pawn.

Impatience lingered on Sansa’s chest, a bittersweet taste of victory gracing her mouth. Her eyes were set upon the five heads placed on spikes at the battlements. She couldn’t look away. They weren’t the result she had prayed for, but have nonetheless been a welcome sight in that snowy morning.

Up until that moment, she had failed. She had tried to play the game of thrones, and she had
miserably failed. Every move she had taken had turned to nothing, getting her more and more isolated. She had acted like a bloody fool the moment she had gathered her Queensguard to detain the Tyrells. She had acted like a mother. But deep down she knew she was right, because who else would’ve wanted the heir to the Throne dead?

_Maybe more people than I think._

That day, so blinded by her desire to make the Tyrells pay, Joffrey actually managed to outsmart her. That was the moment her fall from grace had begun. In less than an hour, she had known the limits of her power, was locked in her chambers and her guard was thrown into a cell. It was then Sansa understood she was indeed powerless, and by her own.

The queen cried herself to sleep that first tonight. The unknown of what was happening outside her chambers was worse than torture. Her mother had also been locked, and no news had come from Edwyle. Her child could be already lying in a grave, with his little hands turning colder than ice and his eyes forever striped from light.

Fortunately, she found out her son was alive through Ser Osmund Ketteback, who was standing on guard at her door the next morning. He only confirmed Edwyle was out of peril, refusing to answer all the other questions she had for him. It was something, but not enough. Like a direwolf entrapped in a cage, she paced through her chambers for hours, growing madder by the minute. She needed someone to come, someone who could free her from those four walls, someone who could do something for her safety. So, she used the only resource available at hand: her voice. She screamed for hours until her throat was raw and the taste of blood filled her mouth.

But no one came. Not Cersei, not Varys, not even Joffrey.

After a time, she turned to prayer, quickly realizing the Gods wouldn’t answer. Neither the Old or the New. They never had. Evening of her first day of imprisonment came and went, and still no one had visited her. Could she had been forgotten? She didn’t sleep that night, keeping her vigil in the darkness, pressing her face against the cold glass window.

Hope came in the morning. She couldn’t believe her ears and eyes when the door was unlocked to let a maid in, carrying a tray with bread, fruit, meat and water. She was hungry, yes, but not for food.

“Is the prince safe?” She asked, not getting an answer. The maid was well trained: she didn’t even looked at her. “Is the Dowager Queen doing anything for me?” Again, no answer. In despair, she grabbed the maid’s arm. “Please, help me.” The woman flinched, stronger than her, easily freeing herself from her grasp. “Please, I’ll give you anything I’ve in my possession if you help me. Send a raven to my brother, the Lord of Winterfell and… and ask Lord Varys to come and visit me.” The maid was already on her way out, hastening her pace. “Please!”

And just as quickly as the door had opened, it closed.

Infuriated, Sansa threw the tray to the locked door, sending fruit and water all over the walls.

It was then she saw a piece of paper falling between pears and red oranges.

_A note._

She threw herself to the ground, spoiling her dress with bits of fruit and water, to grab the note. Hungrily, her hands managed to open it. Tears started running down as soon as she recognized Varys’ handwriting.
Your Grace,

The King is forcing the Dowager Queen to get an annulment. I don’t know what will happen to you, but you and your son are both in great danger. Let me help you, anyway I can.

And there it was.

A friend, her only friend.

Since that day two weeks had passed. During that time, Varys had been her only connection to the outside world. Every two days a new note would arrive concealed among fruit or hidden beneath a goblet. Each note came with news about what was happening, how Edwyle was recovering from his injured leg, how Cersei continued meeting with the High Septon, how the Tyrells were parading at court as if they had won. In turn, she would give her messages to the maid, who would later visit Lord Varys’ and pass him her questions, requests and orders.

That’s how she had slowly realized she needed to escape.

Not long now, she said, watching her own reflection in the window.

Varys had been pressing her to flee since his second second, insisting it was the safest route to ensure a future too her and Edwyle. Even if the annulment was granted, Edwyle would always be a threat to any Tyrell child. After all, he was Joffrey’s firstborn, and the true heir to the Iron Throne. So, escape was a possibility, yes, and she truly wanted to accept Varys’ advise. The idea of leaving the Red Keep to raise her son in Winterfell was everything she had ever dreamed of since the day he had born. But she wasn’t a fool. That move would start a war between the North and the Throne, and was she willing to start a war after all her father had done to maintain peace?

So, for days she told Varys no, she wouldn’t escape. She couldn’t. She was sure Cersei would do something, since she seemed so confident the Tyrells weren’t a real threat. Even if the Dowager Queen did nothing, Robb would rally his forces and march to King’s Landing, as he had done when father had been arrested, forcing Joffrey to reconsider his decision. There was no need for a war, only a show of strength could do the trick.

Those thoughts kept her embroiled in a web of illusions for a few days, until Varys teared down everything, pushing her back to reality.

Your Grace,

There is a rumor in the city that your brother doesn’t intend to march south. Now more than ever I advise you to act, and to act quickly.

Those words struck her like a mailed punch in the stomach. Why was Robb turning his back to her? Wasn’t she worthy of his attention?

It’s a lie, she said. False rumors.
She was so sure it had to be mistake that that day she didn’t send an answer through the maid. She decided to wait for Varys’ next note, certain it would say Robb was on his way after all or that Cersei had finally found means to get rid of the Tyrells. But when the next note came again, her heart was crushed completely and fear crept through her skin, dragging her to the worst nightmare.

Your Grace,

The king grows impatient by the day. His determination to wed Lady Margaery is stronger than ever. Plans are being made to announce their engagement at court in five days, at the opening of the Tournament. Meanwhile, one of my informants came to me with the most terrible news: the Tyrells are advising the king to send Prince Edwyle to Highgarden as soon as possible. I urge you to act before it’s too late.

It was then, while crumpling the note between her fingers, she decided there was no really other option than the one Varys was suggesting since the beginning. Margaery could take her husband and her crown, but she would never touch Edwyle. Taking him to Highgarden was the perfect way to control him, maybe even marrying him to Lord Garlan’s daughter and get rid of him, if need for that were to arise.

So, unable to consult with her mother, she gave specific instructions to Varys: he was supposed to find a way to free her and Edwyle from that bloody tower and arrange a ship for them to flee. She knew the risks of such plan, and how anger Joffrey and the Privy Council would be, but she didn’t care anymore.

There is too much at stake, she thought, touching her belly.

Why was she reluctant to act? If war was the price for her freedom, she should be willing to pay it. After all, she had been the coin her father had used to buy peace. Maybe it was time to stop paying for his mistakes and to defy the Throne. Of course a sense of guilt made her stomach tight at the thought of provoking a conflict, but the pain of losing her son was worse. So much worse. In her confinement, those thoughts quickly took hold of her. It was the only thing keeping her awake at night, and giving her something exciting to live for.

As the news about Robb not marching south continued, she felt also a certain anger rise inside her and pushing her even more to commit that act of madness. Why had she to subside to her brother’s will? She was above him. He was free to hunt his wildlings down the Wall like a spot thanks to her. He had been pardoned for his bloody mess on the Riverlands because she had plead Joffrey to do so, she had accepted being taken to his bed, she had carried his child, she had been tortured and hitted and mocked by him.

All for peace’s sake.

Varys confirmation came right the next day.

Your Grace,

I’m pleased to know you’ve accepted my advice. Arrangements have been made for the day of the Hand’s Tournament. Be prepared.
And now here she was, at the day of the Tournament. Keeping her place by the window, she could almost image the Tournament’s ground somewhere in the city, behind the sea of mist. The banners flapping in the wind, the crowds gathered by the palisades, the knights in their best armors. It was the perfect distraction to escape.

What would she do after? She didn’t know yet. Her plan for now was to flee from the Red Keep and make her way to Winterfell. Robb could’ve turned his back, but wouldn’t keep his gates closed to her. The brother she knew wouldn’t do such thing. From there she would plot accordingly. If her marriage were to be annulled, she would raise Edwyle in the North, granting him a childhood away from intrigue and protecting him the best she could. If war were to be made, then she would fight, even if first she had to fight the Lord of Winterfell.

Now what she wanted most was to leave.

Her eyes returned to the five spiked heads on the battlements. She didn’t knew to whom they belonged, but she had an idea. According to Varys’ very last note, the Blue Bard and one of Margaery’s cousins had plotted to kill her, poisoning a bowl of figs with the help of three servants. The very expensive poison had been found by the Kingsguard in the bard’s room, as if a bard could afford such poison.

_Could this be Cersei’s doing_, she thought, intrigued. Could this be her plan to get rid of the Tyrells? Well, if it was _her_ plan, it was indeed delivering its fruits, but it had come too late. According to the Spider, the Tyrells were withering like roses in the snow. Garlan Tyrell had died the previous night, his wife quickly following. Meanwhile, after having vomited her insides out, the Queen of Thornes was barely conscious, but still alive. How a woman her age could still cling to life after being poisoned Sansa would never know. And Margaery was also still alive. Allegedly, a great part of the poison had been absorbed by the bastard in her womb, sparing her life. Maester Yandel had passed an entire night trying to remove it from her.

That disturbing thought made Sansa place again a hand on her womb. She was already starting to show, her stomach getting round, but not enough to reveal her secret if she was properly clothed. Somehow that unborn child, from a father she would never see again, was her main drive to live.

Someone knocked on the door, disturbing Sansa from her thoughts.

The queen quickly got up from the bench near her window and assumed an hard posture, facing the door. Could it be Varys already?

As soon as a guard opened the door, Sansa gasped, surprised.

“Mother!”

Edwyle was on the other side, sitting on a strange wooden chair with a pair of wheels. His broken leg was still bandaged with splints, limiting his movements. _That won’t make our escape easy._ Nonetheless, he seemed to be fine and happy, wearing his best clothes and with his golden curls glistening in the candle light. Lady Catelyn was right behind, a tired smiled on her lips. Jeyne Westerling, her lady-in-waiting, was also with them pushing Edwyle’s chair into the chamber.

Sansa run immediately to them, tears of happiness running down her face.

“Oh, my little prince, how much I’ve missed you!” She said, filling him with kisses as she gripped his small hands firmly.
“You’re wet, Mother!” He laughed, pushing her away. “Are you crying?”

Sansa quickly wiped the tears with the back of her hand and smiled again.

“Not anymore.” She said, giving him one more kiss on the forehead. “Not now that we’re together.”

“Do you like my chair?” He asked, still smiling. “Maester Yandel designed it himself! It looks like a throne—”

“Indeed it does, my little prince.” Sansa played along with him, patting him softly on the injured leg. “Maybe you could give me a ride some day?”

“I don’t think it can sustain both our weights.” He answered seriously, without grasping the joke.

Sansa kissed him again.

“Oh, and how is your leg? Are you in pain?”

Edwyle shook his head.

“No.” He said, trying to act valiantly. “Maester Yandel gave me milk of the poppy the first day, but I can bear the pain on my own now. Father told me to be a man and to stop crying.”

_Bloody idiot._

“Your father visited you, did he?” Sansa asked, a bit of sarcasm in her voice.

“Yes, he did.” Edwyle continued. “And grandmother Cersei also came, and Uncle Tyrion brought me another wooden figure…” He fumbled inside a pocket in his coat and took out a miniature figure carved in weirwood. “It’s a direwolf.”

_A direwolf_, Sansa glanced amused to the figure. The Imp had a raw sense of humor.

“How lucky you are! We’ll make sure you get a complete set of wooden figures very soon.”

Finally, Sansa stood up and faced her mother. Lady Catelyn seemed older, with her hair grayer and her eyes tired, as if she hadn’t slept for a month. Even so, her smile reflected the relief in her heart. She opened her arms to involve Sansa in a tight embrace.

“We’ve much to talk about.” Lady Catelyn whispered into her ear.

“Yes, we do.” Sansa acknowledged.

_She thinks I’m safe again_, she realized. It would be devastating to break the truth to her Mother, but she would have to do it sooner than later. But for a few seconds she enjoyed the embrace and closed her eyes, breathing her mother’s scent.


“I don’t want to interrupt, but I must have a private word with you, Your Grace.”

Sansa broke the embrace abruptly, looking toward the door. She hadn’t seen Ser Jaime was waiting on the hallway. Quickly, she exchanged a glance with Lady Catelyn, but there was no clue in her face about what could the Kingslayer had to say to her. So she nodded and followed him outside, leaving her mother and Jeyne taking care of the prince.
It was the first time she was leaving her chamber in two weeks, so it felt strange to breathe fresh air, even if they were still indoors. Ser Jaime walked through the windy passageway of Maegor’s Holdfast, stopping at last by a window. The keep seemed to be already empty, silent like a crypt. A few candles flickered in the wind, casting dancing shadows on the walls. Even though it was mid morning outside, it seemed dawn was still breaking.

“How are you doing, Your Grace?” Ser Jaime started by asking.

The Kingslayer, as well as the Imp, had always treated her with kindness, even after his time as hostage to Robb. But that day she had to remind herself he was still a Lannister and no matter what relationship he had with Cersei, he would always be his sister’s pawn.

“How do you suppose I am, ser?”

Jaime sighed and nodded. It was clear he was uncomfortable with small talk. He was better with swords than words.

“I hope you know you’ve not been forgotten.” He reassured, as if that would make things any easier. She had been locked inside chambers for almost two weeks and ser Jaime wanted to let her know she had not been forgotten? “The Privy Council has been doing his best to secure your future and the prince’s—”

“You’ve come to say that?” She scoffed, crossing her arms. “After locking me for two weeks, ser? The only thing I know by now is that the king, his mother and the whole court don’t care at all about my well-being.”

“Your situation needs delicacy, Your Grace.” He tried to justify. “As I hoped you would imagine, the king gets easily irritated when the matter is brought up.” Jaime paused, his flashing cat-green eyes locked on hers. “But we do care about you. My sister has been making her best to delay the marriage’s annulment. In fact, that’s why I’m here today, Your Grace. The chance has come for you to mend your differences with the king.”

“Is Lady Margaery dead, then?” She asked bluntly.

Jaime flashed a smile, taken aback by that remark.

“Not yet.” He said, not at all uncomfortable by the issue. “But she can’t come to the Tournament today.”

“What a pity.

“I won’t pray for her.” She said, coldly. “Can I return to my chambers?”

A wicked smile surfaced on ser Jaime’s lips.

“Don’t try to be sassy with me, Your Grace.” He mocked cordially. “You know what this means. You should be grateful. The perfect opportunity for you to take your place back at the king’s side has arise. Isn’t that want you wanted?” He continued. “As a gesture of goodwill, the king agreed to free you and to let you see your son again. But only if you keep him company during the Tournament. This is a good chance to show how the crown is strong and to debunk some of the nasty rumors that have been running around.”

No.

Sansa shook her head. A few days before that was exactly what she wanted. But now, when
everything was set for her to leave, the prospect of returning to Joffrey’s side and faking being is little pretty queen made her terrified. She was dreaming already with the towers of Winterfell, with the idea of galloping through the Wolfwood by Edwyle’s side and to see him being trained by Ser Rodrik Cassel in the courtyard, like her brothers had been. Besides, for how long would Joffrey care for her? It was a matter of time until another House put a pretty girl under the king’s nose. And above anything else, there was something different now: she had imagined another life, a better one and she knew she could get it.

Would she give up on her dream again to live the nightmare?

“No, I’m afraid I can’t go.”

Jaime laughed, not having it.

“I’m afraid this isn’t a request.”

“Ser Jaime, I can’t possibly go. I feel indisposed and—”

“Stop it.” He retorted harshly, startling her. “You are the Queen, so act like one. Do you know what is at stake? The bloody Tyrells are dying inside our walls for you and your son.” He pointed to the heads on the battlements, also visible from that window. Is he confirming the Lannisters are behind the poisoning? “For the first time, Joffrey took decisions and led us to the precipice of war. War, Your Grace. Is that what you want? To bring the Reach to our doorstep? Most of the Houses sworn to the Tyrells left last night, taking with them the corpse of their lord.” His face had grown red. The valorous knight suddenly looked ten years older. “If we show any kind of weakness now, they’ll fall on us like wolves. So yes, I’m afraid you must do your part, and make right for your husband’s foolishness.”

Sansa closed her fists, anger boiling inside her.

“No.” She summoned up the courage to reply, taking a step further. “For once in my life, I’ll do as I please.”

But Ser Jaime was not intimidated by her show of power.

“If you refuse to come by your own accord, I can make you do it. I can send word right now and your son will be taken from yours chambers before we return. He’ll travel with my Uncle Kevan back to Casterly Rock and you won’t see him again. Do you want that?”

In a way, there was a bittersweet irony in that. She clasped her hands together, letting the nails carve her own flesh. Here she was again, playing this cursed game and losing. When she thought they couldn’t use anything else against her, here they were proving her wrong by turning against her the most precious thing in her life.

“No.” The word came to her lips. As soon as she heard herself saying it, she felt hollow inside.

Ser Jaime nodded, satisfied and relieved.

“I’m glad, Your Grace. I’m sure everything will be back to normal.” He said, trying to comfort her. Nothing is normal in this hell, she said to herself, tears of anger prickling her eyes. “Now come, Your Grace. I’ll give you a few minutes to prepare and dress something proper.”

They started walking back to Sansa’s chambers in what seemed to be a walk of shame. Even if the hallway was empty, she felt naked before the walls and more vulnerable than ever. She should’ve guessed this would happen, though.
A pawn, always a pawn.

It was her curse.

“I want the Prince to stay at my Mother’s care.” Sansa said when she reached the door to her chambers. Her voice was trembling a little, contorted by fear and cold. “The child is too much weak to go to the Tournament.”

Jaime frowned, but nodded after a while.

“Yes, of course.”

It was even harder now to hold back the tears, but she managed to do it. She finally pushed the door to her chambers and closed it behind her back, distancing herself from the Kingslayer.

“Jeyne.” She ordered, making sure her voice was steady again. “I want you to change the Prince to warmer clothes. Make sure he wears the wolf fur the seamstress brought last month.”

Jeyne seemed a little confused, but smiled and obliged, pushing Edwyle’s wheelchair. Thankfully, her son was too much focused playing with his toy to notice how distraught she was. As soon as Jeyne disappeared through the door, the tears started running down her face again.

“Mother.” She said, extending a hand to her.

“Sansa? What’s the matter?” Lady Catelyn asked, the smile slowly evaporating from her lips.

“Not here.” She said, nodding toward Edwyle’s room. “Come and help me change.”

Lady Catelyn nodded. Worry was written in every wrinkle of her face, but silence reigned in her mouth. She followed the queen to the bedchamber, locking the door behind her.

Sansa sat on the verge of the bed.

“We’re not safe, Mother.”

Catelyn didn’t ask why, she simply nodded, kneeling before the queen and holding her hands.

“Just tell me what to do.”

Sansa blinked, stupefied. Was her mother willing to listen her plan, accept it without asking questions, even though it would cost peace to the Seven Kingdoms?

“We aren’t safe inside these walls.” She explained, the words coming out of her mouth between sobs. “This game doesn’t end. The Tyrells are dying in their chambers, the Reach may come in full force to avenge their liege lord, but we’re not safe, Mother. Someone tried to kill Edwyle and I refuse to wait until they actually do it.”

“You want to leave the capital.”

“Return to Winterfell.” She confirmed, confessing her maddening plan. For a moment it was a relief to take that out of her chest. “I can raise Edwyle there on my own, groom him to be a gentle child, a kind one… And one day I’ll let him decide his own destiny.”

“Sansa...” Catelyn’s grip on her hands was strong and warm, as a mother’s touch should be. “Edwyle is the heir. He’ll always be in danger.”
No, I won’t go back.

“I don’t even I’ve my own men to protect him, Mother.” She was breathless, words pouring out of her mouth between sobs. “No, Edwyle can’t stay. He can’t stay! We can’t be forced again to wait in the darkness, letting our fate be decided by Joffrey’s whims. I may be a Stark, and I may be a woman, but I am the Queen and I won’t have it no more. If I can’t leave tonight, at least I’ll make sure Edwyle goes or I’ll die trying it.” She paused, catching her breath for a moment. “Yes, he has to go. If he stays someone will kill him, or the Lannister will use him to control me. I won’t let that happen. Not again and not to him.” She said, her hands touching again her stomach. And there is was, deep down in her chest, that same anger she had discovered a few days ago. “I won’t sell my child’s future as my father did with mine.” She focused in her mother’s eyes, sensing the pain tormenting her. “To hell with peace.”

“Sansa, I—”

“I won’t hear you criticizing me. You, above anyone else, should understand my motives, Mother. You, the one who captured Lord Tyrion without a second thought, accusing him of being behind Bran’s accident! You did what needed to be done for the love of your son, not for peace’s sake.”

“Yes, Sansa, and I would do it again.” Catelyn said, sternly, without considering her words twice. It was a sore matter, even after all those years. Sansa knew her mother still believed the Lannisters were guilty, but that she would never again raise a finger against them. They had lost too much already for that mistake. “But I didn’t had a crown on my head. You do.”

Sansa scoffed, clenching her fists again.

“A crown? Do you think that matters?” She looked around, pointing to the walls, as if an invisible crowd was there watching them. “I don’t have supporters in King’s Landing. My Queensguard was dismantled and thrown into the Black Cells. My own brother did nothing after finding out I was being treated like a prisoner… After selling my hand for marriage to assure peace!”

A slap would hurt less. Catelyn took a step back, taking her hand to her mouth to hidden the shock. She knew what those words meant. The resentment hidden behind each syllable.

“You’re being unfair…” She said, sobbing. “You agreed to marry Joffrey. You used to beg me to —”

“I was a child!” She yelled, pressing her hands against her cheeks. “I was only a child! A fool one, if that even matters! How could have I know that my prince, my sweet prince, was actually a monster?” She shook her head, feeling trapped. “I was sold by my own father to bring peace to the Seven Kingdoms. That’s the truth we all have been ignoring. I saw my brother knelt before a tyrant instead of fighting for me. I obeyed my mother’s orders to maintain peace. But I’m no longer a child.” She lifted her chin, tears running down her neck now. “I’m your queen and I require your absolute, unquestionable fealty. Will you give it to me, Mother?”

Lady Catelyn had also succumbed to crying, hiding in a veil of shadows. The light from a candle revealed part of her face and the look of angst in her eyes. She had carried many burdens with her for the last five years. Now it was time to break free.

Once again Catelyn Stark fell on her knees, with her head bent low and her shoulders shaking with sobs.

“I’m yours to do as you please, Your Grace, I swear it by the Old Gods and the New.” She sobbed, clasping her hands by her heart. “I’ve always been at your service.”
A shiver went back through Sansa’s back.

For the first time since she had a crown, she was in control of someone.

“You’ll leave King’s Landing today, taking the prince with you.” She ordered, her voice surprisingly steady. “Don’t fret. Plans have already been made to remove Edwyle from the keep in the next few hours.” Catelyn didn’t move, she didn’t even look up. “While the keep is empty, Lord Varys will send men to take you out. I don’t know how, I don’t know where, but I’m placing my life on Lord Varys’ hands. I’ve reasons to trust him.” Once again, she touched her belly. “Will you do this for me?”

Even then Lady Catelyn didn’t look up, but words came out of her mouth.

“You won’t come with us?”

“Queen Cersei demands my presence at the Tournament.” She said, cleaning the tears. Enough of crying. “But I’m sure Lord Varys will find a way to remove me from the Tournament.” It was a lie, and when her mother finally brought her eyes up, she saw Lady Catelyn also knew that. The moment the Prince was gone, she would be taken prisoner and probably be executed. But at least Edwyle will be safe, she thought. “Now, can you help me dress?”

“But Sansa… There must be another way. I can’t let you stay here alone. I won’t…”

“Mother, you’ve to do this.”

Lady Catelyn shook her head, tears still flowing down her face.

“I want to do it for you, but I can’t leave you here alone. You know what Joffrey will do to you—”

“Enough!” Ordered Sansa, coldly. “You’ve made a vow to your queen seconds ago. I won’t hear another word about it. Now, please me, find me the blue dress. The velvet one. If Cersei wants me at the Tournament today, I better present myself like the Queen.”

The minutes that followed were of pure silence. Lady Catelyn wept while helping her daughter into the dress. It was one of her old ones, all made of blue velvet, with an intricate embroidery of silver thread that formed the head of a direwolf, the sigil of her house. The collar of the dress was trimmed with ermine skin and matched the wolf’s fur, so like Lady’s, that Catelyn finally placed on her back. Sansa had also insisted on using high-waisted boots, suspecting the snow outside would be worse than the last time she had left the keep.

“And to finish I think I must take the winter crown.”

She had three crowns at her disposal: one that matched Joffrey’s, made of gold, encrusted with rubies and black diamonds; another one, very simple, that was nothing more than a ringlet of silver with three sapphires that she liked to use when attending social calls outside the Red Keep; and a last one, which Robb had given to her as a gift on her wedding day, that was a open circlet of hammered bronze incised with runes of the First Men, surmounted by nine black iron spikes wrought in the shape of longswords. It was a severe crown, not a pretty one, but it was proper for that occasion: it was fashioned after the former Stark Kings.

“You look like a warrior.” Catelyn said, in awe, after placing the crown on top of her head. Her auburn hair was loose, like a sea of fire stretching over the wolf fur.

“Yes, it’s perfect.” Sansa said, looking herself in the mirror. “I want the crowds to see the Wolf Queen.”
She didn’t give her mother more time to try and convince her changing plans. She simply walked out of her room to say her farewell to Edwyle. He was back on his room, already wearing warmer clothes and playing with Jeyne. As she entered, his face transformed immediately. He opened his eyes and his mouth fell, completely surprised.

“Mother, you look like… like the painting of Visenya Targaryen on Maester Yandel’s book! Will you fight in the Tournament?” He asked, truly astounded.

Jeyne was not so impressed, taking note of everything. The dress with the Stark sigil. The crown. The wolf fur. She was a trained spy and she could understand something was about to happen.

The queen advanced toward her son and knelt before him.

“No, my little prince.” She said, controlling her voice. She didn’t want her son’s last memory of her to be a of a crying woman. “Women in Westeros aren’t supposed to joust.” She touched his face, wrapping a finger in one of his golden curls. “You must be a good boy while I’m away. Can you do it for me?”

He frowned, suspicion arising. Had she been too obvious?

“But I’m always a good boy, aren’t I?”

Sansa smiled, nodding.

“Yes, you are.” What else could she say to him without giving herself before Jeyne? “I’ll come back to you in a few hours, alright?” No, she shouldn’t have said that, she shouldn’t fill his head with empty promises. The tears were prickling her eyes like needles. She bent her knees and kissed his hands. “I love you, my dear. Don’t ever forget that.”

And before she could be betrayed by tears, the queen stood up and left the room.

She was far from knowing she would never see her son again.

Lady Catelyn was waiting for her in the main chamber and looked old, old and small. Even so, she opened her arms for one last embrace.

“Do whatever needs to be done.” Catelyn whispered, softly. “I’ll make sure Edwyle is safe. I swear. Even if it’s the last thing I do.”

Sansa nodded, tearfully.

“I know.” She said, breaking the embrace. “I know.”

No more words to say. It was time to face her destiny.

Sansa grabbed the doorknob, turned it and didn’t look back.

Ser Jaime was standing outside, pale at the light of a candle, and surprisingly wasn’t alone. The Hound was keeping in company, chattering about something she couldn’t hear. A group of guards wearing red armors stood close by, silently watching everything. Making sure there were no tears in her eyes, she walked toward them.

“Shall we go?” She asked, almost in a command.

Jaime smiled wickedly noticing the crown in her head.
“When I asked you to dress something proper, I didn’t ask for that.” He said, pointing to her northern crown.

“I don’t believe you’ve the right to decide what I must wear or not, ser.” She replied, turning her head to the stairs leading down.

Sandor Clegane sniggered and took a step further.

“Let’s go, Your Grace. Your litter is ready for you.”

“I thought ser Jaime would be the one escorting me…?” She said, considering the two men in front of her.

“I’ll stay on watch, Your Grace.” Ser Jaime revealed, as if that would make her feel safer.

How would Varys’ men pass Jaime Lannister and his red guards? She had never thought about that, handling from the beginning all the details to her ally. After all, the Spider knew the keep better than anyone, dealing with secret passageways as old friends. Maybe that was the Spider’s big plan.

But what if it wasn’t?

*No.* Sansa shook her head. Dwell on such things wouldn’t bring anything good now.

“Very well.” She managed to say, averting her eyes from the Hound. “Let’s go, ser.”

The way down to the courtyard was less painful. Following Ser Sandor Clegane, she left Maegor’s Holdfast through the drawbridge and down the keep toward the stables. She had a chance to check the five heads on spikes from close, confirming they belonged indeed to the Blue Bard and Lady Elinor, a cousin of Lady Margaery, as well as a few servants. What a dreadful sight they were, their skins already white as marble. After descending to the courtyard, she looked back to the window of her chambers, hoping to have a last glance of Edwyle or her mother, but there was no sight of them.

“The king seemed eager to see you, Your Grace.” The Hound’s raspy voice broke the silence, startling her. She nodded, not saying a word, but ser Sandor was not satisfied with that answer. He looked at her from the corner of his eye.

Sandor was a huge and heavily-muscled man. Years ago, she had been terrorized by his face: the left side was gaunt, with sharp cheekbones and a heavy brow, while the right seemed to have come directly from her worst nightmare: the flesh was burned, marking him with scars that went down to his throat. The story of how he had gotten those wounds was even more dreadful, but was proof enough that he was a knight valiant enough to be part of songs.

*But no one would dare to sing about a hound.*

“You’re supposed to give him his favour.” He added.

Sansa laughed, surprising herself by doing so.

Sandor had meant those words as a joke, a little private joke to make her laugh. Yes, she had been afraid of him, but it was also thanks to him she now knew who the true monsters were. Even when obeying Joffrey’s commands to beat her, he had always made an effort to be gentle. Not as ser Meryn or ser Boros.

*Save yourself some pain, girl, and give him what he wants.*
His advice, so far away in her memory now, had probably saved her life.

“He won’t be happy with your crown.” He said, his eyes glinting toward the iron ringlet in her head.

“I know.” She replied, firmly.

The Hound nodded his head in approval.

“Yes.” He simply said. “It was about a time.”

Not long after they reached her litter on the stables. It was not her usual litter, with a crown carved on the wood signalling her as the Queen. It was a simpler one, made of weirwood, and thus safer since no one would recognize her on the streets. Lannister guards were already mounted on their horses, ready to escort her.

“Here.” The Hound said, extending his gloved hand to help her climb.

She accepted it, climbing to the litter.

The Wolf Queen prepared to face her fate.
Many years ago, Syrio Forel had taught her she should only trust herself during a fight. Even the most trustworthy allies could fail and condemn her to an unnecessary defeat. However, Syrio had also prepared her for the truth: there would be battles in her future where she wouldn’t have any other choice than to rely on somebody else. Those words never made sense to her, not until that moment.

In a few minutes, she would march toward Maegor’s Holdfast and fight her way to the queen’s chambers, but not alone. All around her, pacing the chambers beneath the Red Keep, were at least twenty men. She had given up trying to count them after the fourth failed attempt. The light was weak, coming only from a few candles lit by the Spider, so it was hard to actually check how many men were there.

Twenty men, most of them sellswords hired by Lord Varys, and all wearing a red armor with the golden lion of the Lannisters gleaming on their breastplates. Herself included. How the Master of Whispers had managed to put his hands on so many identical Lannister’s guard uniforms she would never know, but it was the perfect disguise to get into the keep. Not that Arya didn’t feel ensnared inside her own red armor, because she did... But it would certainly help them.

*If Smalljon doesn’t turn against a sellsword in the meantime.*

A bittersweet taste filled her mouth, as she remembered Syrio’s lesson once again. All those men were being paid to fight and free Sansa, so she could flee North with the Prince and probably embroil the Seven Kingdoms in the chaos Robb wanted to prevent: civil war. Word on the streets was that the Lord of Winterfell was too busy reinforcing the Wall to spare troops to aid the Queen.

So, she had to rely on Lord Varys, on his whispers and his sellswords.

The thought made her anxious, of course, but this was one of the cases where she had to rely on others. To walk into the holdfast by herself alone would be suicide. Otherwise, they had no other option.

It was an enraging thought indeed. There were no words able to describe the feelings of disgust she had for her brother. Somewhere back in the North Robb was freezing his arse on the Wall, refusing to send troops in aid of her sister and mother, to keep defending the realm from wildlings. What kind of man had him grow to be? So yes, she was determined to ask him right *that* the moment she crossed Winterfell’s gates. And never again would she accept that he tell her what she should do or not do.

Now, however, she had to focus.

Besides the sellswords Lord Varys had hired, the members of Sansa’s Queensguard were also present and under disguise. As promised, the Spider had freed them from their cells, proving the extent of his web. Hastily, they had been taken to a brothel, where food, a bath and a bed had been waiting for them, as well as Arya and a plan to rescue the queen. Only then had she understood why
the Spider had called for her first: she needed to convince them to be part of the plan and, above
anything else, to work with a small army of brutish, unreliable sellswords.

It wasn’t easy.

Jon “Smalljon” Umber, the captain of the guard, was almost as stubborn as his father. Initially, he
had mumbled something like If your brother didn’t send troops, we must do nothing. He was
convinced after a few minutes, when she told him to go fuck himself. The fact she was so far from
home, hiding in the capital, made her story more believable: as a Stark and a warrior, she was at
King’s Landing to make sure the “secret plan” to rescue the queen was carried on perfectly.

Getting Smalljon’s support meant all the others would help her too. Harrion Karstark, Wendel
Manderly, Dacey Mormont and Robett Glover. All of them had their doubts about the plan, of
course, but her lies sounded true enough to get them aboard.

But now, watching the Spider inside his frayed cloak, disguising as an old septon, she made again
the tormenting question: why did the Master of Whispers care so much about Sansa? He reeked of
lies beneath all those perfumes and powders. And it was no accident that he kept a guard at his side.
What had he to fear to keep a bodyguard close by?

My words lied. My eyes and my arm shouted out the truth, but you were not seeing.

Syrio’s words echoed through her mind. A dangerous game was being played right in front of her, a
game she could not understand. She wanted to see behind Varys’ words, understand his motives or
at least find out what he would get by helping out the Starks. But each minute that passed she was
more convinced secrets were being kept from her. The voice in the back of her mind, telling her she
was walking into a trap, was driving her crazy.

The Purple Eyed Knight.

He had to be the key.

The very same man who had brought her to Varys was one of the false guards set to accompany her
to Maegor’s. Even with a helmet hiding his face, she knew he was the man pacing nervously by the
stairs. The one Lord Varys was watching so carefully. Could he be the reason why the eunuch
seemed so tense? It made no sense at all, especially considering what Dacey had revealed the night
before, but it was a possibility.

It seemed the Purple Eyed Knight was nothing more than one of the Spider’s spies. One for whom
the Master of Whispers was particular fond.

“The maid is taking too much time.” The knight whispered, approaching his master.

She looked back to the Spider, eager to hear his answer.

“You worry too much, my dear.” Lord Varys replied hastily, his face lightened by the candlelight.
“She will come. Trust me.”

Yes, trust him, Purple Eyed Knight, Arya wanted to say, sarcastically. Or should I call you bard?

That was indeed the most curious piece of the puzzle. It seemed the knight’s name was Modaen, a
braavosii bard at Sansa’s service. Or at least that was what they said. Posing as a bard, he had
entertained her sister for two years now, putting at appropriate use his harp and tongue.

And maybe something else.
Dacey hadn’t confirmed that dirty secret directly, but a romance was implicit in the tone she used to talk about the bard. And since Sansa had a soft heart for handsome bards, knights and princes, it was quite easy to imagine more than songs being shared in the night.

*But do you know your lover is a spy, sister?*

Her thoughts were shattered when the sound of hasty footsteps echoed through the chamber, silencing anyone who was speaking. The small army of sellswords froze on their ground, ready to fight if true Lannister guards were to appear around the corner. Arya glanced over her shoulder to check Varys once more, but the Master of Whispers remained quiet, clasping his hands above his stomach and waiting patiently.

Modaen grabbed a candle and moved toward the darkness, revealing a maid climbing down the last steps of a staircase. Her breath was nothing more than a soft cloud in the chilly air.

*This is our sign,* Arya said to herself, locking eyes with Smalljon, a few feet away. Her hands touched the hilt of Needle at her waist, as well as the two daggers she had bought the day before.

In a fatherly way, Lord Varys grabbed the woman’s hand, as if to reassure her everything was fine. The maid, however, seemed far from fine. She was clearly distressed, trying to catch her breath.

*Fear cuts deeper than swords.*

Arya didn’t have to look over her shoulder to see Modaen getting tense, and Smalljon grabbing the pommel of his sword. A buzz of whispers started among the sellswords.

“What news do you bring, my child?” Once again, Varys whispery voice was enough to silence any sound that didn’t come from his mouth.

“He took her.” She said, still catching her breath. “The Hound took her.”

“Fucking dog.” Swore Harrion, pulling his sword.

The rustle of swords leaving their scabbards filled the silence. The fact Arya and the Queensguard where outnumbered by the sellswords was troubling, but in that moment she didn’t give a shit to her odds. In a second, she was holding a dagger in each hand, ready to fight. If this was part of Varys’ treachery plan, she would make him spill the truth.

“Sandor Clegane?” Varys asked quickly, ignoring the commotion around him. His bodyguard had an hand on his sword’s pommel as well, but hadn’t pulled it out yet. “Are you sure?”

“I am, milord. I saw her… I saw her with my own eyes. She left the chambers, looking much like a queen… Oh, milord, she looked pretty, so pretty, like a *true* queen… But the Hound took her.”

Arya laughed, but there was no warmth in the sound that left her mouth.

“If you are playing with us, Spider, I can assure you’ll regret it.” Arya said, taking a step further. The Masters of Whispers smiled back, not easily intimidated.

“Now, now... You wound me, Lady Stark. There is no need for threats.” He said, almost amused with the situation. “*Or* swords.” He added, casting a glance toward Smalljon and Harrion. “I was afraid something like this could happen.”

“And you didn’t warn us?!” Yelled Smalljon, pulling Arya behind his back as if she was nothing
more than a little girl. “This is a mistake. We shouldn’t have come.”

“Oh, would you’ve preferred to stay in the cells, ser?” Varys asked, infuriated. When Smalljon didn’t reply, Varys smiled once again. “Unfortunately, I’m not in control of what’s happening inside everyone’s minds. As you are aware, major events happened during the last few hours. The Tyrells were poisoned and our good and gracious King executed a handful of servants and a bard…” His eyes moved directly to Modaen, hiding in the shadows. “I had hope those unfortunate events wouldn’t disturb our plans, but guess I was wrong.”

“Cut the bullshit.” Arya retorted, tightening her grip around the dagger’s handle. “If Sansa isn’t in her chambers, where the Seven Hells is she?”

Varys looked directly into her eyes, ready to answer, but the maid did it first.

“She is being escorted to the Tournament.”

“The Tournament?” Wendel Manderly asked, as confused as the others. “That doesn’t make sense. I thought the idea was for her to be in her chambers.”

The Spider was already shaking his head, ready to contradict the guard.

“No, in fact I think this confirms my suspicions. The Queen being taken to the Tournament was part of Queen Cersei’s plan all along. You see, the Tyrells were poisoned only two days before the Tournament. If nothing had happened, our good king would’ve announced his engagement to the Tyrell girl and the annulment of his marriage. But Cersei wouldn’t be happy with a Tyrell queen, so I believe she did the best she could to prevent it.”

“Cersei Lannister poisoned the Tyrells?” Arya asked, not surprised at all.

“If not her, someone close to the Lannisters. Of course, they found a way to blame others for the crime, but a strategic mind will easily see the truth. This reek of Lannister work.”

“Still, how does that justifies the fact that the queen was taken to the Tournament?” Modaen broke the silence and took a step toward Varys, removing his helmet. The moment the bodyguard pulled out his sword, Arya got the confirmation about who Varys was afraid of.

Modaen’s words were molded with his own rage and distress.

“Cersei will parade Queen Sansa before the crowds to demonstrate the crown’s strength and debunk the rumors about the king’s marriage.” Varys said, quite directly. If looks could kill, Modaen would’ve killed the Spider at least seven times.

“Are you saying you truly didn’t knew about this?” The bard asked, his voice trembling. “You betrayed her.” He continued, not waiting for an answer. “You’ve lied to her. To us.” He turned his face toward Arya and for the first time she felt his despair. “You’ve been played like a cyvasse piece, Lady Stark. I advise you to play to win now, before it’s too late.”

“Boy, know your place!” Hissed Varys, forgetting his sweet false tone. “You must believe me.”

“Lies.” Insisted Modaen, pulling his sword out of its sheath. The bodyguard acted quickly, pointing his sword to the bard’s chest, but not striking. Not yet. Modaen ignored him and kept looking directly to Lord Varys. “I should’ve realized sooner that you were working only for your friends. The other ones.”

Other ones? Who were the other ones? The Targaryens? Varys had sworn he had no interest in
helping the Mother of Dragons, since she had proved herself to be unable to reign among chaos. So, who could the other friends be? The Tyrells? The Lannisters? Someone else? All those twisted and poisoned words were making her head ache. The discussion was wild and alive, burning like wildfire, and the truth getting more and more distant.

You’re walking into a trap, the voice whispered in her mind.

“How dare you, boy?” Varys asked, outraged, slapping the bard as if he was nothing more than a child misbehaving. Harrion sneered and the maid gasped, horrified. “If you are standing here today, remember it’s to me you owe your life.”

Modaen laughed, touching his face where he had been hit.

“I’m no longer one of your little birds, Spider.” He retorted, menacingly. “I’m done with you.”

For a moment Arya thought the bard would lose his head. Really lose his head. But the bodyguard should’ve been well instructed cause he didn’t strike. Not until Varys’ life was really threatened. The eunuch cared about the bard, no matter what he said. Since his chances to kill the Master of Whispers were slim, the bard simply laughed and turned his back, heading to the exit.

“Do you want me to take care of him?” The bodyguard asked to Varys, signalling to a group of men near the door.

“No. Let him go.” Varys replied, angrily, shaking the hand which had gave the slap. “He’ll come back.”

“He’ll go looking for Sansa.” Arya said, turning to face Smalljon. It was clear the bard didn’t cared about anything else besides Sansa. He was in love with her sister, which only made him ridiculous. She started guessing that was the reason the bard was present that night: Varys must have promised him a happy ending with Sansa or something like that, as if a bard could be a good match for her entitled sister. “But we’ve to find her first.”

Thankfully, Smalljon didn’t make questions and started issuing orders.

“Dacey, Harrion and Robett, you three will go with the bard.” He ordered, quickly. “You’ll have a good chance to rescue the queen if you find her on her way to the Tournament grounds. Take the horses and get her to the docks.”

“Only the three of us?” Dacey asked, dumbfounded. “Must I remind you she is being escorted by the Hound?”

“I can spare you some of my men…” Varys said, raising his voice to take part on the conversation.

“We don’t need your men.” Arya retorted quickly.

Your men are a problem, she noted. A problem I’ve to solve next.

Smalljon hesitated, but nodded, agreeing once again with her judgement.

“You can do it.” Smalljon told his men, solemnly. “You’re Queensguards. It’s your duty to protect the queen.”

Dacey nodded, even though she was not totally confident it would work. The three guards left immediately, exchanging last glances with their captain. Some of the sellswords sniggered, somehow finding something funny in all that.
Too many sellswords and too few of us.

She didn’t like that and the voice in her head kept warning her about it.

You’re walking into a trap, trap, trap.

Trap or not, Varys had definitely the upper hand at the moment. He could simply say “Kill!” and his men would immediately turn against Arya, Smalljon and Wendel, ending their lives before they had a chance to fight. Or he could do even worse, by arresting and delivering them to Joffrey, saying he had found them trying to invade the keep.

Trap, trappity, trap.

So, there was only one thing to do to make sure they were in charge and not him. Taking advantage of the little commotion provoked by the Queensguards running after Modaen, she approached Smalljon and whispered five simple words into his ear.

“Strike him on the neck.”

Turning to Varys once again, she counted to three, giving Smalljon Umber enough time to process what she had said. Then, without hesitating for a second, she threw one of the daggers to the bodyguard’s left leg, catching him between the small open space where his armor didn’t protect the knee. All around her swords were draw again, and she prayed – to the Seven, to the Old Gods and even to Death – for her risky move to work. Swift as a deer, she averted a blow inflicted by one of the sellswords and danced her way to Varys, managing to get behind his back and block every movement he made by resting the other dagger’s tip on his neck.

“STOP! ALL OF YOU STOP OR I’LL MAKE HIM BLEED.” She yelled, blinking twice to see what had happened during those fragments of a second.

Smalljon had understood her plan and killed the bodyguard the moment he had leaned down, in the direction of the pain in his leg. Men act upon pain and their reflexes, and she had just played the two of them against the dumb bodyguard. And thankfully it had worked. The man’s head was rolling on the floor, still inside the helmet. Wendel, she noted, had been surrounded by five men, but had managed to defend himself and take one of them down.

As soon as her words echoed through the chamber, all men froze on their places.

No one, except the scared maid, were close enough to defend the eunuch. If anyone tried to do anything at all, she would gladly rip the Spider’s throat.

“So, this is what’s going to happen, Lord Varys.” Arya explained, watching the Spider’s eyes gleaming not with fear, but amusement. “I don’t think this will work. Me, trusting you, I mean. You keep too many secrets for my liking. And since I don’t know who are your other friends, I’ll make sure you will be my best friend for the day. What do you think?”

“I believe it’s a wonderful idea, Lady Stark.”

She pressed the dagger’s tip into his neck, deep enough to draw some blood. She had little patience for jokes at the moment.

“I’m glad you’re so sympathetic, my lord. For starters, why don’t we share some secrets? You can tell me something like… I don’t know? Maybe if we’re about to walk into a trap in Maegor’s Holdfast or not? On my turn, I’ll share with you what I usually do to bald fat liars.”
Varys laughed, still refusing to show any sign of fear.

“There is no trap at all, my lady. My men will help you breach the holdfast’s defenses and will fight to bring the prince and your lady mother back to safety.” He said promptly. “Has they have been instructed the previous night, and as I always intended to do.”

Arya exchanged a glance with Smalljon once again. The captain of the guard simply shrugged, before spitting toward Varys’ feet.

_We need his men if you want to advance with this madness_, Arya read in his eyes.

Or they could simply turn their backs and leave the keep, giving up their mission.

_No, I’m not fucking Robb._

“Wendel will stay here with him.” Arya said, not issuing a command, more like a suggestion. Her eyes were still locked on Smalljon. “If we don’t return within an hour…” Her eyes moved to Wendel, who had removed his helmet to show his sweaty face. “You will kill him.” Arya said, using her dagger to point to Varys’ throat.

Wendel nodded, and took a step further to start his watch.

Arya was not done yet. She had to address the sellswords, prove who was really in charge and make sure none of them would misbehave.

“The same goes to any of you. Turn on us, and your master dies. You’ll never see all that gold that was promised to you.” She smiled dangerously as she pulled back her arm, freeing Varys. Wendel quickly pointed his sword to the Master of Whispers. “All of us have a lot to lose today.”

“Have you heard Lady Stark?” Asked Varys out loud, reaffirming his orders. “You’ll accompany the Queen’s party to Maegor’s Holdfast and follow any instructions given to you by Lord Umber or Lady Stark.”

None of the sellswords replied, but the silence was itself an answer. As they started to gather to made their way to the keep, Smalljon approached Arya and grabbed her by the arm.

“You spoke like a true leader. I’ll give you that.” He said, coldly. “But next time, let me deal with this.”

Arya snorted.

“With all respect, ser, but fuck you.” Without waiting for his answer, she faced the Spider one last time. The man was still smiling with amusement, ignoring the streak of blood running down his neck or the fact that she had totally overpowered him within minutes. Wendel’s sword already gleamed in the semi darkness, ready to strike if needed. “I’ll see you when this is over, Lord Varys.”

“Yes.” He answered back, calmly. “Whatever you may think, my lady, I truly hope you succeed. I care about our queen and our little prince.”

Arya nodded, giving up on trying to sort out what was true and lie.

The moment she faced the stairs that led to the keep shit got real, as Gendry used to say. She took the first step, placing both her daggers on their sheaths, and led her small army of Lannister armored men through the tunnels. She could sense them behind her, a mass of steel, flesh and blood, breathing on her neck, filling the chilly air with clouds made by their breaths. There was still some tension.
between them and Smalljon, who walked by her side, rumbling something only he could hear. Making their best to keep silent, the men marched through darkness and cold, following her lead.

*The man who fears losing has already lost.*

No, she refused to be afraid. As a maddening smile crossed her lips, she knew her time had finally come. She was determined to fight for the honor her father had lost, to achieve what her brother had refused to do and to prove to the North, and to the whole fucking Seven Kingdoms, that a woman could fight even better than a man.
Sansa IV

The journey through the capital was taking longer than she expected.

As predicted, the winter had arrived in full force, covering the streets with snow and ice. The horses had to gallop carefully through the cobblestoned streets, whining under such uncomfortable weather conditions, their breaths frosting in the air. And as if the cold wasn’t unbearable enough, the wind was whistling through a crack in the ceiling of her litter, making Sansa shiver in her wolf fur.

They were as slow as a funeral march, which seemed appropriate for the occasion. After all, something had died inside her just moments ago. A part of her. And she knew perfectly well what had caused such death: a hundred knives were still gutting her insides, knives made of ice and fear, digging wounds that would forever be a reminder of a hard truth: she would never be free.

Strangely, it was a welcome pain. In a way, it was as if a fire had been lit inside her, a fire made of ice, consuming every fiber of her being, stripping her from every worry and care. She had nothing else to lose, only her life and the child growing inside her, but the former she would gladly give and the latter would be better without meeting the world’s terrors.

Thankfully, the tears stopped when the keep disappeared behind a curtain of mist and snow. Somehow, that last sighting of the keep washed away all her weaknesses. For the first time in a long while, probably for the first time in her life, she was ready to tear the world down. Or at least to try it.

*My fate in my own hands.*

By the time they reached Fishmonger’s Square, the sounds coming from the street made her peek through the litter’s curtains. The fish market didn’t seem so crowded as usual. There were clearly less stalls and less customers. The snow had frozen the fish and the cloth covering the stalls was flapping in the wind, making a disturbing sound like a whip.

Not long after, they reached River Row, the road that led directly to the King’s Gate. It was crowded with smallfolk, running their way down to the lists, yelling excitedly and not paying attention to a small white litter without a banner. The litter trembled with all the tumult outside, but the Hound and the Lannister’s guards managed to keep anyone from getting too close.

Finally, they crossed the gate. Beyond the city walls, only less than thirty pavilions had been raised by the river. The banners flapping in the frigid wind bore sigils from many houses, yes, but not so many as the ones who had attended previous tourneys. Mostly there were banners from Houses sworn to the Crownlands and the Westerlands and a few ones from the Stormlands. She recognized a banner from House Lynderly, the only one who had come from the Vale.

From Dorne, the Riverlands and, of course, the North, there wasn’t a single banner flapping on the wind. No surprise in that. And yes, there was a clear spot by the river that seemed to have been recently vacated by the houses sworn to the Tyrells. Only half a dozen pavilions stood there, the tallest one boring the sigil of House Tarly.

It was always the same: crowds would gather by the lists to watch the jousts, the archery challenge and, the following day, the melee. From every corner of the city, common people would leave their
work and run, hoping to see with their own eyes some of the most illustrious and gallant knights of the Seven Kingdoms.

_The stuff of silly songs_, Sansa thought bitterly, biting her nails.

For a few seconds, she remembered her first Tournament. _How foolishly innocent I was_. By then, her greatest worries involved dresses, hairstyles and Arya being a nuisance. A sad smile reached her lips at that thought. She had dreamt for weeks about ser Loras Tyrell, after he so gallantly conceded the victory to the Hound.

But the splendor was gone.

The Houses’ colours seemed old and faded thanks to the snow-covered fields that served as background. The knights were nowhere to be seen, probably hidden in their tents keeping themselves warm instead of strutting around looking for the favor of young maidens. On the wooden benches built for the noble guests, the crowd seemed nothing more than a great human mass covered in furs. Even the royal cabin, placed at the middle of the lists, was still empty.

_We should all freeze to death_, she thought to herself, as soon as the litter stopped.

Through the curtains, she could see now a big pavilion with the colours of House Lannister. Everything looked red by the riverside, not only the pavilions that stretched by the river banks, but also the men. It seemed there were a lot of Lannister’s guards patrolling the area, more even than goldcloaks.

_Have the Lannisters reinforced their guard?_

Maybe Cersei had done it after the Tyrell’s’ poisoning. Even though that wasn’t a reassuring thought.

_“Your Grace?”_ The Hound asked, climbing down from his horse. _“We’re are here.”_

_This is it, then_, she said, exhaling a sigh. The Hound pulled the curtains open and helped her down the litter. They were next to the lists, where the royal encampment had been assembled. As soon as her feet reached the muddy ground, silence fell all around her.

_Control your fears_, a voice whispered sweetly in her mind.

She took half a dozen steps toward the red pavilions, following Ser Sandor’s lead and the Lannister’s guards who never left her side. Then, someone knelt on the frozen ground. It was a mere page, but he looked solemn enough for her to feel touched by the gesture. And then, quickly, all the others nearby started to do the same. Some of them knelt, others simply bowed their heads as she passed.

_I’m still their queen._

Sansa didn’t stop to talk to any of them and for once was glad to have a wall of men escorting her.

_“Your Grace, I’m satisfied to see you.”_

Those words felt like a blade against her throat and made her look over her shoulder.

Cersei Lannister had just left the Lannister pavilion, side by side with Prince Tommen and half a dozen ladies-in-waiting. Her own guard followed silently, as well as Ser Balon Swann from the Kingsguard. The Dowager Queen seemed regaler than ever, with a blood colour dress fastened with golden lions at her corset. A tiara with seven rubies glowed in her hair, making her so feral as the
yellowish fur, striped from an exotic animal of the Summer Isles, that covered her shoulders and arms.

Prince Tommen was keeping up his smile and being as gentle as he could. At the age of fourteen, he had ceased to be a chubby, childish boy. Maintaining all the kindness Sansa had always known in him, he had grown to become a handsome young man and a good match for any woman in the Seven Kingdoms. Besides, he was humble, without a drop of arrogance flowing in his veins.

*Maybe too much kind to succeed among games of power*, Sansa thought. Fortunately, he would soon leave the capital to take his place as Lord of Casterly Rock.

Without losing her focus, Sansa remembered where she was and how she was expected to behave.

“Yes, Your Grace.” She replied, coldly. “I’m afraid I had no other choice.”

Cersei smiled and there was no honesty in that smile. She seemed uncomfortable to be surrounded by all those people kneeling and showing respect to the wrong queen.

“Well, we must all make sacrifices once in awhile.”

Sansa scoffed, facing her mother-in-law without blinking.

“Oh, yes, *we must.*” Somehow those words sounded like a threat, and the wind carried them for anyone to hear.

Cersei frowned, the smile still gleaming on her lips.

“Don’t be so bitter, Your Grace. I’m certain those sacrifices will pay out.” She gestured toward one of the ladies-in-waiting beside her, Lady Merryweather, who quickly passed her a handkerchief. “Well, let’s hope you and the king have a lovely day.” She pressed the handkerchief into Sansa’s hands. “Be sure you give the king your favor...” She was close now, approaching as if to kiss her in the cheek. “And next time, choose a better crown. That one doesn’t suit you.”

The words were nothing more than a whisper, but quick enough to infuriate Sansa.

Cersei broke the embrace, the false smile back up again. For an instant Sansa truly thought she would slap her mother-in-law in front of all those people.

“You shouldn’t let the king wait.” Cersei said, breaking the moment. She accepted Tommen’s arm. “Oh, and make sure you share with him the good news.” Sansa gulped, taken aback. “I’m sure His Majesty will be thrilled to hear you’re expecting.”

*She knows*, Sansa felt a sea of cold sweat form in her forehead. *Cersei knows I’m pregnant.*

For a moment she stood there, while the queen and her entourage walked away to the royal cabin.

*How does she know?*, Sansa asked, more angry than worried.

No, Varys wouldn’t betray her, would he? No, of course not. One word from Varys was enough for her to lose her head. No, it couldn’t possibly have been him. Maybe Jeyne Westerling had noticed her blood moon hadn’t come.

“We need to go.” Sandor was still there, waiting for her. His eyes, always so ferocious, glinted with a twinge of pity, sorry for the new burden she was carrying.

He was not the only one.
All around her, she could sense the buzzing of whispers starting, the people pointing discreetly toward her, talking about the child growing inside her. Cersei knew how to undermine her, how to make her lose respect. In a moment, she had been the Wolf Queen, now she was nothing more than Joffrey’s bitch.

*He’s not even the father’s child,* she wanted to scream, anger pumping her heart.

“Your Grace?” Grumbled the Hound, impatiently, placing a hand on her shoulder. “The king doesn’t like to wait.”

She nodded, let him guide her once again through a maze of tents.

The king’s private pavilion was not far from the Lannister’s. It was the tallest of the entire encampment, made of yellow and red cloth, uniting the sigils of houses Baratheon and Lannister. It had been assembled on top of a small promontory, so that anyone could see it from afar. Somehow it resembled a fortress, with a circle of spears surrounding it as if the king was waiting for an attack.

The Hound led her through the spears, not a word leaving his lips. Everywhere around them were Lannister guards, watching them through the visor on their helmets, quiet like statues.

Sansa shivered again, discomfort joining the anger still burning in her chest.

It was then that Sandor stopped in his heels. Slowly, he turned his head around, surrounding the area. The Lannister’s guard at his side seemed nervous too, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword. The cheers of the Tournament seemed so distant now, as if belonging to another world.

“Too many of them…” Sandor grumbled, almost in a whisper, voicing Sansa’s own suspicion.

And then the wind carried a sound that was itself an herald of disgrace.

*Swords clashing.*

Everything happened very fast after that. In one moment Sandor was looking toward the king’s pavilion, trying to understand what was happening inside it. A second later he was pulling his sword, aware of a danger she couldn’t understand. However, quick enough an answer emerged. The Lannister’s guards who had been escorting her were also pulling their swords out. But instead of joining the Hound to run into the pavilion, where the sound of swords continued, they started attacking ser Sandor.

One of the guards, the one closest to Sandor, put all his strength in a blow that managed to rip through the chainmail covering his right shoulder, trying to reach the heart but failing miserably.

Sandor screamed, not with pain, but rage. Then, in a quick movement, his sword was clashing down against his first attacker, breaking his skull in half, helmet and all, in a single blow. A gush of blood sprinkled Sansa’s face, making her flinch and shrink in fear and disgust.

*What is happening?* She tried to take a step back, hitting another guard. He was also ready to strike. She screamed and not sooner than that the man’s head fell on the ground, ripped out by Sandor’s sword.

The guards quickly proved to be nothing more than puppies against the Hound. The fight was over in less than ten seconds and in the aftermath, all of it looked more like a massacre. In a dance of steel and blood, the Hound managed to bring down each one of the guards who had so diligently escorted the queen down from the keep. She observed him fight, noticing how he thrived in death, funnelling the pain on his arm and turning it into pure rage.
“Killing is the sweetest thing there is.” He had said once, many years before. Strangely, the way he had fought, as if death was nothing but a nuisance, made her feel safe among chaos. She stood close, completely entangled in the middle of the fight. Blood covered her face, running down her cheeks and reaching her lips. She could taste the metallic flavour in her tongue. The blood of other man.

And then she was bending over herself, throwing up all her breakfast.

“There is no time for that.” Sandor grumbled, forcing her to stand up. “Stay close.”

Something great was happening, something she could not understand. With her eyes glistening with tears, she noticed that not far away, by the Lannister pavilion Cersei had left minutes ago, guards had also started a fight. All of them were using Lannister armour, trampling down tents and fighting against each other. Lannister against Lannister.

*What is the meaning of this?*

She was so focused on what was happening she didn’t see the squad of men heading toward them, running like the wind, ready to bring down the Hound.

“Fuck this.” Retorted Sandor, still holding his longsword with his wounded arm. His left hand grabbed the hammer dangling from his belt. “Little bird, don’t wander or you’ll get crushed.” He commanded, spitting blood. “I don’t know what the fuck is happening, but I’ll do my best to keep you safe.”

*Little bird.*

The new squad of guards were already upon them when a blood curling scream echoed through the frozen plains outside the King’s Gate. The dreadful sound, almost inhuman, ended quickly.

And it had come from the king’s pavilion.

*Joffrey.*

Outside, everyone froze for a second or two. At least, anyone Sansa could see stopped on their heels, waiting for something to happen. Her skin crawled, the blood still warm against her face and the taste of vomit making her want to throw up again.

And then a spear, one of the spears surrounding the king’s pavilion, was stuck in Sandor’s left foot. Now it was his time to scream, officially resuming the fight. In panic, Sansa looked around in search of who had thrown the spear: it had been one of the guards approaching. He had taken advantage of the Hound’s distraction.

However, a spear piercing his boot and carving his way through flesh and bone was not enough to stop the Hound. Amazed, she fell on the ground when the men came close enough to bring down their swords over Sandor. Ready to face them with his sword and hammer, he disappeared for a few moments behind all those red cloaks.

*You’ve to help him,* a voice said inside her mind. But she was in shock. Sandor would die right in front of her while she remained still on the ground, watching silently.

Nor far from her hand was the sword of one of the guards Sandor had killed earlier.

*It can’t be too hard.*

She grabbed the sword with both hands, feeling its weight in every muscle of her arms, and took a
step forward. Nobody would expect her to join the fight. And the men had their backs turned to her. It would be easy to stab them, wouldn’t it? Her hands were trembling, the blood rushing in her veins and making her feel hot in the head.

*You’ve to do something.*

Sansa would’ve stuck the sword on the back of a man if he hadn’t been thrown away suddenly, with his chest open.

She didn’t know how, but the Hound was alive and fighting, his arms moving too much quickly for her to follow them. The hammer was breaking ribs, arms and even skulls, as if having its own life in Sandor’s hand. The sword was ripping arms, cutting heads and taking down each one of those red Lannister’s guards.

When the last man fell on the ground, Sandor fell with him, the spear still pinning his foot to the ground.

“Sandor!” She cried, kneeling at his side.

“I’m alright.” He said, making a painful expression while pulling out the spear.

She touched the wound in his arm. It was bleeding, but it wasn’t the worse. Besides scratch in the good side of his face, he was bleeding from a wound in his right hand and, of course, from his foot.

“Can you walk?”

“Yes.” He grumbled, already trying to stand up. “We’ve to go… the fucking king…”

“You won’t survive, Sandor. You’re wounded and—”

*It’s too late for the king.*

She knew Joffrey must be dead. By the sound of that scream, *his* scream, she knew he had to be dead.

“Wounded?” He laughed bitterly, exposing his yellow teeth. “I’ve faced worse. Believe me.”

Once again, she was amazed when the Hound managed to put himself up again and limp, almost at his normal walking speed, toward the king’s pavilion. Unable to say another word, Sansa kept as close to him as she could, following the red trail left by his bleeding foot.

“You’ll kill us both if you go inside.” Sansa grabbed him by the arm, detaining him. The cries and screams coming from inside were worse than the ones coming from the battle starting by the lists.

He didn’t reply with words, but with one of those enigmatic ugly smiles, before pulling again his hammer and enter.

The place was crowded with Lannister’s guards, or what Sansa suspected now were men simply wearing the Lannister armour. More men than she could count. Their swords gleamed in the light, filling every corner of the big pavilion Joffrey had assembled. Lannisters fighting Lannisters, making impossible for her or anyone else to distinguish between friend and foe. Even before she could blink, the Hound was ripping through every man on his way, ignoring the hits directed to him.

*THE KING IS DEAD!* Screamed a man, jumping to the top of a table. *THE KING IS DEAD!* *LONG LIVE THE FUCKING KING!* Another guard yelled, lifting a spear in the air.
“Oh, no.” She said in a whisper, hiding her mouth behind her hand.

Joffrey.

Sansa thought she would vomit again at such an horrible sight.

At the end of the spear, just like the heads on spikes freezing on the battlements of Maegor’s, was Joffrey’s head. She couldn’t see where the rest of his body was, but that was clearly his head, the golden curls soaked in blood, his mouth opened in a terrified silent scream and his eyes filled with fear. He had died like a traitor, with his head cut off.

Dead.

Joffrey is dead.

She was having a tough time accepting that fact, her eyes fixed on the head looming right ahead of her. Was it possible to be happy and scared at the same time? A smile formed in her lips, vanishing quickly, drowned by all the thoughts invading her mind.

Joffrey was killed by Lannister’s guards.

No. No. That didn’t make any sense at all.

The world was oozing around her, cold sweat gathering in her forehead. She took a step back, preparing to flee from that hell. The Hound had asked for her to stay close, but she had lost him completely. Could he have fallen already? Yes, he was surely dead. She could no longer hear his hammer smashing the life out of those devils in red.

My own fate on my own hands.

She needed to get away. She had to return to the keep, make her way through the city and hope that her child, her little prince, was still waiting in his chambers, safe and playing with his wooden direwolf.

The new king.

Sansa turned on her heels, decided to face alone what was waiting for her outside and to make her way to the keep no matter what.

A hand clasped around her arm.

“Well, well, look who has come to pay a last visit to the king.”

For the first time in her life, she was glad to see Ser Meryn Trant and his white cloak. He was severely wounded on his left arm, covering his armour in blood. Even so, he was alive and capable of fighting. It was his duty to escort her back to the keep.

“Ser Meryn, you’ve to come with me to—”

The moment his iron mailed hand slapped her, hope died again. The impact of the slap was so that her crown immediately fell from her head and her lip split, submerging again her mouth with the taste of blood.

“You don’t give me orders, you wolfish whore.” He grabbed Sansa by the hair and pulled her with him, forcing her to lie on her back over a table.
“I’m your queen!” She tried to scream, feeling the pain in her face, the blood running down her chin. She tried to stand, to get away from that man, but another slap made her fall again. “You can’t do this!”, she cried, furious.

Her voice grew weaker.

I’m a fool.

No one would come for her.

No one ever did.

“Can’t I?” Ser Meryn asked, sarcastically, before ripping her gown. “Nobody cares if I fuck the queen. The king is dead. Didn’t you see his head?” He laughed. “Do you think they’ll care about the fucking queen?” He pushed something from his belt. “The moment they catch you they will cut your little head. They’ll find out it was you and your brother the ones behind all this mess… So thank me, Your fucking Grace, for ending you life in such a pleasurable way.”

And then she saw the dagger on his hand. She would’ve recognized it everywhere, since its handle had an unique form: a direwolf’s head. There were only seven daggers like that in the realm, and all of them belonged to the members of her Queensguard.

“Do you think you would fool us?” He asked, the dagger gleaming in his hand. “It was a brilliant strategy, I’ve to give you that, but next time you want to kill a king to put your son in his throne don’t give the assassin a dagger that can be traced to you.”

Robb would never plot to kill Joffrey in such a cowardly dumb way, especially knowing what that would cost her. What that would cost the North. But the dagger belonged indeed to one of the members on her Queensguard. Who it belonged, and how it had got lost, she didn’t know. And she knew it had to be a lie.

Someone is trying to frame the North for the king’s death.

“I don’t know what are you talking about.” She snarled, viciously, in one last attempt to get away from ser Meryn’s grip. The guard simply laughed and slapped her one more time.

“SHUT UP! I like my whores to be quiet.” He said, using his left hand to loosen his pants while the right one pressed the dagger over her throat. She felt the sting of the blade breaking her skin.

My own fate, she remembered, looking directly into Ser Meryn’s eyes. My own fate in my own hands.

She wouldn’t be raped. She preferred to die. So, locked under his body, she did the only thing she could. Lifting both her hands, she pressed the points of her fingers into Ser Meryn’s eyes, catching him by surprise. How she summoned up the courage to do it, she would never know. She hadn’t been brave enough to stab a man on his back a few minutes ago, but was now doing this without a drop of remorse. She pressed her fingers, her nails carving his eyeballs like a blade. And she kept on pressing, revelling in his screams, feeling drops of blood raining down on her face, sensing the eyeballs breaking under her thumbs…

Ser Meryn dropped the dagger and took a step back, his hands covering his bleeding eyes, trying to understand what was happening. With her bloody hands, Sansa rolled on the table and before she could understand how, she grabbed the dagger and buried it into Ser Meryn’s throat. He collapsed immediately, life slipping away from his body.
She pulled out the dagger and turned around. The fight had escalated. Someone had lighted a fire at the far end of the pavilion. The flames were spreading quickly. On the ground, the bodies were piling up, one by one.

“The North is avenged.”

With a gasp, she turned back to see two Lannister’s guards wielding their swords but with friendly smiles on their lips. Sansa gulped, clenching the dagger’s handle.

*The North is avenged.*

“What?” It was the only thing she managed to ask at the sound of those words. No, she refused to believe Robb would’ve acted in such way to get her back to safety. No, this had to be the work from someone else, someone who was doing an excellent job framing the Starks for the crime and making sure all Seven Kingdoms knew about it. “That’s a lie.”

The guard laughed, putting away his sword.

“Oh, I’m afraid it isn’t, Your Grace.” He replied, ominously. “Long live the puppy king!”

She didn’t flinch when a sword made a clean quick cut, taking off the two men’s heads at once. By the time the heads fell on the ground, still inside their helmets, Sansa was already looking to the Hound.

“You are hard to kill, aren’t you?” She laughed, nervously and so very happy to see him again. Tears came to her eyes at the same moment.

“Where were you?” He asked, angrily. Looking to his face, she recognized the glint of fear in his eyes. The flames surrounding the pavilion, bringing it down, gave her the answer to the question she didn’t asked.

“I tried to follow you, but I got lost in—” She stopped, noticing how his eyes were fixed on the dagger in her hand. “Sandor, I need to get back to the keep.”

*Sandor.*

The name felt so strange, yet so familiar, leaving her lips.

He nodded, and she felt some strange bond forming between the two of them. There was no need for questions.

“The keep isn’t safe for you.” He explained quickly, limping toward her. After locking his hammer again on the belt, he pushed the wolf fur covering her back and threw it to the ground. “They must think you died in the fight.” He explained, resting his hand on her shoulder. She could feel his weight on her, knowing he was using her like a crutch. “Do you realize what’s happening? They may be wearing the Lannister’s colors, but they are framing your brother.”

“Yes, I know.”

Who could be behind it? Not the Lannisters, for sure. The Tyrells? It was hard to believe they would go to such lengths to get a crown for Margaery. Besides, that made no sense at all. By killing Joffrey the chance of Margaery to be crowned as queen was gone. Could Lord Garlan’s daughter be the card they wanted to play? Force a marriage between the girl and Edwyle? Even so, it was a strange move to make: take down a king and frame the House of the new sovereign’s mother for that crime.
“Cersei will have your head for the head of her son.” He said, now pushing his way out of the tent. “Presuming the bitch is still alive.”

That was a fair question. As soon as the left the tent, they stopped on their heels, breathing the frost smoky air. Chaos had been installed on the Tournament’s ground. Dozens of tents were ablaze, just like the one they had left. The wooden benches, where not a while ago dozens of guests were waiting for the jousts, had fallen and were also in flames. She could see bodies on the frozen ground, some of them burning like torches. Trying to escape whatever was happening, members of the small folk and the nobility alike were running toward the King’s Gate. All of them wanted to get away from the cruel kisses of the swords singing on the snow.

It was by the gates true chaos was installed. Hundreds were fighting each other trying to enter the city, men rioting against men, knights fighting against knights, women pulling another women’s hairs. No matter who they were, what their names were or whose side they were fighting for: they were simply humans fighting for survival.

Meanwhile, the snow-covered fields had turned from white to brown and red, blood slowly melting ice. Guards were still crying “The King is dead! Long live the King!” making sure the news kept spreading like wildfire, associating Edwyle’s name to that villainous crime.

*He’s the new king*, she kept reminding herself.

To make it worse, Joffrey’s head was still somewhere among the crowd, balancing dangerously on top of a spear like a trophy, while the rest off his body remained inside the tent, burning to ashes.

A tear ran down Sansa’s face.

“If you want to survive, we’ve to leave. The Lannister will come after you the moment they reorganize themselves after this mess.”

Sansa shook her head. Yes, every word that had left his lips was right, but he was not aware of what she knew.

“Varys is the one behind this.” She said, confident enough to keep her voice from trembling. The queen faced the Hound in the eyes, ready to tell him the truth. It was not easy for her to admit before him she had tried to play the game and had dared to make the riskiest move ever. “I made plans to flee from the keep with the prince.” Confusion reached immediately Sandor’s face. “It was supposed to happen today.”

“She Spider?” Sandor finished his question with a laugh, shaking his head.

“I had my reasons to trust him.” She claimed quickly.

“The Spider is not your ally, little bird.” He said, sighing.

“Please, don’t talk to me like I’m a fool little girl.” She said, angrily. “Who was I supposed to trust? I had no one else.”

“Making plans to escape with your son was a foolish mistake for a start.” He said. “What do you thought would happen next? That you would live with him happily ever after in the fucking North?”

“You don’t understand the hell I’ve been!” She said, tears of anger boiling up to her eyes. “I just wanted… I wanted him to be free of this deadly game. Is that much?”

Sandor laughed, still seeing her as a fool.
“Yeah, you did a wonderful job.”

She ignored that remark.

“Varys was the one insisting to remove Edwyle from the Keep since the very first day of my imprisonment. I guess he must’ve also plotted to kill Joffrey all this time, so that an escape and a murder could both be blamed on the Starks.” Sansa stopped for a moment. More than helping, the eunuch had fooled her, putting stupid ideas in her mind, making her believe everything could be right and getting her approval to commit this madness.

*I’m growing mad.*

“That’s why you’ve to do exactly what it’s expected of you right now. Run. Run to the North. Join forces with your brother. You’ve to do it. Not only for your life, but also for you son’s. If Varys brought this down on us, he’ll also get your child out of the keep and send him home. You could be by his side soon.” He stopped, noticing the doubts still painted on her face. “And if the Spider fails, and you child falls on the Lannister’s hands, you’ll have to do your best to get him back.” He paused, grunting with pain. “There is no other option here for you other than death.”

“I can’t do it.” She said, opening her arms. “I will never reach the North. Even if the Lannisters don’t send men after me, the cold will get me.”

“You won’t be alone.”

Sansa blinked.

“Do you remember what I told you after the Blackwater Battle?” He asked, the shadows dancing on his face at the movement of the flames. “I told you I could keep you safe. I told you that the realm was afraid of me, and that fear would be our armor. And I promised that nobody would hurt you again, or I’d kill them. Do you remember?”

*If I were to escape with you,* she added, remembering perfectly well how he had asked for a song.

“I’m not a fucking knight.” He added quickly, looking her in the face. “But my sword is yours if you want it.”

She opened her mouth to answer, but in that moment a voice sounded right behind them.

“Get away from her, dog.”
Varys had told her how to reach the keep, even though time hadn’t totally erased the memories from her days chasing cats through the tunnels. So, when she led her little army into the dragon’s skulls chamber, she knew they were close. Soon enough, they were crossing a discreet archway close to the Hand’s Tower, right next to the armory.

Arya nodded to herself, glad the courtyard was empty as the Spider said it would be.

“I’ll take it from here, my lady.” Smalljon said, discharging her before she could reply. “You’ve done more than what we bargained for. I know the keep better than you and I’ll do a better work getting us inside without giving us out.”

*Work with allies is fucking frustrating,* Arya remembered, taking a step back to renounce her lead. *But yeah, it’s necessary.*

As soon as the sellswords had organized to form a column composed of rows of two, they left the courtyard and passed to the more agitated areas of the keep. It was strange, and completely insane, to walk among the enemy, as if invisible. Not that the castle was crowded, because it wasn’t. It seemed most of the people were indeed at the Tournament’s grounds.

However, servants had been left behind, as well as older noblemen who were too weak to make a journey through the wintry morning mist. And, of course, there were guards watching every passage, all of them wearing the red color of the Lannisters or the golden cloaks of the City Watch. They nodded as they passed, acknowledging their presence, not caring about who was beneath those helmets.

*This is too much easy,* she thought to herself, feeling her stomach revolve when the gates of Maegor’s emerged through the snow.

It was there that their first obstacle awaited: a knight with a white cloak of the Kingsguard

“What do you want?” The knight asked, as they approached.

Since Arya didn’t recognize his face, she supposed the man had taken his place at the Kingsguard recently.

“Ser Osmund Kettleback, the Dowager Queen just sent us.” Smalljon said, with a surprisingly good southern accent. “We are here to reinforce the security on the Prince’s quarters.”

“The Prince?” Kettleback asked, suspicious. “No one told me to expect reinforcements.”

“Are you questioning the Dowager Queen’s orders, ser?”

*He was right,* Arya smirked underneath her helmet. *He can get us in.*

Osmund Kettleback stared back to Smalljon, trying to figure out who was underneath the helmet. The threat of disobeying an order coming directly from Cersei Lannister imposed enough fear to
rethink before saying no again. So, uneasy, the knight change his mind and cleared the passage.

“Come on, then.” He said, taking a step back. “You can enter.”

Smalljon didn’t thank. He simply marched through the drawbridge, soon crossing the gates as if he owned the place. Arya followed, side by side with other sellswords.

They were inside Maegor’s as if it was the most easily breaching holdfast in the Seven Kingdoms.

“We don’t have much time now.” Smalljon said, removing his helmet. He looked gaunt and pale, his eyes turning quickly, testing strategies in his mind. Thankfully, the passageway was clear for the moment, but somewhere were more guards and probably another Kingsguard.

The captain of the Queensguard turned toward one of the sellswords, the tallest of them all, before Arya could share her view about what they should do.

“Go to the quarters near the Queen’s Ballroom and deal with any man or servant you find on the way. Escort the prisoners to the ballroom and kill the ones that don’t collaborate. Take five man with you and make your best at it. Be quick and make you way to the top of the tower when you’re done.” Quickly, he turned to another sellsword, this time a broad one. “You’ll go to the Guest Apartments. I don’t expect you’ll meet any threat on the way, but we must be careful. I think three men should suffice to accompany you. Take them and go.” And, finally, he turned on his heels to face Arya and the five men who lasted. “The rest of us will take care of the prince.”

Arya nodded, pulling out Needle of her sheath.

“Let’s go.”

She felt more alive than ever. Her heart was racing maddened by the idea of getting revenge for her family. And wasn’t that the most glorious thing in the world? As she started following Smalljon through the corridors and then through a set of stairs, climbing their way to the royal chambers, she kept on smiling like a maniac.

“It’s too much quiet.” One of the sellswords said, impatiently, as they turned a corner.

*It’s quiet, yes, but not for long.*

“What are you?”

The voice came from someone placed right ahead of them. Her hands started trembling with excitement when she noticed the five Lannister guards – *real* Lannister guards – at the other end of the corridor, blocking the staircase that led to the royal bedchambers.

“The Dowager Queen sent us to watch the prince.” Smalljon repeated the lie, once again using his fake accent.

The man on the other side wasn’t so easily convinced by that.

“Why are you wielding your weapons, then?” The man asked, placing a hand on the hilt of his sword. “All care is needed nowadays.” It was not even an attempt to salvage the situation. It was more like a joke. Smalljon was prepared to fight.

“Well, then remove your helmet.” Commanded the guard, pulling out his sword. His men did the same. “All of you. Let me see your faces.”
“Yeah, about that…” Smalljon laughed. “I don’t think it’ll happen.”

The fight started in a blink of an eye. Suddenly, it was five against seven in an easy, but messy battle. Arya went after a guard who came directly at her. He was a good fighter and gave her a tough time for a few seconds, reaching for her flank. However, after a few strikes she managed to lift Needle, catching the man off guard, and plunging the thin blade through his chin. She felt his teeth and bone crushing as the sword slipped through his head.

Looking around, she realized how messy the fight had turned so quickly. Which guards were on her side? She gulped, trying to distinguish Smalljon among the red crowd.

“Look out!” Someone screamed right behind her. She looked over her shoulder in time to escape what would have been a fatal blow on her head. The sword of her attacker hit the wall.

“Seven Hells.”

She couldn’t know who her attacker was: friend or foe? Definitely foe, she thought, averting a second blow that would have ripped her hand off. Doing her best to escape his sword, she couldn’t keep up with his up. She kept on raising Needle in time to defend the attacks, but not quick enough to retaliate.

“Stark!” Someone yelled, someone she couldn’t understand. It wasn’t Smalljon’s voice. “Justice for the Starks!”

As must as she wanted, she couldn’t afford the luxury to turn her neck to see who was screaming for her family. Fortunately, her rival committed the mistake she didn’t, giving her the chance to knock him down. In a desperate move to get rid of him, she pushed the man. Losing his balance, the guard trumped on a body already on the ground and crashed against a window, falling noisily through it. His scream, quickly followed by the sound of his body being impaled by the frozen spikes at the bottom of the moat, made everyone silent for a second.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. A body falling through one of Maegor’s windows? Shouting to the seven winds that they were invading the castle would have been a better way to announce themselves. It was a matter of time now until reinforcements arrived.

And then, to her great consternation, Jaime Lannister appeared on the hallway, descending from a staircase. Three more red guards followed him, their swords ready. She blinked, excited, and eager to give her blade a taste of Lannister blood. She cut down a guard who came running out of nowhere, brandishing his sword like a mad man, and pushed him against another guard approaching.

The Kingslayer fought gracefully, his sword nothing more than a flash of light, ripping through flesh and bone as if it was as soft as paper. He could be older and balder, but he was still capable of fighting like a young warrior.

“I can fight him.” She said to herself, even though it was a lie. Inhaling, she lift Needle and…

Someone grabbed her arm and threw her against a wall.

It was as quicker as that. In a moment, she was preparing herself to face the Kingslayer, on the other she was at the end of sword, its tip on her neck. In a failed attempt to get out of that situation, she tried to use Needle do strike back. The guard stopped her with a simple tatic: he spoke.

“You must go and fetch the child… Do it quickly, girl. Do it while the Kingslayer is here.” Even if his voice was cut off by his hasty breathing, she recognized Smalljon. He was pointing his sword at her as a cover up, gaining a few seconds for them to talk. He nodded toward the set of stairs: the way
was clear. “The royal chambers are right above.”

“No.” She replied, her eyes flashing in search of Jaime Lannister. “We are outnumbered at the moment. You won’t have a chance to defeat the Kingslayer by your own, not even with the help of a few sellswords. But I can help you.”

Someone yelled, startling them. Down the hallway, Jaime Lannister was still fighting three men at the same time and winning. More Lannister’s guards were running down the corridor, lifting their swords to aid the ones who were duelling the Kingslayer. More sellswords, more than the ones who had accompanied them from the chambers underground. Could there be more false guards than the ones Varys hadn’t told them about?

“It seems the Gods are smiling upon us.” Smalljon said, with a weak laugh. “Now go, girl. Go and run like the wind. I’ll do my best to clear the way for our prince.”

Before he could go, Arya pulled one of her daggers and, to Smalljon’s surprise, made a scratch on his breastplate.

“This way I’ll recognize you.” She explained, also scratching her armor.

He nodded before returning to the fight.

Swift as a deer, Arya started climbing the staircase, three steps in a row, running faster than ever. Quickly, a gallery with too many doors appeared in front of her. Thankfully, there was no sign of a guard. With the sound of cries and swords clashing below stairs, she surveyed the doors, trying to concentrate, and easily found the one she looked for.

“Who is it?” Asked a voice behind the door, after she knocked.

“It’s me.” Arya answered, noticing for the first time how breathless she was. “It’s me, mother.”

She was not expecting an embrace from her mother when the door opened, not even a comment about how happy she was to see her. A speech about how stupid she was for putting herself in such danger would’ve been more than normal coming from Lady Catelyn Stark. However, the greeting waiting for Arya was totally unexpected.

“May the Seven be gentle…” Her mother said, tears running down her face while a smile spread on her lips. “You’ve come for Edwyle.”

“And for you.” She added quickly, taking off her helmet. “But we’ve to leave now.”

Catelyn nodded, gesturing to someone inside the chamber. Arya looked over her mother’s shoulder to see Sansa’s lady-in-waiting approach, pushing a chair with wheels. The prince was sitting in his little wooden throne, with his leg bandaged and his eyes wide open in curiosity. Arya blinked, mixed feelings troubling her concerning the little boy. During all those years in Winterfell she had developed her own idea about what her nephew would be, imagining him like a version of Joffrey, maybe with something from Sansa. However, the boy’s eyes, blue like her sister’s, were full of something Joffrey never had: kindness.

“No one told me about this.” Arya said, taking a step further. She used Needle to point to the chair. “Can’t he walk?”

“I’m afraid I can’t, my lady.” The prince replied on his own, so much like Sansa. “I’ve injured my leg.”
Arya exchanged a glance with her mother and shrugged her shoulders.

“I guess I can simply carry him on my back.”

Hodor used to carry Bran on his back all the time when he was younger. Yes, she hadn’t the built of the half giant, but the child wasn’t bigger than Bran was at the time.

“You’ll carry him where?” Asked the lady-in-waiting, more than intrigued.

Arya blinked, not sure how to deal with the girl.

“Jeyne, if you value your life go and lock yourself up in the bedchamber.” Commanded Catelyn, sternly.

“Lady Catelyn, this is treason.” The girl said, aghast.

Arya pulled her dagger.

“And this is death.” She warned, ready to shut her up. “Haven’t you heard my mother? Lock yourself up and don’t whisper a word, or I’ll kill you.”

“Jeyne has done nothing wrong, my lady.” The prince observed, his eyes wide open. He was clearly growing distressed. “There is no need to kill her.”

The boy was getting under her nerves and she didn’t know why. She wanted to hate him, but she couldn’t. In fact, she found herself smiling to him.

_The little brat._

“Yes.” She said, kneeling to comfort the prince. The last thing she needed was an agitated child. She had hated being a child, and she now hated children. Or wanted to hate. “But sometimes, to prevent someone of hurting us, we must hurt them first.”

Hastily, Lady Catelyn led the girl to a side room, locking her up and saving the key in a pocket of her dress.

“Won’t the girl give us any trouble?” Asked Arya, standing up.

Lady Catelyn smiled and shook her head.

“No, I’ll take care of her.”

Arya blinked and looked again to her mother.

“What do you mean you’ll take care of her?” Deep down, she knew what her mother meant. “You won’t come?”

The smile on Catelyn’s lips was not one for happiness, not even for sadness, but was instead a smile of relief.

“No, I won’t.” She said. “I can’t leave your sister alone.”

“But she isn’t alone.” Arya replied quickly. No, she hadn’t come so far to leave without her mother. She refused to let her behind. “We’ve sent men to rescue Sansa. She’ll join us on the ship, I assure you.”
If someone could see the truth beyond her lies, that someone was her mother.

“Oh, Arya, no. I won’t go…” She said, sitting on a chair. “I promised her I would leave King’s Landing to make sure Edwyle was safe, but now that you’re her you’ll take care of him. Sansa needs me here. If she manages to escape, as I pray the Seven she will, I’ll surrender my life willingly and do my best to amend the relations between the Throne and the North. Gods knows we’ll need that. If she is caught, I’ll help her escape this hell, any way I can.” Arya shivered, noticing how deadly her mother sounded. “But I’ve nothing to go back. Not anymore. Your brother has a wife and doesn’t need another woman surrounding his castle, and Bran and Rickon… Well, they may need me, yes, but they are grow up and have learned how to live without my presence. Sansa, however—”

“But they do need you!” Arya yelled helplessly. “Even I need you!”

She only realized tears were running down her face when the taste of salt reached her mouth.

“I need you to come, Mother.” Arya urged between sobs. “We can be together again. All of us. As a family should be. And from Winterfell we can face whatever Joffrey throw at us. Father always said it’s impossible to invade the North if two hundred determined archers hold the Neck. So please, mother, we can still do this. You’ve to come… You’ve to come home.”

“Arya, you’re losing time.” She said, softly, stretching a finger to catch her tears. “There is nothing you can do to convince me to go. You’ve the right to be anger with me, but some day I know you’ll understand. I could never leave King’s Landing knowing there was a chance, even if it’s a slim one, of Sansa being alone in these walls, trapped like a mouse at Joffrey’s will and growing mad with the pain of not having a single person, not even her brother, willing to fight for her.”

“But if she escapes, you’ll suffer. The torture, the pain, the loneliness.”

Catelyn shrugged.

“I’m an old woman. My life ended the moment your father said yes to Robert Baratheon. So, let them come. I’ll gladly pay the price. They can torture and kill me slowly, but I will greet the Seven when they come for me if I know all my children are safe at Winterfell, taking back what it’s ours.”

“No, I won’t allow it.” Arya replied, feeling angry tears boiling up to her eyes again. “You will come with us, even if I’ve to force you.”

“Where are we going after all?” For the first time in a while, the prince spoke. He had listened to every word exchanged, and seemed to have understood everything. “And who are you after all, my lady?”

“This is your aunt Arya.” Catelyn presented, kneeling in front of her grandson. “She’ll take you to the North.”

“I’m taking you both to the North.” Arya insisted, gripping the pommel of her sword.

“The North?” Edwyle asked curiously. “But it’s cold there, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Catelyn sniffed, containing the sobs. “But once you’re at Winterfell, you’ll be warm. In fact I’ve one last story to tell: long ago, when I wed your grandfather, he knew I would miss home in the cold plains of the North. So, as a proof of love, he gave me a little piece of something that reminded me home and since that than onwards every time I missed my father and siblings, I would to the Glass Gardens your grandfather built for me. A place where the temperature is warm even during the coldest blizzard, where blue roses bloom even when the sky is dark and where water never freezes. Every time you miss home, go to the gardens and pray to the Seven. I’ll be there with you, even if
you can’t see me. Will you do that for me?”

The prince opened his mouth to answer, but someone else spoke behind them.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to postpone the prince’s visit.”

Arya lifted Needle immediately, turning to the door. Ser Jaime Lannister was standing by the threshold. His white cloak, she noticed, was stained with fresh blood, but unfortunately it seemed it wasn’t his. He removed the helmet, exposing his blond hair and an expression of anger and disappointment.

“No, we won’t.” Arya said, taking a step toward him. She could sense her mother right behind, hearing the rustle of her dress while she moved to stop Arya from a certain death.

Jaime Lannister laughed, but the sound that came out of his mouth was mortifying.

“I don’t want to kill you, girl, but I will if you don’t put your funny little sword down.”

He’s underestimating me, she thought with a crazed desire to show him what she could do.

“Why would I do that?” She replied, advancing another step.

However, dispensing her as if she was nothing more than a nuisance, Jaime Lannister’s eyes moved from Arya to Catelyn.

“Lady Stark, I beg you to stop this madness before you pass the point of no return.” He said, sternly. Surprisingly, he leaned against the door’s threshold, showing no intent to fight. The tip of his sword touched the ground. “We can start a new war right now… or we can put this bloody feud between our Houses to rest once and for all. It’s your call.”

Catelyn stepped from behind her daughter. The tears who just seconds ago were streaming down her face were gone, replaced by a serious and curious expression.

“I’m afraid certain wounds will never heal, ser Jaime.” Calmly, she lifted her hand to pull down Arya’s arm. “Maybe my daughters are right.” She continued, pausing for a second to consider her next words. “Maybe it’s time we defy the Throne so that you will stop treating us as prisoners.”

It was strange to see Jaime Lannister advocating peace, especially after watching him slay man after man downstairs. But for once Arya saw something in the Kingslayer she had never seen before: he seemed tired and suddenly so old. Every wrinkle in his face seemed to beg her to put the sword down and stop fighting. Unlike Robb, his words were not a show of cowardice, but a man wishing to start living a life that had been denied to him for years.

He wants what we want, Arya understood. Home. A place away from this shithole and with the one person he loves at his side.

Yes, she could read the pleading in his eyes. That was why he was willing to put down his sword and discuss terms. Peace would grant him a way to finally leave the keep, the place where he had lived since he was a boy of fifteen or sixteen-year-old. But once again, Starks and Lannister wouldn’t align because the only way for them Starks to get home now would be war. She looked at her mother, so close now to the Kingslayer, trying to understand if she would also act as a coward and surrender again their future.

A word from the queen’s mother and the bloodshed downstairs could be forgotten by the Lannisters in a second. The prince could be safely transferred to a chamber with no chance for escape. Maybe
even Sansa could be escorted back to the keep. The birds would be locked again on their cage.

It was Catelyn’s choice.

“Do you want a negotiation, ser?” Her words were hard as ice. “I’ll hear your terms, then. But only after you give me the truth. Tell me the one thing I’ve wanted to know for all these years, and I’ll hear anything you might have to say and truly consider it. But first, the truth.”

Arya turned her head toward Catelyn, not following the conversation anymore. What truth was that she was talking about? She may have not understand it, but Ser Jaime clearly had.

“Your son.” He said, nodding. A grim glint transformed his eyes. “The cripple one, isn’t it? Is that what you want to know?”

_Bran._ Everything had started the moment he had fallen from that tower, hadn’t it?

Catelyn nodded, advancing another step toward him.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Her voice trembled, as did her hands, which she was keeping inside the pockets of her dress. “Did you push him from that tower? I’ve to know. I’ve to know the truth to start healing my wounds.”

Jaime Lannister stared back at her, considering her words.

Arya felt her heart beating faster.

The truth.

But then, the kingslayer shook his head.

“No, it wasn’t me.”

What followed next happened so fast Arya didn’t saw it coming.

Out of nowhere, Lady Catelyn took her right hand out of her pocket pulling a dagger.

_My dagger,_ Arya realized, touching the empty sheath of the blade.

“LIAR!” Catelyn screamed, and in that sound was something capable of shaking Arya to the core. She had never believed Old Nan tales about ghosts and spirits, but it was the type of scream that belonged to those stories. A scream of someone who had had her soul ripped out, of someone who had given up on life even though their heart was still beating, of someone in a great unmeasurable pain. Unfortunately, it was a feeble attempt, and Arya felt a pang of pity for her mother when the Kingslayer hit her in the face, with his mailed hand, throwing her against the stone wall. The pity was over quickly, though, because Arya had already released the rage she couldn’t control, that very same rage she had been feeding for years. By the time Lady Catelyn’s body hit the floor, Arya was already moving to strike against the Kingslayer.

Not even Jaime Lannister’s laugh made her fear for her life. Needle met his blade. The sound of swords clashing echoed through the room as the prince started crying, joining his sobs to the song of steel.

“I should have guessed it would be pointless to talk sense into you.” Ser Jaime snarled, striking to her waist. She stopped him in time, trying to tackle him next on the leg. He was too strong for her, too
tall, too quick. But she kept fighting, making her best to detain his blows, observing the way he moved, trying to find weaknesses. “You’re just like your father.”

_Fear cuts deeper than swords._

No, she couldn’t be afraid. Looking around quickly she saw the table and understood what she had to do. If she could only run to it and jump to its top, she would be taller than Ser Jaime and…

Needle flew from her hand before she could do anything else.

“Will you surrender now?” Jaime asked, resting his sword on her neck.

_What do we say to the God of death?_

“Not today.” She replied, before spitting in his face. Her hope was that the spit would distract the Kingslayer for a second, allowing her to get the second dagger in her belt. And when Ser Jaime blinked in surprise, she found a way to grab it, and pull it out and…

She couldn’t believe her eyes when Ser Jaime’s sword descended upon her hand, missing her flesh by inches to hit the dagger. The impact force her hands release the dagger, which fell a few feet away.

“Good try, girl.” He said, pointing his sword to her throat while the other hand cleaned the spit still on his face.

“Go on, then, you monster.” She snarled.

If this was the end, she wouldn’t die pleading for her life.

“Do you really think I will kill you?” He asked, astounded, laughing again. “I know better than that. You Starks are hard to—.”

Once again, a quick sequence of events followed, almost too quick for her to follow. Ser Jaime’s words were cut off literally by a dagger on his throat. The blade had been stuck on the back of his head, right at the end of his scruff, buried so deep that its point came out at the middle of his throat. Arya blinked, watching the arrogance transform into something else in his eyes. It wasn’t fear, more like as if in his head he was saying _Oh fuck, didn’t see this coming._ Blood blurted from his mouth, sprinkled directly to Arya’s face.

“No… Wha…” He said, touching the end of the blade with his free hand.

And then, to Arya’s horror, Jaime Lannister swirled on his heels, lifting his sword and cutting the head of the person behind him. One blow wasn’t enough, but as the scream filled the room Arya understood what was happening. Managing to deliver three more blows, Jaime Lannister finally managed to cut off the head of the person who had stabbed him on the back.

Arya fell on her knees when the head of Catelyn Stark rolled to her feet.

The prince’s screams were filling her ears, and somewhere Sansa’s lady-in-waiting was banging on the door to get out. But Arya couldn’t move as she watched Ser Jaime also sinking on his knees, drowning in his own blood, next to her mother’s headless corpse. His body stopped moving after a few seconds, with his lifeless eyes staring toward the ceiling.

“No, no, no…” Arya said, refusing to look again to the head a few inches from her hand. She feared a part of her mother could still be alive. “No, no, no.” Completely bewildered, Arya turned got up
and turned to the prince. The child screamed even louder as she extended her hands toward him, ready to grab him and run from that hell. “No, no, no.”

For a few minutes, she lost track of everything. And then she was running through the holdfast, the Prince crying while sited on her shoulders, making his best to hold her neck. His tears against the skin of her neck made her even more desperate to get out.

No, no, no.

The moment she reached the passageway downstairs, the fight seemed to be over. There were no men there, only bodies piling on the ground and blood painting everything in red. So much death, so much more than what they were supposed to bring to the holdfast.

You’ve walked into a trap, a trap, trappity, trap.

She descended another set of stairs, and then another, find the way clear to her escape. She just wanted to run, disregarding completely the dead bodies on the way. She only remembered she was supposed to find Smalljon Umber when the knight appeared right in front of her, close to the drawbridge. He had lost his helmet, his face covered in blood, but he seemed fine.

“What happened?” He asked, noticing how distressed she was. “Why did you take so much?”

She simply shook her head, incapable of speaking. Gesturing toward the Prince sitting on her shoulders, Smalljon quickly understood what she meant and, without questions, transferred the boy to his own back. He was still adjusting the prince when Arya walked through the gates, down the drawbridge, feeling despair taking over her.

She couldn’t understand what had just happened, but something was broken inside her forever. The Arya Stark who had climbed her way to the top of Maegor’s Holdfast had died beside her mother, and had been replaced by something entirely, a new person she didn’t know.

If I could’ve just climbed to that table…

But her Mother had died, losing her head as her father would’ve lost years go. War was inevitable now. Even Robb couldn’t turn his head to the events that would follow. If he were to do that again, she would rebel. Not a rebellion for playing with swords or use pants instead of dresses. She would actually rebel against her brother, divide the Northern Houses against him, rally men willing to defend the Stark’s honor and get her revenge over Joffrey, the Lannisters, the Tyrells and all the others who had looked for their fall.

More carnage awaited them outside, but also what seemed to be a celebration of victory. Guards wearing the red armor were running everywhere, their yells filling the morning with words she couldn’t grasp.

“FOR THE NORTH!” Many of them were chanting.

“JUSTICE FOR THE STARKS!” Another one cried.

How many red guards were? More than fifty, not considering the ones who lied dead on the ground. Maybe even more than seventy. Looking back to the holdfast, she then saw someone had hanged a banner from a window. A white banner, with a grey direwolf’s head on it. That made no sense at all, unless…

Varys.
The truth sunk in like a punch in her stomach,

It all had started with him.

She knew it was too late to catch the eunuch, but she ran through the chaos, oblivious to anything else. For seconds, she lost sight of Smalljon and the prince. She forgot her mother’s head laying on the floor. She forgot about Sansa. The only thing on her mind was to get her hands around Varys’ neck to rip his head out of his body.

Her feet led her to the hidden archway close to the Hand’s Tower, and then down the stairs, the chamber of the dragon’s skulls, and more stairs, and more passageways and then she was again on the chamber where everything had started less than an hour before. She was breathless, tears running down her face and sword ready to kill.

But there was no sign of the eunuch. Instead, she trumped on something in the dark. She had to cross the room to grab a torch so she could see whatever was on the floor. It was Wendel, of course, staring at her with his eyes open, next to the eunuch’s bodyguard. Someone had broken his neck.

Arya knelt by his side and placed her fingers on his eyelids, closing them.

*Another kill for the North to bear.*

Varys had played them like a puppet master. He knew the tensions between the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, especially the animosity between House Stark, Lannister and Tyrell and in a brilliant move he had set the path for them to destroy themselves and start a war. She doubted he was siding with any House would take part on that war, but we would get a war, and with war chaos, and with chaos new possibilities.

*New possibilities for his other friends.*

Modaen had to know who those friends were, and for who the eunuch had bought this war. As she suspected, the bard was the key to unsolved this riddle.

“We can’t take his body with us.” She didn’t hear Smalljon approaching, but suddenly he was at her side, veiling Wendel’s body. The prince was still on his shoulders, the crying subsiding to a sniffling. “The ship is waiting for us.”

He had to help her stand.

“And you’ve to put yourself together.” He added, shaking her. “We’ll avenge your mother.” He continued, showing he already knew what had happened. “But first we’ve to leave.”

She nodded, and voluntary made her way to the exit.

As if the day hadn’t reserved them enough horrors, another terrible sight waited for them at the end of the tunnel. Three other corpses lied on the ground, almost totally buried in the snow. They only found out they were there because the snow was painted red and there were some signs of a struggle.

It was Dacey.

And Harrion.

And Robett.

The three of them were dead.
Manderly, Mormont, Karstark and Glover.

More than one northern House had lost one of their ones that day.

It was the kind of pain she needed.

She had no words to say that moment.

“Seven fucking hells.” Smalljon mumbled behind her, his voice contorted by pain.

Modaen had to be the one behind those deaths, since the queensguards had run after him to bring Sansa back. There were no signs of the bard, so she assumed he had decided to fight them to go look for Sansa alone, as it had been his intention since the beginning. That meant her sister should be lost too.

“Yes, we’ll avenge them.” Arya muttered, looking up to focus on the path ahead. The docks were not far. “We’ll avenge all of them.”

Not long after, the three of them were getting aboard the Purple Vessel, a ship bound to White Harbor. Donnel Locke, who had agreed to wait for them before resuming his journey to the North, was waiting for them with a grim expression when they climbed the wooden plank and into the ship. Arya saw him grabbing Smalljon’s arm to confide in him whatever sad news he had.

*I can’t do this now.*

Arya went directly to the cabin reserved for her and locked herself inside. Pulling Needle out of its scabbard, she started destroying every little thing around her, letting rage out of her body, unable to contain it for one second more. She kept on fighting pillows as if they were her enemies, ripping them apart. The cushion was next, followed by the bed and even the small mirror behind the door.

*Chaos.*

She was still fighting her demons when the ship passed by the Tournament’s grounds, sailing away from the fire and terror installed by the river side.
“Get away from her, dog.”

The words startled Sansa and the Hound. Immediately, she took a step back and turned around to find another man wearing the Lannister armor. He was climbing down a horse and was taking off his helmet. The moment she saw him Sansa believed it couldn’t be possible. The man she knew was a master at the harp, not the sword. His voice was soft, sweet, not that guttural hard sound coming from between his lips. However, it was really him. Every line of his face was contorted in anguish. His long black hair, caught in a ponytail, was wet with sweat and covered in dirt.

“Modaen.” She whispered, shaking her head. She was feeling uncomfortable for so many reasons. What was Modaen doing in the middle of such chaos? How had he found her? And why was he wearing the Lannister armor? She shook her head, unable to grasp the truth. “What… How are you here?”

“Who the fuck is he?” Sandor asked, pulling the sword out of the scabbard without a second thought.

“Stop!” Sansa screamed, grabbing Sandor’s left forearm before he could harm her lover. “Don’t kill him.” She pleaded, breathless. “He’s just a fool bard wearing an armor that doesn’t belong to him.”

Modaen snorted, taking the insult badly.

“To me he seems just like another one of those fuckers.” The Hound replied, his eyes locked on the bard.

“No.” Sansa repeated, pressing down Sandor’s arm. The Hound looked at her and she found suspicion gleaming in his eyes. “He’s a friend.” She tried to reassure him.

*I hope he’s a friend.*

She was surprised when Modaen pulled his sword out of the scabbard. It wasn’t an ordinary sword, one of those cheap ones made for the members of the guard. It was a longsword, heavier than anything Sansa believed Modaen could hold. She blinked, completely surprised every second that passed.

“Modaen, what are you doing?” She cried, nervous. “You can’t fight him. There is no need to fight.” Sandor laughed, eager to add another name to his list.
"I can kill him, Your Grace." Modaen said, laughing like a madman.

"You can’t!" She insisted, standing between the two men. "You’re not a trained warrior."

When Modaen smiled mischievously, she understood he had lied to her. The man she thought she knew was a lie. All those nights in his arms, believing she had finally found something true at the heart of a court of traitors, was also another farce. Possessed by that thought, she let herself be pulled to the side by Sandor’s arm before the knight strike against the bard for the first time.

The duel lasted longer than she thought it would.

The fact the Hound was bleeding from the wounds on his arms and foot made him slower than usual. Even so, Modaen really knew how to use a sword. Standing at the side, completely petrified, she watched the fight, finding herself rooting for the Hound and not for her lover. She would prevent Modaen’s death if she could, but if somehow Sandor were to kill him, she wouldn’t weep over his body.

The swords sang in the snow. While Sandor kept on charging against Modaen, the bard managed to stop all the blows. However, he was having a challenging time to made his own attacks against Sandor.

That was his downfall.

Trying to block one of the Hound’s blows, he was taken aback by the impact of the hit and forced to take a step back. That was enough for the Hound to quickly place the sword on his throat.

"Don’t kill him." Sansa said, calmly.

"Why?" Grunted the Hound, making a grimace of pain. He was eager to get his kill and leave.

"He’s one of Varys’ spies." She said, taking a step forward. Modaen was immobilized, lifting his eyes defiantly to face Sansa. "Aren’t you?"

The look of regret in his face answered before his words.

"Yes, I was." He said, ignoring the naked steel so close to his throat. "But I’m no longer working for him. He lied to me, he betrayed me and—."

"Betrayed you?" The question came from the Hound. "Why would the Spider give loyalty to someone like you?!"

Modaen didn’t answer to that, still maintaining his eyes on Sansa.

"Your Grace, you’ve to trust me. I’ve come for you as soon as I knew you would be here. Varys gave me his word that you would be leaving the castle with your son, but he didn’t fulfill his word. He was ready to throw you to the lions, to use your son to whatever plans he has—"

"So Edwyle is safe?"

The bard gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

"I could lie to you, but I won’t. The truth is I don’t know. I left the keep before your sister went up to Maegor’s with your Queensguard and a few men. But I think by this time the child must be safe, boarding the ship to the North."

He’s telling the truth, she realized. But no all of it.
“So Varys is really behind all this.” She confirmed, feeling foolish. The Spider had turned to her in the worst moment of her life, using her weaknesses to manipulate her, and she had fallen in his game willingly. “For who is he doing this?”

The bard shrugged.

“I don’t know.” He said. “I thought he was doing this for...” He hesitated, and something made in change the words he had ready. “I thought he was doing this for us. A long time ago, when he placed me at your court as a spy, I would never imagine I would fall in love with you, Your Grace. But then the Spider... I guess the Spider realized how we could use us to his own purposes, filling your head with the idea of freedom and mine with the hope of being by your side far away from this city. But I’m afraid he had other plans in mind, other friends to serve and...”

A war to create.

“Sansa, you’ve to believe me.” Modaen said again, pleading for her trust. It was the first time ever he called her by her name. “I’ve come for you. I love you. And I swear I won’t be like Joffrey, I swear it. I can marry you, and I’ll be a good husband, and I’ll take care of our son—”

“Son?” The Hound grumbled, exchanging a shocked glance with Sansa. She caressed her stomach with her hand, shamefully answering his question.

“I should kill you before you say another word.” The Hound said, angrier than ever, pressing the sword against his throat.

He’ll kill him, she thought, unable to detain him. I want him to kill him.

“Please, do.” Modaen said, finally directing his glare to the knight. He was hurt. She hadn’t replied that she loved him back, she hadn’t interposed for him, she hadn’t make a move to protect him. Yes, he was hurt, but so was she. And Sandor.. “But what will you do after you kill me, Clegane? Do you really think you can take her far? You’ll be dead within hours. Even if you take my horse, those wounds you’ve will leave a trail of blood behind. The blood will freeze in your veins, the infection will fester shutting down your body and you’ll get killed by your own stubbornness. What will happen to the queen?” Modaen laughed, and closed his eyes. “Go ahead and rip my throat, dog. We’re all doomed anyway.”

Yes, we’re all doomed.

Sansa gasped when Sandor buried the sword on the frozen ground. She felt it tremble beneath her feet, and shivered at the sound of the Hound’s scream.

“Go!” He said, breathing with difficulty.

“What?” Sansa asked, turning to him.

“Go!” He repeated, turning to her, barking as a raged Hound. “Go with him! He’s right, I won’t be able to take you far. He has a better chance than me and it’s clear he cares about you.”

She took a step forward, extending a hand to touch his arm.

“Sandor, no. You said you could take me home—”

“No.” He replied quickly, and that word hit her like a slap. “I can’t.”
Modaen was already standing up, eager to escape before the Hound changed his mind again.

“Sansa, you’ve heard him. Let’s go…” He placed a hand on her back, but his touch made her flinch.

“Don’t you dare touch me.” She snarled, getting away from him.

She was not in love with him, she didn’t care for him, she didn’t want to see him again. How couldn’t he realize that? There was no future ahead for them. No marriage, not even a life together raising their son. The thought of him as a bard in Winterfell made her sick, the idea of him reporting to Varys each night after leaving her bed made her want to rip his eyes out as she had done with Ser Meryn.

The Modaen who had sung to her to sleep, holding her between his arms, was dead.

“You said you would run with me.” She insisted, refusing to let of the Hound’s arm. “Please, don’t leave me.”

But Sandor was having a tough time raising his head. He was clearly disturbed. If the news of her being pregnant had strike a chord when Cersei had announced it to half of the court, the discovery that the child belonged to another man was worse than any other wound on his body.

“You’ve to go.” He said, with his teeth closed. It wasn’t the first time she had seen him controlling his anger, but was the first time that anger was directed at her. It hurt as bad as if he had trespassed her with a sword. “Go!”

That time, when Modaen’s hand touched her hip, she followed him.

“Don’t cry, my love. I’ll take care of you now.” Modaen said, helping her climb to the horse.

“I can take care of myself.” She replied, coldly.

Modaen simply stared at her, with a loss at words. Biting his own lip, he climbed to the horse, taking his place right behind her. He extended his arms to grab the reins.

“Wait.”

Her heart jumped a beat when Sandor spoke again. For a moment, she felt Modaen’s body growing tense behind her, as if preparing to ride away. However, he didn’t move. The Hound approached slowly, after sheathing his sword. He was pointing a finger in Modaen’s direction, as if threatening one last time.

“If anything happens to her, I’ll hunt you down, bard. Even if I must go to each one of the Seven hells to find you, I’ll hunt you down.” He said, furiously. His fingers started unclasping the pin of his white cloak. “I’ll come to you soon, little bird. As soon as I patch up these wounds, I’ll make my way to honor what I promised, whatever circumstances you are.” His eyes rested upon her belly for a moment. Then, taking off his white cloak, he placed it upon Sansa’s shoulders. “This may not be a fur, but it will keep you warm.”

She was grateful for the cloak and showed it by nodding, once again sealing an agreement with him. Yes, he would find her.

One day.

Then, the horse whined and started galloping through the frozen ground, leaving behind King’s Landing and a knight without a cape. Underneath the cloak and locked between Modaen’s arms,
Sansa allowed herself a timid smile, even though the path ahead looked grimmer than ever.

*Not yet free, but I’ll be,* she said, feeling the bard’s arms around her.

She would find her way to Winterfell and would face her brother cowardice. She would get Edwyle back, were he to escape the keep or to fall in Cersei’s hands, and would make sure he had a future ahead. And she would get rid of the bard, as those red devils at Varys’ service had gotten rid of Joffrey, before their child could born into this dreadful world. And in the end, even if it was the very last thing she had to do, she would prove Varys how she could play the game and dethrone whatever plans he was forging in secret.

**Chapter End Notes**

I hope you liked it. I’m sorry for having killed so many major characters at once, but I kept some of them alive (in my original draft I intended to kill the Hound, for instance, and Varys life was also on the balance). I had this plot brewing on my mind since I started working on the very first chapters of this fanfiction. I knew something great had to happen with Sansa’s storyline and that she had to suffer from her mistakes in order to learn how to play the game. I also wanted to divide the Starks in two factions: Robb, who is acting to maintain peace and to kept on defending the Wall from the looming threat of the White Walkers; and Sansa/Arya, who are willing to make war to get back the one thing Eddard gave hand on the Prologue: their House’s honor. They grew sick and tired of bending the knee and serve to keep peace.

I’m proud to see this plot finished. I’ve been working on this almost every day, using my lunch breaks at work and postponing some work I’ve to do for university. But you know what? I don’t regret it. It’s been almost a year since I started this and I’m looking forward now to the plot ahead. I think the next chapter will be about Daenerys or Jon - let me know which one of them would you prefer - or maybe about the aftermath in King’s Landing. It’ll be interesting to see how Cersei, the Privy Council and Tyrion (yes, Tyrion will be a recurring character from now on!) deal with the king’s death and the prince’s escape. And, of course, with other things.

As usual, let me know if you liked this chapter through the reviews.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: Thank you so much for your positive reviews last chapter. I was really worried you wouldn't like the King's Landing Arc. In the meanwhile, I'm glad to see some of you correctly guessed Modaen's identity. I wanted to include that character in this fanfiction, but as usual I intended to do something new. I'll put the matter of his identity – as well as his motives and plan - to rest very soon. Like Jon's secret, I won't delay the revelation.

I've great events now planned for Bhorash, the Riverlands and the North. King's Landing will still feature in the plot, of course, but with important changes. In fact, I'll get back to it next chapter. For chronology purposes, I've to return to it. But then I promise I'll focus on Jon (I've three pages already written from his next chapter), and then Sansa, Daenerys, Robb and Arya.

For now, I'll give you some Jon. I find this POV easier to write than Robb and Eddard, and I would really like for your feedback about how it turned out. As I've said previously, it's not easy to write male chapters. I must also warn you this chapter is like an intro to Jon's plot, so it might be a little slower than the others. I hope you like it anyway! I'm looking forward for your reviews.

PREVIOUSLY: After finding out his father his Rhaegar Targaryen and his mother Lyanna Stark, Jon fakes his own death with the help of Eddard and Cotter Pyke. He then boards a bravoosii ship bound to Essos, so he can reach Bhorash, the city of the unchained, and enlist the help of the Dragon Queen. This is Eddard's ultimate plan to save the Wall from the menace of the White Walkers, believing dragons are the answer to combat their enemies from Beyond the Wall. Daenerys, however, has mysteriously flown in Drogon's back, leaving the city to find answers.

"This is madness."

The lysene captain of the *Spicy Lady* joined him at the deck as the ship made his way through the dark waters of the bay. Glothal was a good man, but a coward. It was admirable how he had agreed to take him to Bhorash. He had paid the man well, of course, spending a considerable amount of the money Cotter Pyke had given to him. Nonetheless, for a man who was so terrified of a direwolf, setting sail to a place called Dragon's Waste had to be an incredible achievement.

Standing with his eyes on the looming city ahead, Jon shook his head.
Madness, yes, but still necessary.

He stretched his hand to scratch Ghost behind his ears.

The direwolf stood at his side obediently, with his tongue lolling out of his mouth, drool dripping to the wooden floor. He was constantly thirsty, not yet used to the warm weather and the dusty winds of Essos. And who could blame him? Ghost was a creature made for the icy slopes of the North, not the arid lands of the East. And so was Jon, no matter what his father said about his parentage. He longed to get back to the frozen hills of the North, and to feel again the cold kiss of the northern winds against his skin.

"I can take you back." The captain insisted, making a strange noise with his wooden teeth. "A few more coins and I can take you to Volantis."

He has good intentions, Jon said, cleaning the sweat from his forehead with the help of his hand. Ashes came attached to his hand, melding into a strange grey paste. He cleaned it to his pants and sniffed the air again, before turning to the man. But why doesn't he shut up? The lysene captain seemed to truly care for him. Not only because Jon had proved to be a handy man aboard the ship, but also because a direwolf aboard could be not only intimidating for the captain himself, but to anyone who dared to confront them in land or sea. Besides, if the rumors about Bhorash were true, it was indeed pure madness to march into the city.

"I've business to tend in the city." Jon repeated for what should be the twentieth time. "You already know that, captain."

Glothal clicked his teeth again and shrugged.

"You will be ripped apart, lad." He said, nodding toward the city. "If the sickness doesn't get you, the Bloodteeth Children will. And even if you manage to escape those, the priests will get their hands on you." His eyes flinched toward Ghost once more, and the direwolf snarled. "Even your little friend there won't help you."

Jon turned his face again toward Bhorash, while his hand continued scratching Ghost behind its ears.

He doesn't know what we can do, little friend.

A part of him wished he had left the direwolf back at Long Barrow, maybe at his father's care. It wasn't easy to hide his identity with Ghost at his side. Yes, he had shortened his hair and changed his black robes for a cheap armor dignified for a mercenary. He had even bought a sword and a bow at Volantis, to make sure he could pass for a mercenary, but with the wolf at his side rumors would start eventually and rumors had a way to travel to Westeros. He didn't know what the Night's Watch would do if they found out he was in fact alive, but he suspected.

However, on the other hand he was glad to have the creature at his side. Besides keeping in company on an unknown world, he reminded him of home and had saved his life already. During his days at Lys, the direwolf had ripped the throat of a man who tried to rob him during sleep. Which meant that deep down, no matter who looked at him or the whimpers of fear he heard anytime he walked down the streets, he knew he had done the right decision to bring Ghost with him.

"We'll take our chances." He simply answered, hoping the captain would stop.

I'm almost there, he said to himself, gulping.

It was hard to believe that soon he would face his destiny. More than a month ago, when he had left Eastwatch-by-the-Sea aboard a bravoosi ship, the day he would reach Bhorash seemed far, far away.
But here he was now, the city growing closer by the minute, the sounds of seagulls crying over head, joining the yells and voices emanating from Bhorash.

The journey had been long and tiresome. Leaving Westeros, he had sailed first to Braavos, then sailed down the Narrow Sea to make a few stops in Pentos and Tyrosh. More than adjusting to a sailor's life, he had trouble to adapt to some many cultures. Constantly surrounding him was people speaking another language, some he didn't even knew existed. And their habits were different to, and even the food they served or the drinks they poured. At Tyrosh, he had caught a fever after drinking some strange liquor that tasted like piss.

It was there he parted ways with the Titan's Fury crew, joining a smaller vessel bound to Volantis. Or so he had thought. That was something he also learned: all people, no matter their backgrounds or the tongue they speak, can lie. When he woke up one morning at Lys, he quickly found out the captain had not only lied to him, but he also wanted to get more gold out of him to take him to Bhorash. After a fight with the tyroshi captain, he got his money back and managed to book passage with Captain Glothal to travel to Volantis.

It had been a long journey indeed, but now its end was near.

*Bhorash.*

The city of the unchained.

From afar it didn't resemble like a city at all, more like a gigantic encampment. On the streets between the ruins of old buildings and palaces he could see crowds, moving desperately like ants. A veil of smoke and dust hung over the city, and if the wind did not lie, the smell of ashes proved something was currently burning. The smoke could almost camouflage the smell of shit and death.

*Almost.*

But it was impossible. The decay seemed to gain new contours as the ship approached the docks.

Jon narrowed his eyes.

The silhouette of a gigantic palace, rising on top of a mountain, was also getting sharper. An extremely tall tower, almost as tall as the Wall, rose above all else. The structure imposed its respect and fear, even if it was in ruins. Parts of it seemed to have fallen recently, and also recent were the dark marks covering the white stone. Scorching marks.

*Dragon fire.*

He was not yet aware that dragons roamed the skies somewhere over his head.

As if sensing his own thoughts, Ghost snarled once again. The white direwolf turned his head toward East, where he could see nothing more than the vastness of the sea and the distant sky, painted in a mixture of black and red. It was there, somewhere among the ruins of the Slaver's Pyramids, that rumors said the two uncontrolled dragons had built their nest.

"Can you feel them?" He asked the direwolf, who kept snarling to an invisible threat.

*Dragons, true dragons.*

Ghost turned his head to look at him with his red eyes, judging in silence.

Yes, the direwolf seemed as distressed as him with the fact that true dragons, those same creatures he
knew from Old Nan's tales, could be not far from them, ready to rain fire over their heads. It was a distressing thought, and at the same time an exciting one. However, he didn't feel special, as if the presence of dragons could strength a bond between his blood and theirs. Not a tingle at the point of his fingers or a warmness on his chest. Nothing. Was he supposed to feel something? To sense the creatures?

The splash on the water made him realize the Spicy Lady had launched its anchor. There was no time to dwell on such theories and stupid ideas. Reality was calling for him.

Returning to his cabin, he grabbed his stuff and said his goodbyes to the crew and the captain.

"Last time to reconsider going down, lad." The captain insisted, before letting him descend to the docks. The cries and voices of people gathering in the port almost muffled the man's words. "Come with me and—"

"Have a safe travel back to Lys, captain." Jon answered, cutting him off. With a last smile, he passed a last golden dragon to the man. "And thank you."

Without any other word, Jon climbed down the plank and didn't look back.

The first thing he felt when both his feet were on land was that he was lost.

Now what?, he asked.

You know nothing, Jon Snow.

Ygritte's voice echoed in his mind, as the hot wind caressed his hair like her touch. Around him people passed by, looking curiously to the sellsword with the giant wolf. Many of them dared to point, a woman laughed and a curious child got close enough to look better at Ghost before the direwolf snarled.

The palace, he reminded himself, cleaning sweat from his forehead. We've to start by the palace.

He had decided to go directly to the queen's palace, even if the tales circulating at Volantis were true. Letting himself be oriented by what his eyes could see, Jon advanced through the chaotic streets, leaving the docks behind. Thankfully, the crowds opened a path for him to pass whenever they got sight of Ghost. Soon the city would be talking about the sellsword with the giant wolf, but hopefully by that time he would've delivered the papers Cotter Pyke had signed and be inside the palace's walls.

"Rat! Have a tasty crispy rat for dinner! Just for a few coins!"

He turned his head suddenly.

The Common Tongue.

Somewhere among the crowd, on that very same street at the end of the world, someone was selling rats and intercalating the Common Tongue of Westeros with some kind of Valyrian and Ghiscari. After travelling for such a long time, hearing someone use the Common Tongue made him feel empathy with whoever it was. A bit of home in an unknown land. He looked around, trying to catch a glimpse of the person still yelling Rats! Rats for dinner!, when he finally saw the small girl sitting on a bench, with a tray of charred little balls.

No, not a small girl.
"You're from Westeros." He said, approaching her.

The girl whimpered as soon as her eyes set upon Ghost. The tray of burnt rats slipped from her lap, crashing on the floor. Avidly, Ghost stepped forward and devoured two of those things.

"Ghost, to me." Jon called, coldly. The direwolf snorted angrily and stepped back to his side again, catching on the way a third rat. The dwarf girl, meanwhile, had grabbed the tray and was using it as a shield. "There is no need for that, girl. I just want to talk with someone who can—"

"I must warn you my brother is coming." She said, trembling. "Go away or I—"

Jon smiled, trying to show the girl she could trust him, but it was not easy.

"What's your name?"

The girl narrowed her eyes, looking at him suspiciously before watching Ghost laying down on the ground, bored. Somehow that must've calmed her a little, because her tone was softer when she spoke again.

"I hope you know you'll pay for the rats, wolf boy."

Jon gave in immediately, pulling the bag of money from the pocket of his trousers. He passed a golden dragon to the girl.

"Will you tell me your name now?"

She didn't seem impressed by the golden coin. After quickly checking if it was real, biting it, she made the coin disappear inside a sleeve.

"The name is Penny." She revealed, putting down the tray. "Yours?"

"Samwell." He lied instantly. "Well, nice to meet you, Penny. Would you like to get another golden coin?"

"I don't have any more rats to sell." She snapped quickly. "My brother is down on the sewers hunting more. So, if you want some, you can get those ones…” She pointed to the ground. "And get the fuck out of here with your beast."

Jon laughed. There was something extremely funny in the way she spoke. It reminded him somehow of Lord Tyrion, the Imp, and his constant sharp tongue.

"Tell me first what's happening in the city and then I'll leave." He said, showing her another golden dragon.

"In the city?" She retorted back, confused. Her eyes glinted toward the new coin, suddenly so hypnotic. "Where the fuck have you been? Everybody knows what's happening on this fucking shithole."

Jon gulped. Besides feeling lost, he felt now overpowered by his own lack of knowledge about what was happening.

"I've been travelling on the High Sea and last I heard about the queen I was in Volantis." The girl snorted. "So, it's true? The Dragon Queen is really gone?"
Penny shrugged.

"Depends on the version you hear on the streets." Realizing he hadn't understood her words, she smiled, knowing now she was in command. "I can tell you each version if you give me that coin right now."

He gave her the coin without hesitation. It was a fair bargain.

"Well, well, where to begin?" She said, making the coin disappear again into another sleeve. "On the East side of the city you will hear the red priests telling stories about how the Queen rode her dragon to conquer the world or some shit like that. They are lighting fires every day to show her the way back home. Bullshit." She pointed to somewhere nearby now. "But if you go down to the Plaza of the Blessed, you'll hear the septons recruiting soldiers, promising them food and shelter if they convert to the Faith of the Seven. They are doing a fine job, I've to give them that. They kept insisting the red priests have the queen locked in a dungeon." She told, smiling. Her eyes glinted greedily to his pocket. "And I'm sure it's a matter of time now until something happens. With the queen gone and the Council keeping silent, the religious orders have lost control, especially since the red priests burnt down the Sept. It's a matter of days now until they start fighting each other."

A city on the verge of religious war and with its queen missing.

That was definitely no good for him.

"And… who is ruling the city then?"

If Daenerys Targaryen had run away, or even if she was indeed locked in a dungeon, the power of the city must had fallen into someone's hands. But the dwarf girl didn't seem to know that. At least, he didn't get another answer until a third golden coin was back in her pocket.

"Well, there is the Council of Freemen, allegedly." She continued after a minute, explaining quickly that it was composed by ambassadors elected by slaves of different cities. "But they are useless and dumb, all of them. They are nothing more than a stupid little thing to create the idea of freedom. My guess is that the one truly ruling the city now is one of the queen's men. She has an adviser, Maester Marwyn or something like that, but no one has seen him since the queen disappeared. And there is the old guard, the one who is always at her side… Ser Barristan? I think that's his name."

Ser Barristan Selmy, he remembered. The Bold. He didn't know the man, but his father used to tell stories about him and his prowess on the battlefield. If he was in fact the one ruling for the queen, he had a chance to be heard. A westerosi, familiar with the Common Tongue and, above anything else, a man who knew his father.

Both my fathers, he reminded, feeling odd at the thought. If he was to tell the truth to Ser Barristan – something he wanted to prevent, but which seemed necessary to gain his trust – would the knight believe him?

Would he help me?

"Here girl." Jon said, slightly disturbed with all that information. He passed a last coin to the girl. "Go and eat something better than a rat."

The girl accepted the coin with a snort.

"Better? Oh, you really are new in town, aren't you, wolf boy? The best you can find after rats are cats." She said, saving the lost coin. "But those are rare already and I prefer rats anyway. Their meat is softer." Her eyes focused on Ghost. "Take good care of your beast. He would be a delightful treat
for many on the city, especially the Bloodteeth Children."

"You think I can't defend myself from a bunch of children?"

"Perhaps you do. But there is also a possibility that you don't, wolf boy. As soon as night falls, the children creep out of the sewers, led by the Night Provider, and they hunt down anything alive in the city to make their own feast." Penny gulped in fear. "As the red priests say, the dark is night and full of terrors."

Before he could reply, the girl turned his back to him and disappeared back to a tent, taking the tray with her.

What kind of freedom is this?, he asked himself again, feeling sick to his stomach as his eyes rested one last time on the black charred rats the girl had left behind. Daenerys Targaryen's cause had been a noble one, yes, but her people had been freed of their chains to be bound to another kind of slavery.

Death, poverty, sickness, anger.

Pushing through the crowds, he started seeing the city for what it truly was.

Bhorash was too much crowded, the roads leading to it blocked by slaves trying to get in and the ones trying to get out. Hunger walked hand by hand with sickness on the streets. In fact, he wondered if what he had heard about the Yellow Fever, an epidemic that had taken many lives during the Battle of Meereen, was true. Judging by the fact that most people were feeding on rats and cats – if nothing more human than that –, he had to guess the rumors could indeed be true.

You can save the Wall, and possibly all the Seven Kingdoms, his father had said before sending him to Long Barrow, to fake his own death. But who will save Bhorash?

A knot in his stomach told him that even if the Dragon Queen returned, it wouldn't be easy to convince her to sail to the Wall. Back in the Seven Kingdoms, the rumor was that Daenerys hadn't sailed because she was unable to control the other two dragons. But somehow Jon understood now, even if he didn't actually know her, that the Targaryen Queen would never leave her people while they lived in such misery.

Unless she is mad like her father.

He gulped, realizing again the weight of his inheritance.

Madness also runs in my veins, he remembered. No, he couldn't dwell on such thoughts. Not again. Shaking his head to kept those ideas out of his head, he looked over head to check if he was still on the right path to the tall ruined tower of the palace. Sweat kept running down his face, and his skin was already heating up, burnt by the scorching sun. Even then, with his sore muscles, he kept on pushing, climbing streets, completely oblivious to the crowds with their eyes on him and Ghost.

"Varzen! Varzen! Varzen!" The screams of children, laughing, made him look ahead.

Through the crowd, he saw a group of naked children ran out of nowhere, tumbling out of a great tent assembled by the ruins of a palace. The children stopped on their heels right ahead of him and looked at Ghost not with fear, as usual, but hunger.

The Bloodteeth Children, he realized, noticing their teeth painted in red. Blood.

"Varzen!" One of the children kept on saying. Jon had learned a few words with the crew of the
Spicy Lady, and fortunately had learned that tone. Somehow, he wished he hadn't. "Meaty."

One of them grabbed a stone from the ground.

Ghost snarled, feeling threatened. Without thinking twice, Jon placed his hand on the hilt of the sword. He didn't intend to harm a group of starving children, but as he had told Penny, he could do it and he would if they dared to attack him.

Thankfully, that was not necessary.

A woman, as skinny as the boys, with her breasts bare and a scorch mark in her face, came out of a shelter, brandishing a wooden staff. She immediately noticed the direwolf, and Jon's sword, and started to beg for his forgiveness in a hasty and messy Valyrian. Then, when Jon nodded to let her know everything was fine, the woman started beating the children with the staff, knocking one of them down while the other ones ran for their lives.

*They are fed on anger,* he thought, feeling feverish. As if the day wasn't hot enough, the wind was warm and oppressive, making it hard for anyone to breath or think. It was hard to believe it was Winter back in Westeros. Ghost whimpered at his side, stopping occasionally to lick water from the ground or to rest for a second or two. Jon stopped with him, scratching the direwolf behind its ears, drinking from the bottle he had with him and looking to the streets ahead.

*Not far now.*

As he turned a corner, he gasped in surprise.

Hundreds were gathering in a plaza. Why there was so many people there he didn't understood at first sight, but as he stepped forward he realized there was a man in white robes standing atop a staircase. Behind him was a structure made of stone and wood that was now crumbling down. There were signs of fire in that building, as black as the scorching marks on the tower, but the fire seemed long extinct. And there was something else about the place, something familiar in its architecture.

*The seven-pointed star.*

There it was, right above the doors of the scorched sept, the symbol of the Seven. He had never cared much about the Faith, even though there was a sept at Winterfell and another one at Castle Black. He preferred to pray to the Old Gods of his father, not the ones the Andals had brought centuries ago. Even so, it was shocking that the Faith had found so many supporters in a land where dragons roamed the sky.

"The queen is gone!" Yelled the septon, in his high place on the staircase. The voice crossed the plaza, provoking roars of support among the crowd. "The red witches have trapped her with their spells, making your Mhysa a slave." The cries of horror and anger echoed back in answer to the septon's words. "So it's time for us to fight back the red devils hiding in the East side of the city!"

As the screams filled again the plaza, Jon took a step back and looked around him. Everyone seemed bewitched by the man's words. Everyone seemed willing to start rioting.

"The red devils are conspiring in their houses, preparing their curses to bring down our city and make you slaves again." The septon continued, more calmly now. "The sellswords companies are leaving our queen's side. The Triarchs of Volantis are already forging new chains for us. And the Kraken will soon be on our shores to raze down this city. That's why I urge you, my sons and daughters, to join our fight. Let the Crone guide you during these dark times, let the Warrior strength your arms on the wars to come, let the Mother bless you with her gentle mercy. Fight for the Seven
and fight for your Queen. The Faith Militant is getting ready, sharpening its knives and swords to march upon the red priests and set on fire their temples, as they did with our sept. It's your choice."

In what kind of mess had he fallen in?

*The Kraken will soon be on our shores.*

The plot thickens. Last time he had heard about the Greyjoys, Theon and his sister were waiting for Robb's forces so their forces combined could put an end to the siege on Torrhen's Square. However, at the time there were already some rumors about Victarion Greyjoy and the fleet at his command, sailing away from the shores of Westeros. Could he really be headed to Dragon's Waste as the septon claimed? Bringing the ironmen to the chaos of Bhorash would definitely put an end to whatever promises the city hold for the refugees.

And it also meant his time was growing shorter than he thought.

What other invisible threats he didn't knew?

*You know nothing, Jon Snow.*

He had to reach the palace and he had to do it fast.

That was easier to say then do. He struggled most of the afternoon trying to find his way to the queen's palace, even if he could see it from any point on the city. If the streets were not a maze, he would've reached his destination earlier, but dusk had already settled in when he finally reached the gates.

More chaos waited for him there. It seemed the access to the palace was guarded by the Unsullied, the eunuch soldiers the Queen had freed in the slave's cities. He had already met some of them, as well as a few dothraki, patrolling the city. Here, however, their duty was slightly different. They stood around the palace, guarding every path and staircase that led to him, acting like one big human black wall. It was an intimidating image. Side by side, so close they didn't leave any space for anyone to pass in. If anyone dared to try it, they would pull them back gently, using their spears only if any threat was made.

Hundreds were gathered by the Unsullied, trying desperately to get their attention. Pleas and cries for help filled the air. Jon advanced through the crowds, keeping Ghost at his side, horrified with such misery and despair. As he passed, more hungry looks were cast toward him and the direwolf.

*As soon as night falls, the children creep out of the sewers, led by the Night Provider, and they hunt down anything alive in the city to make their own feast.*

A woman smiled at him, licking her dry lips with her tongue, the hunger clear in her eyes. Uncomfortable, Jon touched the pommel of the sword at his waist. He would use it if anyone dared to be stupid enough to attack him. Not that he wanted to fight desperate children and women, but hunger could lead people to do crazy things.

*They are nothing more than beggars.*

Only the truth hit him.

*And I'm a beggar, just like them.*

He tried to approach one of the guards, hoping that showing them the papers would be enough to grant him access to the castle. But the guards couldn't even understand the Common Tongue.
"I request an audience with the Queen's captain." He said, trying to pass through a group of desperate women also trying to pass a message to the Unsullied. Ghost snarled, making his way through the women's skinny legs, startling them. They disbanded immediately, screaming in terror. The direwolf advanced proudly, stopping while when he reached the soldiers.

The Unsullied right in front of him looked at Ghost with fascination.

"I request an audience with Ser Barristan Selmy." Jon repeated, approaching the man now. After pulling Cotter Pyke's papers from his bag, he passed them to the Unsullied. The soldier didn't move to grab them. "I'm a brother of the Night's Watch, an important Order who mans the Wall at Westeros and—"

"No." The soldier said, interrupting him. "No."

Jon couldn't contain a desperate laugh.

"No?" He asked back, the laugh still hanging on his lips. "What do you mean?"

"No." The soldier repeated, his eyes cold as the ones of a dead man.

"Is that the only word you can use?" Jon asked in Valyrian, or at least what he hoped Valyrian was.

"No." The Unsullied replied again. "The Council of the Freemen will hear requests in two weeks. You must wait until then."

Two weeks?

"I can't afford that. I don't think you understand me. I bring urgent... urgent..." What was the word for news in Valyrian? "Information." He added, sensing that nothing would change the soldier's decision. "Information regarding the queen and her affairs in Westeros."

"No." The Unsullied replied again, which made him more frustrated than before. "You must wait."

He didn't even try to understand what the matter was.

Jon saved the papers back in his bag and focused his eyes on the looming Tower, so close yet so far. You know nothing, Jon Snow.

Well, he knew one thing: had to find another way in.

Or someone who can get me inside.

Turning his back to the soldier, he started walking away again. Time was of the essence. Since night was eminent, and Penny's warning kept echoing in his head, he decided to find a place to pass the night and do some business. The docks had a few taverns, if his mind wasn't betraying him. He had to start with them, hoping it would provide any answer. He had learnt more than Valyrian or daggers tricks with his fellow crewmates. They had showed him where to get the best liquors on the world, how to tell lies without being caught and even how to get a woman into his bed without paying her anything – not that he had ever used that last advice. But they had also taught him that ports were like a treasury chest for anyone looking for opportunities, since it convened the strangest sort of fellows. If there was anyone who could help him, or who was willing to trade help for gold, that someone had to be on a tavern, not on a shelter of the Faith or hiding on the sewers.

So, keeping his eyes open, he made his way down the city, again passing through the encampments
and the Plaza of the Blessed. The septon's sermon had ended. Now, as darkness started to fill the sky, a queue was forming by the ruined sept stairs as hundreds gathered for their blessing. A group of septons wearing grey robes were distributing blessings, as well as a strange broth that reeked of rotten flesh. Even so, it was something.

His own stomach started to ache for the first time in day when he finally got back to the docks. After inspecting the ships still anchored, he noticed there was no sign of the *Spicy Lady*. Glothal had known better had fled the city immediately.

"Let's go, Ghost." He said, dragging himself slowly toward a row of decrepit houses by the end of the docks. "Let's find a place to sleep."

Curiously, not even the taverns of Bhorash were like the ones in Volantis, or Lys or Braavos. The usual sounds of the crowd, the laughter and the smell of cheap beer had been hushed to whispers. Besides, turning on an alley, he quickly noticed that there was no one on the streets. All of them were gone, refugeed on their tents, their ships or inside the taverns.

*The night is dark and full of terrors.*

After inspecting the three establishments available, he chose to knock on the one with the sign over the door saying *Dragon's Lair*. In fact, he would've knocked if Ghost hadn't stayed behind and something hadn't happened the minutes that followed.

"Varzen."

The word reached his ears almost like a whisper, as the soft buzz emanating from the taverns silenced completely. Slowly, he turned toward the end of the alley and saw the child, a little girl of about five years old, holding a stone in her muddy hand. She smiled, and her eyes glinted with fascination, but not toward Jon.

"Ghost, to me." He commanded, realizing the direwolf stood a few feet away from him, posing ready to strike. The direwolf didn't move, ignoring his command. Feeling uncomfortable at the sight of the eerie child, Jon decided to change strategies immediately. "Girl, are you lost?"

"Varzen." The girl replied, before raising her small arm to point to Ghost. "Varzen."

*Meaty.*

When a second child appeared behind him, also whispering *Varzen*, he pulled out the sword without a second thought. Steel gleamed in the night, reflecting moonlight shining above them and the light emanating from one of the taverns. He had turned to the second child when he noticed a third child, and then a fourth and fifth coming out of a sewer.

*The Bloodteeth Children,* he realized, noticing the red stained teeth of one child. In their tiny fists, they were holding stones, wielding them like daggers. *The dwarf girl was not joking.*

"I don't want to hurt you." Jon said in his best Valyrian. Ghost was still snarling, exposing his fangs. "But I'll do it if—"

"Garomesh arac."

*Fresh blood.*

It was then that a man appeared, also climbing out of a sewer. It was certainly strange and bizarre to look at him. The man was tall and skinny and was covered in...
"Skin." Jon whispered, smiling with amusement. *Human skin.* He tightened the grip around the sword's pommel.

The skin was dry, and assuming a strange tone of brown, but it was definitely skin. And the man was wielding a great staff made of bones, with a small skull on its top. It resembled somehow of the late Lord of Bones, but instead being a Lord of Skins. The thought was amusing, as well as the idea of fighting him and his bizarre army of hungry children.

"Let me go and no one has to get hurt." Jon warned one last time.

"Varz algomos arac."

*Fresh meat can't be wasted.*

It was Ghost the first to strike, jumping directly to the so-called Night Provider, or as Jon was calling him privately, the Lord of Skins. However, before he could follow the direwolf to strike against the leader of the band, a rain of stones hit him. He laughed as most of them scraped his armor, or passed by him without finding their target. But some children were masters at it already. One of the stones strike him on the forehead, making him oozy, while another one found his jaw.

"I don't want to fight you, children." He repeated, cleaning the blood with the back of his hand. From the corner of his eye he saw Ghost trying to escape the grip of children while averting the Lord of Skins blows.

He was still recovering from the pain on his forehead when a new wave of stones rain over him.

One hit him below the eye, a second cut his lower lip and a third one found his way to the back of his neck.

He didn't know how, but the pain overcame him. Quickly, he lost balance, and was forced to place a hand on the wall in order not to fall. The blood was running down his face, reaching his lips and covering his eyes. His skull hurt, an impossible ache expanding to the back of his head, while someone, someone he couldn't see, grabbed his sword and threw it to the ground.

"Varzen! Varzen! Varzen!" Intoned the children, happily, extending his hand to him, pushing his arms, dragging him down.

*You know nothing.*

He lost his senses when one of the bigger children hit him on the nose.

And then he was Jon no more, but Ghost.

The Lord of Skins was right in front of him, defending his attacks with the staff. Every blow he made hit him viciously, provoking another wave of pain. But he tried to attack, to get past the wooden staff, to rip that throat and make blood rain over him. He could smell the man, the reek of shit and piss and sickness, so he knew the blood was bad and the flesh rotten. But he had to kill him, spill his insides out, save his master.

The children turned on him surprisingly.

How were they not scared of him? He was not used to that. He knew the children's flesh was softer and sweeter, and used to like scar them, but he had never taste them. He didn't want to hurt them. His master wouldn't like that. But he had too, and he would banquet on their flesh later, drown his hunger down…
The sight of master's body, unconscious, laying a few feet away wasn't right. However, when the children grabbed his hind legs and started to pull, he didn't hesitate for a second and gave up on the Lord of Skins and his staff. In less than five seconds, he had ripped a child's throat with his fangs, relishing in his blood for an instant and quickly turning to another child, pulling his arm with enough force to break it. Most of the Bloodteeth Children started to cry, running back to the sewers.

Now that is how I like, a voice whispered in the back of his mind, the voice of his master, the voice within him. The head of an older girl, ten or eleven years old, was quickly rolling on the ground. He had ripped her apart in two **bites**, locking her throat between his jaws and crushing it two times until it fell from the neck. The girl died with her arms stretched toward Jon's body.

*My body*, claimed the voice.

She intended to drag him to the sewers, probably to have him for dinner.

The dilacerating pain on his left hind leg made him howl in the night.

Turning his head, he saw another boy, who couldn't be older than five, hugging his white fur while clenching the meat on his leg, devouring it with his tiny little mouth, refusing to let him go. The pain was excruciating, but Ghost managed to overcome it to scratch the left side of the boy's face. The child finally let go, running back to the sewers, leaving one of his eyes behind.

Only three brave children remained, gathering with their Night Provider. The four of them stood at the end of the alley, whispering while looking at Jon and Ghost. It was then that the direwolf made his final move, jumping one last time to attack the Lord of Skins. The staff danced quickly in the man's hands, striking Ghost on the side, making in whine in pain.

But the pain wouldn't detain him now.

He rested only when his jaws ripped apart the man's stomach.

The remnant of the children ran immediately to the sewer. One of them was courageous enough to grab one of the dead children on the ground, one of the smaller ones, to drag it with her making sure she wouldn't sleep with an empty stomach. But then even her was gone, leaving the Lord of Skins alone to die slowly, watching his insides slipping through his fingers.

Ghost walked back to Jon's side, sniffing him to make sure he was alive. He could hear his master's heartbeat.

*My own heartbeat.*

"It's him." Said a familiar voice, at the beginning of the alley. Ghost lift his head, recognizing the scent in the air. It didn't smell like piss and shit, like the children of the sewers, but like carbonized rat. "The wolf boy."

"The wolf boy, yes." Another voice replied in the shadows. A voice capable of speaking the Common Tongue perfectly. It belonged to a tall man, with a hood covering his face and a longsword at his waist. He was wearing an armor underneath his cloak, and looked so much like a mercenary, but not any kind of sellsword.

*A westerosi.*

"Thank you, Penny."

"Is he dead, Master Ralso?" The dwarf girl asked, approaching slowly.
"I don't think so." The man said. "I hope not." Ghost heard a clink of coins and something bright being passed to the girl. *Gold.* "I'm sure this traveler has many tales to tell and I'm eager to hear all of them."
Olenna

Chapter Notes

AUTHOR’S NOTES: I knew I had to write this chapter, but I don’t know when. I started writing the chapter that will come next and I got stuck in it for two weeks. Then, I decided to write this one and in just three days I’ve managed to finish it. Sorry for the delay. Before you proceed to this chapter, there is an important thing I’ve to say: previously on this fanfiction I committed an error making Garlan Tyrell the Lord of Highgarden and not Willas. I don’t know why, but I was sure Garlan was the oldest one. So, in this chapter I try to amend that mistake. I’m just giving the heads up. Meanwhile, this chapter is a little different from the previous ones, since great part of it is focused on memories. However, it was awesome to write it since it’s about the Tyrells and their part on the game. I hope you enjoy it.

As usual, I’ll be waiting for your reviews!

OLENNA

Olenna Tyrell was no fool.

She had never been.

Many spoke about her cunning and bluntness, calling her Queen of Thorns, believing she was just a cold-hearted woman hungry for power. But the truth was that she was so much more than that. As the matriarch of House Tyrell, there were responsibilities as heavy as the most unbearable burden, but that she managed to carry with grace. Yes, she had always been graceful.

She could still recall the day her husband had presented a new squire at Highgarden, planting him right under her nose. That had been one of her first moves for the wellbeing of her family. The boy was a Flowers, a bastard with Luthor’s face. He seemed oblivious to the fact he was living next to his half-brother, right in the heart of his father’s family. But Olenna, once again, had never been a fool and had seen him for what he was. A threat. She loved her husband in her own way, which meant she was grateful for his little detours and long hawking trips. But the one thing she wouldn’t allow was that any flower that wasn’t a rose was planted within the limits of her garden.

So, she did the right thing: she found a way to make the boy disappear. Her instructions had been so clear that Luthor Tyrell died thinking his little squire had fled from Westeros after robbing a considerable amount of gold from his coffers. The exact same amount she had paid to the man who had performed the deed and disposed of the body.
No, Olenna Tyrell was no fool.

Concerning her family, she would always do the best, considering what the Gods have placed in their way. And sometimes, as she had learned with time, it’s not easy to understand what the best is.

So, even while laying on her deathbed, Olenna knew her game was not over.

The poisoned figs, which would be the cause of her death, had not been placed at her table by Elinor or the Blue Bard. That was pure nonsense. The girl had always been a fool, deprived of any ambition, and the bard could never have afforded such poison with the allowance Margaery paid him. No, she and her family had been poisoned by someone who saw them as a nuisance. Only a fool like Joffrey would not see that.

Considering the recent events, her bet was now on Cersei Lannister. Sansa Stark wouldn’t have the guts to plot such devious trap. And who could blame the Dowager Queen for trying to eliminate the players who were threatening her game? After all, Cersei as a matriarch, just like her, looking after the interests of her family.

This is a deadly game indeed.

The matter now was time.

Death was near.

The poison had already taken Garlan and his stupid wife, and a few other oafs who used to dine at her table. She would be the next one. Her body was growing weaker by the hour, her stomach unable to hold any food and blood constantly filling her mouth. She didn’t require a master to tell her she was running short of time. Even so, she had summoned the strength to hold on for a few more days, as if a strange force was giving her enough time to put an end to unfinished businesses.

“Is the Imp coming or not?” She mumbled, dizzily.

Septon Askell, who was reading out loud from The Seven Pointed-Star, stopped in the middle of a prayer to the Crone. From the other corner of the bedroom, Margaery lift her head. She had also been praying, sitting in a chair among the shadows, waiting for a miracle to happen.

Since the Maester had confirmed the baby had absorbed most of the poison, ironically saving her life, she had succumbed to weeping and prayer. Pale and frail, she looked like a ghost of her former self.

“Y-yes.” The septon replied, stammering on the word. He felt intimidated on her presence. “Yes, Lord Tyrion said he would visit as soon as the Small Council adjourns.”

“Oh, yes.” She said, remembering now that the septon had already told her that an hour ago. “Yes, yes. Continue with your foolish tales, septon.”

Olenna was not extremely pious. She attended religious service occasionally, and lit her candles to the Mother and the Crone, but that was about it. However, that day she had insisted to have Septon Askell by her bedside. She was sure he would be needed.

“Grandma—” Margaery detained the septon from continuing and stood up from her chair. “Could I’ve a word in private?”

Not this again.

Before Olenna could say anything, the septon closed his book.
“Wait outside.” Olenna commanded, turning to the septon. “But don’t go away.”

After nodding, the septon left the Tyrell women alone. As soon as the door closed, Margaery stood from her chair and advanced gracefully to Olenna’s bed, falling on her knees as if to pray. Her cold hands grabbed Olenna’s.

“No.” Olenna mumbled, pulling her hand from her grip. “This doesn’t concern you anymore.”

Margaery was livid, but the horror reflected in her eyes was replaced quickly with a mixture of despair and fury.

“I know you’re lying. Please, don’t keep me in the dark.” She pleaded, her voice trembling. “I’m afraid and—”

“It’s too late for that.” Olenna uttered, irritated. “I should send you back to your brother and let him deal with the mess you and your father brought to our family.”

Margaery’s lips trembled in fear as her hands squeezed Olenna’s again, making her frail fingers hurt.

“Are you sending me back to Highgarden then?” She asked, tightening her grip. “Is that what you want for my future?”

Once the most desirable maid of the Seven Kingdoms, she now was a twenty-three-year-old widow, with the reputation of a whore and probably incapable to bear any children. It was understandable the fear tormenting the girl. Who wouldn’t be scared in her place? After years of servitude opening her legs, she almost had gotten what she wanted. Now the best prospect for her future was to submit herself to the care of her brother, accepting her ruined reputation. Not even old lords would dare to take the Lion Whore for their wife.

“I never wanted this for you.” Olenna said, ending those words with a new fit of coughing. Blood filled her mouth again. Slowly, she managed to pull her hand from Margaery’s grip to grab a handkerchief to spit on. “But I’m afraid there is nothing left to do. We must pay the consequences of what we’ve done.”

“Grandmother, but I—”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, you stupid girl.” Olenna raised her voice, even if that meant getting her throat bloody again. “Get out and wait with septon Askell until I call for you again.”

For a moment, she thought the girl would refuse to leave. However, with the same glint of fear and hurt pride gleaming in her eyes, she nodded and left the room.

_We’ve lost too much in this bloody game I never wanted to play._

Margaery was the thing keeping Olenna alive.

She didn’t know why she cared about the girl after all the things that had happened between the two of them during the years. A House divided, their reputation smeared through the Seven Kingdoms and too much loss in ways she could never imagine possible. They had brought all of them over themselves led by their hunger for a crown. In a way, Olenna felt guilty for not having done enough to stop her son and grandchildren. But on the other hand, she knew she was still fighting this battle
because she loved Margaery and would always do so.

At this point, no lie could be woven to rebuild the girl’s reputation. She had bet everything on Joffrey, and with him now dead, no one would want her.

*Except one man.*

It would be hard to arrange a marriage for Margaery and make sure she would’ve a future. But until her last breath, Olenna would do her best. After all, family had always been her priority.

“All of this could’ve been prevented.” She said to herself out loud, her eyes locked on the ceiling. “All of this.”

Olenna had always seen herself as a player. Through the years, she had even earned the title of Queen of Thorns. She hated it, but was proud of what it meant. After all, by having a word on any marriage of House Tyrell she had strengthened the Reach, making sure it had a military capacity as well as coffers filled with gold. Luthor had been a good companion while he lived, letting her partake in many decisions and heeding her advices.

Mace, her own son, was different from his father in many ways.

“You dream with greatness, Mace, but you’re not very great.” She recalled saying that to him on his first days as the Lord of Highgarden. “Don’t ask for what you can’t get.”

But Mace had shared earlier on his intentions to get closer to the Iron Throne. Since a child, he had revealed himself to be ambitious, even if he was not good with swords or words. Not as ambitious as his mother, but the kind of ambition that led men to do stupid things.

“My son wants to have the biggest cock of the Seven Kingdoms.” Olenna joked privately with her company ladies. “He’s not a bit like his father.”

No, Mace didn’t give a damn to important things like how the Reach was fairing by its own. Even married to a Hightower – the most stupid daughter of Leyton Hightower, surely, but nonetheless a Hightower – he kept dreaming about the only thing a Tyrell never had had: a crown.

Memories long gone, from the days when Margaery was nothing more than a girl of five or six, were still vivid in Olenna’s mind. She could remember the summer air and the sweet scent of roses as Mace invaded her private apartments, bringing with him a letter signed by Jon Arryn, who was by then the Hand of the King. Oh, how fool he had sounded.

“The Usurper refused our marriage proposal again.” He said, showing her the letter. “Read, mother. *Read* what he says!”

Olenna didn’t have to read Jon Arryn’s words to learn their meaning.

“Let me guess.” She had said instead, ignoring her company ladies’ giggles. “Our gracious king says the prince heir is too much young to be betrothed.”

“Yes!” Mace yelled, truly surprised with the refusal. “As if my little rose is not good enough for him!”

Olenna simply rolled her eyes and rip the letter in half.

“But embarrass yourself, Mace.” She advised. “The entire Seven Kingdoms know who Prince Joffrey will marry when he comes of age. Only a fool like you can’t see it. Robert Baratheon may
not have married a Stark, but his son will. Write that down and read it a few times every day. Maybe someday you’ll learn it."

He mumbled his way out of her chambers, and for the next few years his hunger for power subsided.

Years later, when Jon Arryn died and the entire court travelled to Winterfell, a marriage between Houses Stark and Baratheon was negotiated, proving Olenna had been right from the beginning. She was slightly surprised to learn that her granddaughter, by then a maid of sixteen-years-old, was distressed by such news.

“Believe me, Margaery…” She said to her granddaughter, walking with her in the gardens. “A crown is a heavy burden. Be glad it didn’t fall on your head.”

Margaery scoffed, making no effort to hide how displeased she was with her grandmother’s indifference to the matter. Much to Olenna’s distaste, Mace and Alerie had fed the girl with false promises during her childhood. They used to tell her she was far too much beautiful to not marry into the royal family.

"Idiots.

"Growing Strong." Margaery said, shaking her head. “That’s our House motto.”

“After so many years married to your grandfather, do you really think I don’t know those stupid words?”

“Well, if you know them, you sure seem not to care if House Tyrell grows or not.”

Olenna wanted to slap the girl right there. In the end, she controlled her hands, but laying on her deathbed, she wondered what would’ve happened if she had slapped Margaery and force some sense into her.

“This isn’t the proper moment for our House to snatch a crown.” She simply said. “We must continue doing our best to strengthen House Tyrell. Maybe one day a chance to marry into the royal family will arise. Maybe your children, or grandchildren. But believe me, Margaery, it would be a mistake to do it now.”

And she then shared with the girl her own tale.

“When I was just a little girl, I was betrothed to Prince Daeron Targaryen. My father was just as fool as your father, constantly dreaming with greatness. The Arbor was known by its wine, and appreciated by it, yes. But my father wanted respect and influence. So, as that old oaf used to say, he wouldn’t rest until one of his children was married into the royal family. It was not an easy task, but somehow he almost achieved it. After writing to Bertha Blackwood, who was then the queen consort, he managed to negotiate a marriage between the youngest prince and myself.”

“A deal you made him break years later.” Margaery quickly said. She already knew the story by heart.

“Yes, I made him broke it off.” Olenna had confirmed, letting a smile touch her lips. “And I’m glad I did it. Did I want to be called a princess, and to live surrounded by gold and jewels? Yes, who wouldn’t want that? But you must remember always this, Margaery: there are more valuable things. I wanted a man who would respect me and share his power with me, someone with whom I could build a family and leave a legacy behind. Daeron would never give me that. He was not happy at court, living among diplomacy and power games. I was eager to worm myself in a power position, but Daeron was not fit to give me that. He had been carved to the battlefield and his heart belonged
She had never uttered that name out loud since the last time she had spoken to Daeron. That conversation had happened right after she had caught him in bed with the knight. The shock of the moment had quickly given way to an opportunity and her first move in a greater game for her future. She promised to keep Daeron’s secret safe if he agreed to break their engagement. Olenna couldn’t do it herself. It would be disrespectful.

He did his part, and she did hers, and the marriage never happened.

“I could’ve gotten a crown in my head, and passed my days being addressed as Your Grace, but I would have led a miserable life.”

Margaery didn’t answer. Instead, she looked at her grandmother with pity, as if she was nothing more than an old crone and didn’t know how the world worked.

A few months later, Loras rode through Highgarden’s gates with Renly Baratheon at his side. Both came bearing the news of the king’s death and Ned Stark’s imprisonment, as well as the fact that Joffrey had no right to the Iron Throne. It seemed a filthy rumor was spreading about the heirs to the throne being bastards of Cersei and Jaime Lannister.

Those news were like wildfire. In the hours before dawn, Mace decided not only to support Renly’s pretense to the Iron Throne, but also pulled Margaery from her bed to marry her to Renly, right before he was crowned. It had been his dumbest move of all time.

Olenna was abed while everything happened, totally oblivious that House Tyrell’s fate had changed overnight. Mace was smart enough to know his mother would be more helpful in bed than out of it. Had she been awake, she would’ve prevented everything.

In less than a week, Renly was marching North again, headed to King’s Landing, taking his little queen with him, as well as his lover and an army.

“Oaf!” Yelled Olenna to her son, when he decided to pay her a visit. He would join King Renly as soon as his new armor was finished. “Lord Oaf, is what I’ll call you from now on. Only an idiot like you would marry the girl to a man who has no legitimacy to be king.”

Even if the rumors about Joffrey were true, there were two problems concerning Renly’s pretense. Since Eddard Stark had been pardoned, Joffrey had now his grandfather’s army and the support of the North. Secondly, considering that Joffrey was indeed a bastard and could be removed from the Iron Throne, there was another man with a stronger pretense. Stannis, Renly’s oldest brother, who had also called his bannermen to join the fight.

Throwing Margaery to such chaos had been a mistake, a mistake that could bring down everything Olenna had built for the Reach. Everything jeopardized to put a crown on the girl’s head.

“This was the right thing to do, lady mother.” Mace kept on saying, smiling proudly. “If I’ve a chance to make a move to put my daughter on the Iron Throne, I’ll do it.”

It won’t be Margaery the one sitting on the Iron Throne.

“That’s why you’re an oaf, Mace.” Olenna answered quickly. “Before power, comes family. Remember that.”
"I just made Margaery the queen of the Seven Kingdoms."

"Oh, yes, you did." Where had she failed in raising him? "But what will be the use of a crown if she has no head?"

She was not entirely sure he had caught the meaning of those words, but she simply walked away from Mace and returned to her quarters to wait. There was nothing else to do than wait.

The bittersweet taste of being right filled her mouth when the news arrived of Renly's demise. The death was a confusing affair and it would remain a mystery for eternity. Someone claimed it had been Brienne of Tarth doing the deed, others pointed a finger to Catelyn Stark and there were even those who blamed Stannis' red priestess. Whoever it was, it managed to turn the tide in favor of Stannis and make the last Renly's supporters flee.

Highgarden stood at a delicate point at the time. Mace had to make the right decision to ensure the future of his House. After moving his army to Bitterbridge, he met with Kevan Lannister and made a new deal for Margaery. He would kneel to Joffrey, and the Throne would pardon his betrayal, if he were to fight against Stannis. To celebrate such deal, Margaery would marry prince Tommen and be one day Lady of Storm's End.

It was a victory for Margaery, considering she was now a widow, even if her marriage had lasted for just a few months. Besides, it proved the Lannisters were willing to ignore the Tyrell betrayal for siding with Renly. Well, she had to give credit to her son for that. Had she been the one negotiating with Kevan Lannister, she would've bargained a similar deal.

"It’s not the marriage your father wanted…” Olenna said, after reading Mace’s letter. She was breaking her fast in the gardens, keeping Willas as her company. “But considering she was the wife of a dead king, I must say we got lucky.”

In a way, it was too much good to be true. A marriage with the Lord of the Stormlands would be good for the Reach. She had never supported the idea of marrying Margaery to Renly Baratheon while he was lord. The topic had been discussed a few times, brought specially by Loras, but Olenna didn’t want for her granddaughter a marriage like the one Daeron would’ve given her. But now the Stormlands would get a new Lord.

"Yes, luck was on our side.” Willas said, plucking a grape form a bowl. “But we must have an eye on the boy. If he grows to be just like Joffrey, we may have to do something, grandma.” He looked her in the eyes. “You know I won’t let Marge be mistreated.”

Willas could have his lazy leg, but he had the wits and the heart to be compared as younger male version of her.

"Yes, I know that.” Olenna had answered back, grabbing his grandson’s hand. “Let’s pray Tommen grows to be a good man. Gods know how Joffrey would’ve made your sister suffer.”

*The Illborn King.*

That was what the people were calling Joffrey. Rumors said he was a spoiled little boy, with a refined taste for violence. Allegedly, he had even asked for Eddard Stark’s head. If Cersei hadn’t stopped him, his lust for blood could’ve led him to a worse war than the one being fought at the time. In turn, Sansa Stark had to pay with her body and soul for her father’s sins.

Not long after Blackwater Battle, Olenna travelled to King’s Landing as did most of the noble Houses of the Seven Kingdoms. She had received the summon to pay her respect to the king and his
new wife. Besides, she was eager to see how Loras was faring and if Margaery was taking her engagement gracefully.

An hour after reaching the capital she learnt she had come too late.

“Oh, grandma, I won’t actually marry Tommen.” Margaery revealed, amused. She dared to giggle like a child who had just heard a silly thing. The giggle still haunted Olenna after so many years.

“Oh, you won’t?” Olenna had asked, not entirely surprised.

“No, of course not.” She said, smiling. “By the time Tommen is old enough to marry me, I’ll be far too old for him. Besides, he’ll never be king.”

That time she actually slapped the girl.

“Learn before it’s too late, you stupid girl.” Olenna snarled, grabbing her granddaughter by the wrist. Margaery raise her chin, showing her red cheek proudly. “You could’ve lost your head by playing this game. Must I remind that you were married to a usurper? Striking a deal to marry a prince should be enough for you. Don’t be a fool by repeating the same mistake.”

“Let me go or I’ll make you regret this.” Margaery snarled, smiling viciously as Olenna had taught her.

Olenna laughed and let the girl go.

“You’ve your head filled with impossible dreams.” She said, watching Margaery left the chamber. The girl didn’t turn again. Olenna’s advices were no important to her any longer. She simply walked out, refusing to see the truth. For a long time, they didn’t speak with each other.

Later that day, she met with Loras. She suspected he was the one feeding Margaery’s illusions to get more than what she had already gotten. However, she quickly understood Loras couldn’t be behind this. The boy was broken, the death of Renly had clearly taken his toll on him. Being forced to kneel and serve the boy king his lover wanted to depose couldn’t be easy.

“I thought I could stay here, but I can’t.” He confided to his grandmother. “This city is eating me alive. Everywhere I turn I see...”

Olenna knew about the boy’s romance, but had never thought it would’ve hit him so strongly.

“Have you tried to join the Kingsguard?” She asked, trying to escape from the delicate matter. Loras would never marry a girl, so he could very well thrive as a member of the Kingsguard. “It could be a distraction and—”

“No.” He interrupted. “I can’t fight for him.”

“Then what are you doing here, boy? You can return to Highgarden.”

“Fathers needs me here.”

“Let me deal with your father.”

“But Highgarden… I can’t—”

The pain in Loras’ eyes as he turned to her was the answer she needed.
“Oh, for Gods’ sake boy! One day you’ll have to come back home and face the truth.” She sighed, feeling her heart as heavy as a stone. “Well, you could travel to Essos for a few months. Get away from this mess and heal your wounds in your own way.”

*Pretty boys, fights and ale.*

That had to be enough to heal her grandson.

That very same week, Loras left King’s Landing aboard a ship bound to Pentos. Six years had passed since that day, and he had never returned home. Last time he wrote had been more than a year ago to say he had joined a sellsword’s company and was fighting for the Targaryen Queen in the Disputed Lands. He would never be again the Knight of Flowers.

With her granddaughter with her back turned to her and Mace doing his best to avoid her, Olenna stayed at King’s Landing for just a few months to make sure Margaery wouldn’t do anything foolish. The girl passed most of her days keeping company to the Dowager Queen and Prince Tommen. The king had not shown any interest in her, thankfully. In fact, the court constantly whispered that the king visited his wife’s chambers every night. The bruises on Sansa’s skin were proof of that.

And then it was announced the queen was pregnant.

Olenna returned home and, for almost four years, she lived secluded in Highgarden. Back in court, the royal marriage seemed to be thriving. The Iron Throne had a male heir to secure the lineages. Joffrey kept visiting his wife devoutly. The alliance between House Baratheon, Lannister and Stark ruled the Seven Kingdoms with an iron fist. Even the Tyrells were collecting their fruits, since Mace had wormed himself to the Small Council, bringing with him Horas Redwyne. In two or three years, Tommen would finally marry Margaery and Olenna would finally rest.

But then Mace died shitting himself.

Being the oldest of Mace’s children, the lordship would’ve passed to Willas. But Mace, obsessed with his stupid ideas about perfection, planned to make Garlan lord after him. They only found out his dirty move, and the decree signed by Joffrey officiating Garlan’s inheritance, when Mace’s body was returned to them. It was a despicable, cowardly and cruel move.

Even so, out of the goodness of his heart, Willas simply conceded the lordship to Garlan without contesting his father’s decision. That was one of the reasons why Olenna loved him so much. Willas knew family mattered, just like her. He didn’t wish for more bad blood dividing House Tyrell. As he used to say, he would be perfectly able to “help” Garlan rule from the shadows.

“Garlan, you are now the Lord of Highgarden.” Olenna said as soon as she overcome her son’s betrayal. “I think it’s time to bring your sister back. She shouldn’t be left alone at court.”

In less than a month, Margaery was back at Highgarden, with her eyes puffed from tears and vowing to flee from the castle as soon as the opportunity were to arise.

“Why are you crying?” Olenna cornered the girl, with whom she had no talked for a long time. “I thought you would be glad to be back home. It may be the last time you are here as Margaery Tyrell. I expect you’ll marry Prince Tommen very soon.”

The realization that Margaery had whored herself into Joffrey’s bed dawned on her when the girl looked her in the eyes.

“I won’t marry stupid Tommen.” She snarled, just as vicious as she had done years ago. “I told you once, and I tell you again.” She wiped the tears from her face. “Joffrey will make me queen.”
No slap hit the girl that time, but Olenna locked her in the bedroom as a prisoner. A crisis, she was sure, had happened after all. She couldn’t know when the affair started, and why the spies she had on the court had never reported anything to her. Probably they had been paid off to keep silent. Margaery had inherited her cunning, after all. Infuriated, Olenna didn’t lose a minute writing to Tywin Lannister. He would be just as interested as her in solving the matter. He could hasten the marriage between Tommen and Margaery. However, even before she could get a reply, a Kingsguard came to Highgarden’s gates with an ultimatum from the king. Margaery’s presence was required at court. The refusal of such summon, as the king had called it, would mean war.

*Maybe he is Robert’s child after all*, she said to herself. *Robert’s Rebellion started just like this.*

“We’ve to let her go.” Garlan decided on its own. “We can’t afford a war during Winter.”

Olenna had nothing to say to her grandson. He was right, and now the only thing she could do was pray that Joffrey would lose his interest on the girl. Letting her granddaughter move to court, she refused to give her blessing. The information that came from the new sources she had hired reported distressing things. The affair between the king and Margaery was now very public. The girl usually left her chambers by midnight to return at the first light of dawn, bringing bruises on her skin and hopeful smiles on her lips.

Olenna did her best to understand what was moving the girl so fiercely. Could she really crave a crown so much? She passed her days dreaming out loud about how Joffrey would get rid of Sansa and give the crown to her. Margaery had even the audacity to form her own court, hiring a bard and surrounding herself with ladies in waiting. Things were growing out of proportions. Willas tried to convince Garlan to hasten the marriage, but the Small Council was regarding the affair as a small problem. They had more important things to deal with, like the news about the Targaryen Queen destroying slaver cities on Essos. And even Queen Sansa seemed indifferent to what was happening, as if Margaery was in fact doing her a favor in getting her husband out of her bed.

And then, just two months ago, an unexpected letter came to Highgarden.

A letter addressed to Olenna, signed by no else other than Margaery.

The message was simple and clear: she still had no crown, but soon she would have an heir to the throne.

“It’s time we end this nonsense once and for all.” Olenna said, convening with Garlan and Willas that same day. “Your sister has ashamed herself and our House. We must end this the best way possible. If she is pregnant, Joffrey has to do something.”

“What?” Asked Garkan, during their last meeting before she had left.

Olenna smiled ominously to Willas. Both knew what had to be done.

“We’ll force our dear king to give up on Margaery.”

And so, she returned to King’s Landing once again, facing the frozen roads and stormy winds, and decided to deal with her granddaughter once and for all. Ironically, she came upon the city the same died Tywin Lannister died. Was that an omen? She hoped so.

If Margaery was carrying a bastard child, would Joffrey dare to cast Sansa aside and declare Prince Edwyle a bastard? It was highly unlike. The Targaryen had endangered themselves legitimizing bastards and taking more than one wife and that had led them to wars, madness and extinction. No, the best bargain she could hope for was to deceive Queen Sansa and make sure she would do the
dirty work for her. Feeling menaced, Sansa would certainly search Cersei. If not Sansa, then Lady Catelyn Starks. Gods knew how she had dragged the Riverlands into bloodshed the moment she had arrested the Imp.

Uniting Stark and Lannisters would ensure that Margaery would return to Highgarden, to raise her bastard son in peace and live the rest of her life without humiliating anymore her House. Yes, she could again try to force some sense into the girl, but by doing it herself she would again be risking Joffrey’s rage and her granddaughter would never pardon her for that. No, someone else had to do it for her, someone else had to show Margaery her place, someone who was not close to her family.

The question now was: how to convince the Starks and Lannister to deal with Margaery as a nuisance? Olenna knew the answer to that: she had to do what wasn’t expected of her.

“I believe the time has come to bond our Houses.” She had said to queen Sansa and Lady Catelyn, when she had paid a visit to them. “An alliance between House Stark and Tyrell could be useful in the long winter that is upon us.”

The veiled threats hidden in those words were like a cobweb, subtly trapping the queen and her lady mother. Why would the grandmother of the king’s mistress propose an alliance between Starks and Tyrells? The moment Cersei were to know about their meeting, she would be paranoid. It would be a matter of time until she ran to advise Joffrey to get rid of Margaery. The moment the king broke Margaery’s heart, Olenna would gladly flee from King’s Landing with the girl back under her wing. They would heal wounds at home. Everything would be fine.

At first, Olenna saw everything happening as predicted. Cersei would get rid of Margaery, yes. She was even attempting to accelerate the marriage between Margaery and Tommen.

Everything turned to chaos when someone attempted against Prince Edwyle’s life.

Chaos was followed by more chaos. Sansa tried to arrest Margaery, Joffrey counter attacked against his wife and locked her in a tower and Cersei started to negotiate a marriage annulment. In an incredible twist, Olenna was astounded with everything. It seemed Sansa would really lose her crown, that her son would be declared a bastard and Joffrey would be clear to marry Margaery.

“Have you done this to that boy?” Olenna cornered Margaery that evening, right before dining with the king. Margaery was thriving, as if she had already a crown on her head. She laughed condescendingly and shook her head.

“No, of course not.” She said, while one of her ladies in waiting placed a collar made of emeralds around her neck. “But I won’t pray for his recovery. I don’t my child to live on the shadow of a bastard.”

That night, during dinner, Olenna took her leave as soon as she finished her meal. She couldn’t bear look to the king. The way he talked, as an arrogant little prick, made her sick. But the worst was how he looked to Margaery, as if she was nothing more than the finest jewel of the Seven Kingdoms. It was not love the emotion glinting in his eyes.

It was greed.

She didn’t sleep that night. Her mind led to any possible option available. Would she dare to join forces with Cersei? She doubted that. The Dowager Queen seemed to be controlled by Joffrey somehow, since she was doing her best to get the damn annulment. She couldn’t also use Randyll Tarly, even if he was Hand of the King. He could be sworn to House Tyrell, but Tywin Lannister had done something to assure his fealty before dying. As dawn started to break, Olenna understood
there was only one way to prevent Margaery to marry Joffrey.

And to give her a crown.

Next morning, she sent Right – one of her bodyguards - to Flea Bottom with a specific order: buy the deadliest poison available in the city. She would kill Joffrey, even if it was the last thing she had to do. After the annulment, there wouldn’t be a better moment to get Joffrey out of the way and celebrate the marriage deal between Tommen and Margaery, who could then raise Joffrey’s bastard with Margaery, acting as Lord Regent. Presuming that the boy would take Margaery as his wife, of course. To ensure no one suspected the Tyrells, she would’ve to find a way to blame the Starks.

She was too much worried devising her plan to poison the king that she totally disregarded the idea that someone could poison her family. Yes, maybe that one time she could’ve been called a fool.

It was incredible how the game of thrones never ceases to amaze. Margaery got close enough to sense her victory only to lose everything again. Everything could’ve turned out differently if Olenna had moved faster, if she had acknowledged her mistakes and, of course, if Mace had never plotted to get a crown for her daughter. Willas would’ve no other choice than call his bannermen and march to war against the Throne to avenge the crime that had been committed against his family. No lie would cover the truth.

Olenna was ready to accept the disgrace of her family, when septon Askell had come with the most wonderful news.

“The city is being ruled by chaos, my lady.” He said, with tears in his eyes. “We must pray for our good king’s soul. Dark timesloom ahead.”

Joffrey had been killed during the Hand’s Tournament. Olenna laughed, and silently thanked the Gods and whoever had killed the king. As the day passed, and the sound of bells and screams could be heard from the city, more news came. The Starks had invaded the Red Keep and kidnapped the Prince. They had somehow infiltrated on the Lannister guard. Queen Sansa was suspected dead, just like her husband. Catelyn Stark had been found headless laying side by side with the body of Jaime Lannister. Cersei was safe, as well as prince Tommen, but had locked herself on the royal sept. The Imp was presiding the Small Council.

Power had shifted extraordinarily in the most ambitious move Olenna had seen in her life. Maybe more twists were reserved for the future. Maybe she could be part of those twists.

“My lady, are you awake?” Right, her guard, awakened her softly a few hours after she had dozed to sleep with her thoughts.

“Well, clearly I am now.”

“Lord Tyrion is here for you.”

_Dumb idiot._

“And are you waiting for me to die so you can let him in?”

Tyrion Lannister came quickly after that.

With stubby legs, a jutting forehead, mismatched eyes of green and black, and a mixture of pale blond and black hair, the Imp came strolling through the door. He didn’t seem the same man she knew, always with a joke bouncing off his lips and a sarcastic remark to make about things he was not asked about. He was in pain, clearly. Wearing dark clothes, he seemed to have grown ten years
older in just one day. If the death of his nephew had cheered him up, his brother’s demise had completely drowned any light of hope in his eyes.

*Good,* Olenna thought to herself, watching him enter. *A broken man can hear reason when there is none.*

“My lady, I must admit I was surprised to know you wanted to see me.” He said, staring at her as if he wanted to read in her eyes the meaning of his visit. “I would’ve visited sooner, but I’m afraid we’ve too much to deal with.”

“Oh, bullshit.” She said, gesturing to a chair next to her bed. “You know why you are here, Lord Tryion.” She was blunt and direct. There was no time for diplomacy. “In fact, I’m surprised you haven’t come sooner.”

Tyrion managed to force a sad smile and took his place.

“I wish I could say I’m sorry for your loss.” Olenna said, sniffing. “But I would be lying.”

“Well, I don’t need your sympathy.” Tyrion said, with the same bluntness. “And for what matters, I won’t be sorry for you.”

Olenna laughed, and a drip of blood ran down her lips. She cleaned it with her handkerchief before continuing.

“Yes, yes, that seems fair.” She said, putting the handkerchief down. “But let’s talk business, shall we? You need my granddaughter.” She paused to see his reaction. Olenna was glad to see that Tyrion had inherited his father’s wits. The Imp simply nodded at the sound of those words. “Have you crowned him already?”

“We’re still waiting for the search parties we’ve sent after Prince Edwyle.” Tyrion replied immediately. “Before doing that.”

“You’re an idiot, then.” She coughed again. “You must put a crown on Tommen’s head as soon as possible.”

“And why is that, my lady?”

“Stop playing dumb with me, Imp.” She said. “Once again, you need House Tyrell on your side.”

“Do I?” The Imp asked bluntly, raising his voice. “I’m not entirely sure I do, my lady, and I won’t be bullied into accepting a poisoned offer.” They exchanged a silent glance for a few seconds. “For what I know at this point, you could be the one behind what happened at King’s Landing. We both know you would’ve your reasons to do it.”

“Bullshit.” Cut Olenna, starting to lose her patience. “Even if I suspect it was your family the one who poisoned my family, I would never be able to pull such a move in less than three days, Imp. But you could do it, couldn’t you?”

The Imp seemed amused.

“Me?”

“All Realm knows you had a difficult relationship with your nephew.”

“I can’t say I never thought about killing him, but he had my blood on his veins. I would never
“summon the courage to do it.” He paused, looking directly into her eyes. “And I would never lift a finger against my brother Jaime.”

“Well, I guess that whoever did this is on both our sides.” Olenna pressed on.

“Yes, that’s the intriguing bit, isn’t it?” The Imp asked, stopping her. “I found it incredibly odd that someone is playing such incredible moves to put the Starks on such bad terms and get your House closer to the throne.”

“What do you mean?” She asked. It seemed the Imp was doubting the Stark’s involvement. “Do you think the Starks were not the ones behind this?”

Tyrion shrugged.

“I think someone is lying to us.” He said, coldly. “Someone is making us believe the Starks have the prince in their hands, but I’m not entirely sure they have. I have seen their banners hanging down on Maegor’s, but I don’t see Robb Stark’s involvement in this. More like as if someone was framing him. Someone that wanted to buy a war between the Throne and the North. The only thing I’ve not yet understood is who can truly benefit with this war.” He smiled wickedly. “But I’ll find that very soon.”

“I hope you do.” Olenna replied. “But I give you my word, Lord Tyrion, that House Tyrell had no part in what happened. And having one of the greatest military forces of the Seven Kingdoms, both us know how that could help the Iron Throne in whatever wars are to come.”

Tyrion sighed and didn’t reply for a few seconds.

“You know what will happen next.” Olenna continued. “The North will come for you. Even if you manage to put your hands-on the little prince, the Young Wolf will come to get his revenge for his mother and sister. And you won’t resist Robb Stark’s forces if House Tyrell joins him.”

Tyrion crossed his arms.

“Will the Reach raise their arms, then?”

“Do you take my grandson for a fool? You’ve sent him the body of his brother, and soon you will send him mine. Do you expect him to do nothing?”

Tyrion blinked again and his answer was quick.

“Very well.” He said, following her line of thought. “The thing can be done, my lady.”

*He has already thought about this, she understood. Of course he has.*

“Your sister won’t approve.” Olenna said. “But since I hear she is keeping herself locked in the royal sept, I don’t think she’ll be a problem if you act quickly.”

“Act quickly?” Tyrion lift his hand to stop her. “If Tommen is crowned, I can promise you that Margaery will be taken as his wife in less than two months, once everything calms down. But first I’ve to make sure your grandson won’t turn his army against us.”

Olenna blinked, astounded.

“No, I won’t accept that.” She said firmly. “You must marry my granddaughter to your nephew tonight or the deal is off.”
The Imp rolled his eyes and sighed again.

“What would that bring me?” The Imp asked.

They were getting there.

“We have at our disposal fifty thousand swords.” She said, remembering the register books. “And as Lord Horas Redwyne would tell if your sister hadn’t sent him on a fool’s errand, we have more than two hundred ships in our fleet. I believe my grandson can deliver them in less than two weeks.”

Tyrion blinked and his smile spread.

“Does that suffice the Iron Throne, my lord?”

“Yes, it does.” Tyrion replied. “But I’ll have to run this by my nephew before I can say yes.”

“Run this by your nephew?” Olenna laughed. “Wait a few more hours, and your sister will awake from her grief. Act now, and you can secure the future you always wanted. Make the right move now and you’ll get a king under your thumb, make yourself Lord Regent until he comes of age to rule by himself and later you can even get your hands on Casterly Rock. Don’t be a fool, Lord Tyrion.”

Tyrion laughed once again, but by then she knew she had already won him over.

“My lady, you seemed to have thought it through.” He stopped. “What do you suggest then?”

“Go and fetch prince Tommen.” She said. “I’ve a septon and my granddaughter waiting next door. Let’s marry them here and now, and crown the new king and queen.”

That same night, by the time the bells started ringing midnight, King Tommen Baratheon, the first of his name, took his crown before Gods and Men. It was not the traditional ceremony on the Great Sept, but it had all the conditions to legitimize him as king. On the small bedroom of Lady Olenna, the king sat on a wooden chair, pale as snow and shivering in fear, as septon Askell placed a crown on his head and made him pronounce his vows.

He won’t be a great king, Olenna thought to herself. But he’ll be loved.

Later, Margaery became his wife and took her crown. There were just a handful of witnesses in that room reeking of sickness and death. Lady Olenna watched everything from her bed and Lord Tyrion kept to her side, watching history happening in front of his eyes. A servant was invited so she could later spread the news through the castle and Randyll Tarly was also there, since he was Hand of the King. No one else was allowed to enter the room.

It was a simple service, but Margaery finally got a crown on her head. For the first time in a while, Olenna saw relief in her eyes.

When she fell asleep that night, the matriarch of House Tyrell knew she had done the right thing for her family. No, it was not the future she had envisioned for the girl. And no, Margaery would never be as happy or powerful as she had been. But considering everything that had happened, all the pain inflicted through the years, all the loss and tears, she realized they had already paid the price, hadn’t they?

We paid with our lives to get a crown.

So, the best thing to do was to accept what they had bought.
Mace.

Alerie.

Loras.

Garlan.

Margaery.

Every single one of them had dreamt with that moment.

“Well, here it’s.” She said when she met all of them in her dreams. “Look what it brought us, you oafs.”

Next morning, they found the Queen of Thorns dead in her bed.

And rumor has it that she was smiling.
AUTHOR’S NOTES: Wow, guys. Thank you so much for all the love and the positive reviews I received for Olenna’s chapter. It was a risky move, but as I’ve said to some of the few who contacted me, I think Olenna never wanted a crown for Margaery. She knew the risks it would imply and, for her, the wellbeing of her family as always first. That’s why she plotted Joffrey’s death in A Storm of Swords. Well, this chapter will be the last one, finally, about the events that happened in King’s Landing.

The next seven chapters at least will be about Jon, Daenerys, Sansa, Arya, Myrcella, Robb and Eddard. Not necessarily in this order, but we’ll get to those stories first. And from that point onwards, many plots will get together and I’ll get easier for you to follow the story. I’m sorry if I’ve been too much focused on the King’s Landing’s arc, but it was necessary to bring it to an end. War is finally happening. Next time we’ll hear about it, I expect it will be a Tyrion POV. As usual, feel free to leave your review and contact me via PM.

I struggled to write this one. Cersei is my favorite character, and up until this point I made an effort to portray her as a smart player of this game. But the loss of Jaime and Joffrey made it impossible to maintain such register. This is a very bleak chapter, I’m sorry. But it was needed. You’ll see.

CERSEI IV

First, the tears drowned her in a sea of sorrow.

Cersei Lannister had stood on watch by their side for days. Nothing else mattered. The Iron Throne could be vacant, the city could be burning in chaos and a war could loom not far ahead, that she no longer cared.

At least, not until she was ready to fight again.
No, the voice said in her head. His voice. A voice so clear that it was as if Jaime was just behind her back and not lying dead in front of her. You can’t mend broken things, sweet sister.

The time to act was upon her. For two days she had cried, yes, living in total seclusion, wishing to lie down between those bodies. It was impossible to live in such a state of raw excruciating pain. It was the kind of pain you can’t explain. An agony you can’t endure without changing something in your core, unless you don’t want to survive in a world that is no longer your world.

The bond she had with Jaime had been abruptly severed. It seemed like a part of her heart was now rotting inside her chest. She could almost feel the taste of blood in her throat, just as Jaime should have tasted before dying with a knife piercing his neck. And the most intimate parts of her body, the parts of her that had given birth to Joffrey, that had made her feel alive and experience the sweetest pleasures of the world, seemed now to have been sewn shut with steel wire. Nothing more than a wound that will never bleed again.

That was the kind of pain she felt.

How can I do this without you?

She looked to her brother in search of an answer.

Jaime looked strangely peaceful, wearing his golden armor. She had insisted that he had to be buried as a Lannister and not as the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, as traditionally commanded. A red cloak was fastened to his shoulder, enveloping him in a bed dignified for a king. He had his sword at his belt, the ruby glinting on the pommel and the helmet placed by the side of his right arm. A true knight. Thankfully, the wound ripping his neck was hidden beneath the gold breastplate.

Slowly, Cersei extended a hand to touch the cold gold again, ignoring the empty scabbard on his waist where a dagger was missing.

Save your tears, sister, his voice said in her mind, tormenting her. You know my blood is in your hands.

Cersei closed her eyes. The voice was there, always there, filling an unfamiliar void in her life and making sure she paid for what she had done. After all, in a terrible way, the blame was on her.
During her vigil, many memories had come to her mind. One of them had the smell of the sea and the taste of Jaime’s sweat imprinted on it. She could still feel the taste of salt he had on his lips that night. He had returned to his chambers, after a night swim in the Sunset Sea. His golden hair was wet, as was his body when he took her to the bed and made love to her, spoiling her favorite dress with seawater. That had been an age of glory, filled with days of promises and hope and nights of dreams and eternity.

However, she could remember that night better than any other because it was the one when Jaime had decided their lives for them. Having the moonlight as a blessing, he told her he would forfeit his inheritance and join the Kingsguard to be at her side in the Red Keep. She was supposed to marry Rhaegar by then, and the thought of living a few years away from each other was a sweet price to pay for a whole life side by side. She would get a crown in her head, and he would get his white cloak. They would be a power couple.

However, he had made her swear a few words, just as they lay naked on his bedroom.

“Promise me, Cersei.” He had pleaded, as if his life depended on that. He was still inside her, catching his breath. “Promise me that one day we will run away.”

“Run away?” She asked, digging her nails on his back, thrusting him deeper into her.

“After you give heirs to your dragon prince.” He said, between kisses. “When you believe your round as queen is done.” Another kiss. “When we’re done with the bloody Seven Kingdoms, promise me that we’ll leave.”

She had laughed between moans, stealing one more kiss from his lips.

“I’m serious, Cersei.” He said, stopping to look directly into her eyes.

“Yes.” She replied, pushing him inside her again. “I promise.”

She had been nothing more than a silly girl, but she learnt to cherish that promise the years that followed. The occasion to leave, though, never arose. At least, she had never believed it had. Power proved to be not as smooth as they had hoped. Yes, Jaime was sure their father’s death was the sign they had prayed for years. And maybe it was. But she had not heeded his words, she had made plans to poison the Tyrells, to secure Joffrey’s reign and now…
Now it’s too late, Jaime’s voice finished. It’s too late for us.

The Dowager Queen closed her eyes again. No tears ran down this time.

“For how much time must I endure this?”

“I’m afraid you don’t have much time, Your Grace.”

She was not expecting a real answer, but the voice that replied had not come from her mind.

Many had come and gone before she had ordered the guards to prevent anyone from entering the Royal Sept. Not even the bloody Silent Sisters were welcome. The Dowager Queen wanted to be alone, to have them for herself for a few more hours, to hold them in a maddening nightmare forever. The Small Council had conceded to her request, too much focused on getting their hands on everything else that was happening.

And to keep me away.

But time was up.

“Qyburn.” She acknowledged, turning slowly to face the maester. He was one of the few allowed to visit her. Carrying a tray with wine, bread and cold meat, he approached slowly. “Why are you here?” She asked, bluntly. “Have they found it?”

It.

The word was so small and insignificant, but somehow it didn’t hurt anymore.

“I’m afraid not, Your Grace.” Qyburn stammered quickly. “As far as I know, the City Watch keeps patrolling the perimeter around Flea Bottom. The riots continue and—”
“Do I look like I care about that?” She asked, turning his back to him once more. She preferred the company of the dead to the one of the living. “I gave specific orders to the Council concerning that pit hole. In a few days, I’ll raze Flea Bottom to the ground and put an end to that plague.” She retorted, feeling her face grow red. “But I don’t have time for that now. The king deserves to be buried with respect. The City Watch and every man in this wretched city should be looking for his head. What is the Small Council doing?”

Even though two days had passed since what they were now calling the Red Melee, King’s Landing was far from returning to normal. She didn’t know the details yet about how sellswords had infiltrated both the Lannister Guard and the City Watch, even if she had a theory or two. The Small Council was already investigating the red and gold guard, purging any traitor from their ranks. Even so, it seemed most of the responsible were gone. Lord Varys included, as well as Queen Sansa, who was allegedly dead, and her little weasel of a sister and the prince.

What she knew for a fact was that the head of the king remained lost. She would never be able to erase from her mind the sight of the head parading on top of a spear. The only remnant of her son was the veiled thing laying on the table side by side with Jaime. They had found the body among the ashes of the king’s pavilion, and recognized it only thanks to the armor he was wearing. But it was nothing more than a charred, headless, black thing.

A thin golden veil covered it, trying to give the late king a regal ending.

Gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds.

She shivered, clenching her fists.

“I’m afraid, Your Grace, the Small Council is not heeding your request.” Qyburn continued, frowning. “My informants have told me the City Watch received orders to stop searching and protect the perimeter around—”

“Enough.” Cersei commanded, lifting her hand. “You are just repeating yourself.”

The maester nodded.

“But Your Grace, as your humble and loyal servant, I feel obliged to advise you again.” He said, and his voice quivered with a note of impatience. “You’ve to do something if you want to have a place in court. The king is being advised by some of the men who have reason to get you out of the game.”
The king.

The ringing of the bells was taking any bit of sanity left in her. King. They were claiming. All of them. From the bells of the Great Sept to the ones on top of the watchtowers by the gates. King. All of them chanting their praise. King, king, king. All of them tolling for the future. All of them tolling for life. All of them tolling for the sake of the new king.

Gold shall be their crowns...

Once again, Jaime’s voice sounded vividly in her head, teasing her with her worst fears.

“No!” She screamed, turning to the dead body. “No!”

“Your Grace, what are you—?”

Cersei Lannister turned again to the maester, just as quickly as an enraged lioness.

“Tell me what you wanted to say and go away.” She commanded, letting her voice echo through the sept. “I don’t have time for this.”

Qyburn took a step further, resolute in saying whatever was on his mind.

“Your Grace, you’ve endangered your position by letting Lord Tyrion control the Small Council.” He stated, repeating all the little things he had been feeding her recently. “Your brother has already called to arms. Envoys left last night to the Westerlands, the Reach, the Vale and the houses on the Crownlands.” He gulped, looking directly into her eyes. “Besides, I’m not entirely sure if the military strategy prepared is the right. Lord Randyll tells me Lord Tyrion is devising a plan to attack the Riverlands in less than a fortnight…. And you know Lord Tyrion has the new king around his little fingers, Your Grace. King Tommen has a crown on his head, but the entire court knows he will need guidance to—”

Look at him, Cersei, the voice in her head whispered again, chuckling. Can you see yourself through his eyes?
Yes, she could. The pity in Qyburn’s eyes was unbearable. The Dowager Queen didn’t look so much as Cersei Lannister these days. Wearing the same black dress she had worn at her father’s funeral, she looked like a ghost. Her skin had grown pale and cold, her eyes were reddish from the tears and the fatigue and her hair was disheveled. However, she couldn’t care less about looks.

_He is a fool_, the voice pressed on. _He still believes you can do this, sister._

Cersei gulped, wishing the voice would stop once and for all.

_Do you really believe you can halt your fate?_

“Where—?” She started, before stopping. The voice in her head and the one outside it were messing with her senses. “No, no… Qyburn, where is she?”

Once again, Qyburn’s face showed confusion and impatience. However, the maester quickly grasped the meaning of her words and sighed, right before giving her the answer she wanted. It was clear he felt other matters deserved more discussion than that one.

“She is hidden and safe, Your Grace. Just as I assured you yesterday.”

“The Small Council have not asked for her?”

Qyburn smiled somberly.

“I’m afraid they have, yes.” He said. “Lord Randyll Tarly paid me a visit just a few hours ago to poke around and make questions about Lady Catelyn’s body.”

“I don’t want to hear her name.” Cersei snarled, digging her nails into the flesh of her hand. “Well, it’s best if we remove her from the keep. Lord Randyll may be in our pocket, but the other ones are not. I’ll deal with Tyrion soon enough, but we must prepare. For now, they may be too busy talking about war and making new kings, but soon enough they will start looking for it. So, I believe it’s better if the body is taken out of the keep. Hide it somewhere in the city, in a place where you can work and—”
“Your Grace, I can take care of the woman’s dead body.” He assured. “It’s about the ones who live I’m afraid—”

Cersei shook her head.

“No.” She insisted, her eyes wide open. “Her body is of the utmost importance, Qyburn.”

*Let the bitch stay dead,* Jaime whispered again, amused. *I did her a favor putting her out of her misery.*

“No.” Cersei repeated out loud, making Qyburn believe she was talking to him. “She killed my brother and I’ll make her pay, even if she is already burning in the Seven Hells.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Qyburn replied, once again showing how uncomfortable he was.

*Oh, no, it seems like even your little rat thinks you’ve grown mad,* Jaime laughed.

Cersei shook her head again and took a few steps toward Qyburn.

“And have you done the other thing I asked?” She said, grabbing the jar of wine to fill a glass for herself.

“Yes, Your Grace.” Qyburn replied promptly, reproachfully watching the ribbon of wine falling into the glass. “Lord Tyrion will pay you a visit as soon as the Small Council convenes.”

“Good.” She said, sipping the wine. It tasted like ashes.

“*Good?*” Qyburn asked. “Your Grace, I’m afraid you are not aware of how your position has changed during the last few hours. I urge you to go to the Small Council hall. Lord Randyll may be acting on your behalf, but even he can’t do much to stop Lord Tyrion. There is still some time to prevent any foolish action that will heavily harm your position—”
“No, I want Tyrion to have a taste of power first.” She said, finishing the wine quickly. “Right before I snatch it from him.”

“But how do you plan to do that, Your Grace? I don’t think I’ve to remind you your position is at stake. The Small Council believes they have the king on their grasp.”

“The king you talk about is not the king.”

_Oh, but a golden crown is already laying on his head, sister…_  

No, she would not allow him to finish that sentence.

_And both of us know that soon enough a golden shroud will be laying over his dead body._

“What are you saying, Your Grace?” Qyburn asked, frowning his brows. He had noticed how for just a second her eyes had turned to glass, as if her mind had left her body.

“I can’t find the right words to—”

“I can get rid of Lord Tyrion tonight, if that is what you wish.” Qyburn interrupted, eager to help her anyway he could. He was not doing this entirely for her. If she were to lose power or to leave the court, he would also be unwelcomed. “I can arrange for the king to be taken to your chambers. I can make the Tyrell whore throw herself from a tower. She just lost her grandmother, so it will be easy to make her death seen as a suicide over her grief. I _can_ spin things in your favor, Your Grace, but you have to let me help you and you have to do it _now._”

Cersei poured herself another glass of wine.

“Yes, you’re very resourceful, aren’t you?” She managed a bitter smile. “That’s all for now, Qyburn. You may go.”

The maester felt those words as a slap, but nodded, admitting defeat. As the door of the sept closed after he left, the eerie silence fell again and she took another sip of wine. Only the tolling of the bells disturbed her now. The wine was doing his job muffling the other voice.
Sitting in one of the benches of the sept, she looked again to the bodies.

It was much more than getting Tyrion out of the way and force the Small Council to do her bidding again. That she could do quickly. No, this was a fight against time. The loss of Joffrey and Jaime had taught her that fate was catching up with her. The hell she had lived in during the last few days was only the start of a penance she would pay if nothing was done to halt it.

It all came down to the bloody prophecy.

*Queen you shall be.* Yes, Maggy The Frog had been right all along. Since the day she had married Robert, she had remembered the old woman’s words almost every day. Every time she was afraid, or whenever a victory was achieved, the words were there, looming like a threatening shadow. But a part of her never believed them to be true. Even so, she had always acted cautiously, preparing for the worse.

*Queen you shall be... until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear.* Oh, for how long had she been sure the queen Maggy had anticipated was the dragon whore ravaging through Essos? She had been sure the Targaryen girl would be a problem someday. Her fear had even led her to prepare for the day she would come riding her dragons and bringing her army. She and Joffrey had convinced the Small Council to send assassins after her. They had reinforced the defenses of the keep and the city. And they had instructed Addam Marbrand to train secret squads of the City Watch to fight dragons, providing them with all kinds of dragon lore from the archives of Oldtown.

But all along, the queen who had brought her down and taken all that she held dear had been another.

*Sansa.*

The Starks seemed to be the ones behind everything. Jeyne Westerling, who had been found locked in the chamber next to the one where Jaime was killed, told them Arya Stark had come to kidnap the prince. So that meant, as she had suspected, that the North had made a move to put his heir on the Iron Throne and was involved in all the mess that had happened. If Edwyle just had died after falling from his horse, everything would have played out differently.

*Oh, Sansa,* Cersei thought to herself, tightening the grip around the glass.
If the girl’s body hadn’t burnt to ashes among the ruins of the king’s pavilion, she would get her revenge. Death by fire was too kind to her. Maybe the Gods had been good and had spared the girl. Maybe she was somewhere alive, running for her life with her son. After all, only her crown and cloak had been found among the dead. It was not really a proof of her demise.

*If she is alive, I’ll make her wish to be dead.*

Before that, she had to prevent the rest of the prophecy from happening. The words that followed were ones that haunted her the most. It was about her three children.

*Gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds.*

It was not hard to interpret the meaning of those words, but she had felt too much safer to believe that her children, the princes of the crown, could die before her. However, as Joffrey lay dead and Tommen with a crown on his head, she realized the prophecy was not only true, but that time was also running short.

After the events in the Tournament’s grounds, it became clear that a shift of power would happen. The natural heir to the Iron Throne was Prince Edwyle, but with the prince lost the Small Council had on its hands two possible decisions. Qyburn was right. Instead of crying, she should have tried to prevent Tyrion’s stupidity shape the new world. But it was physically impossible to do so without grieving.

The Small Council had sent men after the prince, of course, but the chances of getting him back were slim. A war would happen no matter what. In the meanwhile, a regent would have to be appointed to sit on the Iron Throne while the true heir was amiss. Unless the Small Council decided to put the crown on another’s head and ignore the rightful lineage. That was the first option: recognize Edwyle as king, appoint a regent and make war to get him back where he belonged.

The other option was the one already in motion. In secret, Tommen had been crowned in a small bedroom, at the eyes of servants. Randyll Tarly, Tyrion and Lady Olenna e Margaery Tyrell had also been present, giving their blessings. A marriage happened minutes after, forming a new alliance between the Throne and the Reach, as if the Tyrells were more trustworthy than the Starks at the moment.

Cersei had to shut it all down and get rid of the architects of such plan. All of them. She would even throw that Tyrell whore to a cell if that meant the Tyrells’ obedience, but her little boy wouldn’t kept
a barren whore as his wife or maintain a crown on his head.

No, the plan was simple. She would appoint herself as Queen Regent and send Tommen to Casterly Rock, away from golden crowns, dangerous intrigues and unworthy wives. The whole idea had dawned on her as the bells started tolling through the city on the morrow. She would mourn the dead for the rest of her life, but she would also make sure Tommen and Myrcella were safe. That was her duty as their mother and why she had to break the prophecy once and for all.

And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you. Her tears had drowned her, hadn’t they? Cersei Lannister allowed herself a wicked smile, and for a moment she looked exactly as a Mad Queen. She stood up from the bench and grabbed the jar of wine. She would need all the strength available.

A few hours passed. Day turned to night quickly, and all the while she enjoyed her solitude, in a silent feast with the dead. It was just after finishing the jar of wine that the doors of the sept opened to let in the man she most wanted to see.

Tyrion walked in and he seemed to be bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. With a tired expression and red eyes, he looked even shorter than he actually was.

“I’m glad you finally asked to see me.” He said, advancing slowly through the cold sept. Two men of the Kingsguard followed him. Faces she didn’t know. Faces to replace the dead ones. Faces she would soon replace.

“It was time.” She said, trying to sound weak and fragile. She nodded to the empty place at her side on the bench. “Come and sit.”

“Mother.”

Cersei almost gasped in surprise as she saw Tommen walk right behind Tyrion. He had been hidden all along behind the guards. The golden crown glinted strangely on his head. Somehow, it fitted him nicely. He seemed more regal and wise than Joffrey had ever looked, but it was a distressing sight all the same. Tears pricked in her eyes, and fear once again escalated in her chest.

“What are you doing here?” She asked, taken aback. “I want to have a private word with him.”
Tommen hesitated before taking another step. He turned his head to Tyrion and back to her, and then back to Tyrion. The resolution seemed to have settled on his face when he finally opened his mouth to talk again.

“I had hoped I could join you. We need to discuss important family matters, Mother.”

*Oh, they want to send me away,* Cersei realized. *They think they are in control.*

“Very well.” Cersei said, forcing a tired, willing smile. *I need them to trust me.* She could play along in their game and make her move when they least expected. Tommen was old enough to understand what was about to happen. In fact, it could work as a lesson for him. It was time for him to understand he had not been carved to play the game. “But if we are here to discuss family matters, maybe it’s time to do it only among family.” Her gaze focused on the guards waiting by the door.

Tommen simply gestured to the guards, commanding them to wait outside. Finally, the three of them sat on the bench, the one right in front of the bodies. For almost five minutes, neither of them talked, as if each of them were paying their respect to the dead.

Tommen, Cersei noticed, had no stomach to look toward Joffrey’s body. He kept his eyes on his feet and by the way his leg kept moving, she understood he was nervous. Tyrion, on the other hand, was looking with teary eyes to Jaime, as if he wanted to say one last thing to his brother but, for the first time ever, had no words to use. Books and wits cannot prepare a man for death, no matter what you think.

“Cersei, I know we had our differences.” Started Tyrion eventually, when he got his words back. “And I don’t hope *this* will change much between us. The days long gone will always weigh more than the days to come. So, I’m not here to ask for your sympathy, since I don’t intend to give you mine. We may be brother and sister, but we would only fool ourselves trying to ignore how much we despise each other. Nonetheless, we have one thing in common.”

They exchanged glances, as he paused to mediate about what to say next.

“And what is that?”

“Both of us loved Jaime.” He said, his lips quivering once more. “I hope that we can work together, treat each other with respect, to honor Jaime’s memory and—”
“Love?” She asked, clenching her fists. Oh, she needed to maintain her act but, somehow, she knew that would be impossible. “Don’t be a fool. You may have loved him, but don’t compare whatever brotherly feelings you had for him to the ones I had.”

Tyrion was slightly taken aback by that remark and broke the gaze they had been sharing up until that moment.

“It was a different kind of love, but Jaime was—”

Tyrion stopped, unable to say another word.

For a moment, she didn’t know exactly what to say and silence fell again between the three of them. There was too much sorrow dividing them, and no bridge to cross that abyss. She could have reminded him how her bond with Jaime was stronger than anything Tyrion could have had with him, but as the Imp had said, she didn’t want his sympathy.

“Do you know why I’ve asked for you, Tyrion?” She asked, after a while.

“Tommen, of course.” Tyrion said, sniffing. His voice was embargoed by emotion, but he was trying to control any sign of weakness. The time for pretending to be a family was over. “I know you are angry and yes, I know you have the right to be so. I should’ve consulted you first, but everything happened quickly, Cersei.”

“Yes.” Cersei replied, sharp as a blade. “You should have looked for me. I would never have allowed this nonsense. Tommen’s place is not here. His place is on the Westerlands as the rightful Lord of Casterly Rock… But I suppose it would suit you better if he were to take the crown. Have you snatched our father’s title already?”

The Imp sighed, impatient, and just as quickly he was back to his former self.

“Cersei, I don’t intend to argue with you now.” He said, averting the question. “We are preparing to march against the Starks. Putting Tommen on the Iron Throne was the smart thing to do. We’ve secured the Tyrells, even after whatever happened to them…” By the tone he used, she understood a subtle accusation was implied. “And hopefully soon enough we’ll have the Vale and the Stormlands joining our ranks. But to win this war we need a strong king on the Iron Throne, a king able to unite the Great Houses again and end any rebellion the Starks bring to our doorstep.”
“Must I remind you that Prince Edwyle is the king and not Tommen?”

Tyrion’s lips spread into a wicked smile.

“I would never have imagined that you could say such words, dear sister. However, let me put your worries to rest: the Council signed just an hour ago a declaration that will be spread throughout the Seven Kingdoms starting tomorrow.” Tyrion said, pulling a piece of paper from his sleeve. Cersei grabbed the paper. “The marriage between Sansa and Joffrey was annulled. Thanks to you, the papers were ready to sign. We just made it official. So, the prince is now a bastard and has no pretense to the Throne. Of course Robb Stark will want to use the boy to make war against us, but Law and Gods are on our side. The Great House will recognize that our pretense is stronger.”

“No.” Cersei repeated, rumpling the papers in her hands. “I’m afraid this will not happen.”

“Why?” It was Tommen’s turn to ask. “Do you think I’m unfit to rule?”

Cersei looked to her son, sitting right next to Tyrion.

You don’t have the thirst for power.

“No.” She lied. “I just want you to live for many years, my dear.”

“Cersei, are you serious?” Tyrion intervened. “I thought we would argue because you don’t approve of the marriage, but not because Tommen is the king. There is nothing you can do about it.” His eyes turned once more to the dead bodies. “It’s time to move on. Tomorrow Joffrey will be taken to the Great Sept to—”

“He won’t go anywhere.” She snarled, viciously. “Not without his head.”

Tyrion exchanged a glance with Tommen, silently asking for him to help him out.

“The head is lost.” Tommen said, softly. “The City Watch cannot find it—”
“The City Watch is not looking for it.”

“Of course it isn’t.” Tommen said just as quickly, and in a harsher tone. “The City Watch is protecting us. Most of the Lannister Guard is behind bars awaiting trial. We need men protecting our walls in this time of upheaval, not looking for heads.”

Cersei gasped. She would have slapped him if Tyrion was not sitting between them.

“How dare you talk in such way about your brother?” No, Tommen would never say that by his own. “Oh, who put those words in your mouth?” She asked, turning quickly to Tyrion now. “Was it you? Or is the Tyrell whore already whispering in his ear?

“Mother, I can’t accept that you illspeak in such way about the Queen—”

_The Queen._

“No!” Cersei interrupted, standing from the bench. “The Tyrell whore is no fit for you, Tommen. Neither is the crown. I want you to understand that and simply accept it.”

“Cersei, calm down.” Tyrion said, extending his arm to touch her arm. Surprisingly, he looked concerned for her, watching for the first time a paranoid side of his sister that he knew was in her, but that had never shown itself so clearly.

“Don’t touch me!” She yelled, pulling her arm away from his touch. Her eyes turned again to Tommen. “You will depart to Casterly Rock in the morning.”

“I’m no longer a child, Mother.” Tommen replied, his voice shaking.

“Cersei, enough.” Tyrion intervened again, lifting a hand to silence Tommen. “Cersei, we are not your enemies. I beg of you to work with us, not against us. The Small Council has sworn his fealty to the king. There is nothing you can do to undo that.”

Cersei laughed.
“There is always something to do.”

“We need you on our side.” Tyrion said, ignoring her last remark. There was no gaining in pursuing her fears and mad accusations. “In fact, I’m sure you’ll want to do this on your own for the behalf of our family.”

Tyrion was trying to sweet talk her, showing her that he valued her, as if she was one of his whores.

“We received strange news from the Vale yesterday. The guards were scavenging Varys’ chamber, trying to find any sign of him, but they found instead a message from Petyr Baelish. Do you remember him?”

_Littlefinger._ She had seen the man for the last time almost five years ago, when he had been banished from court at the request of Lady Catelyn. There were rumors that the Lord of the Fingers passed his time between Lysa Arryn’s legs and the Stormlands, meddling in shady businesses.

“What about him?”

“Well, they didn’t reply to our letters for a long time, and it seems there is a reason. According to what Baelish told Varys, the Lords Declarant of the Vale decided to cease communications with the Iron Throne for a few weeks because of certain events. I don’t know how they managed it, but they did a fine job containing a great scandal. Lady Lysa was executed a few weeks ago after assaulting Myrcella.”

Her heart jumped a beat.

Lady Lysa was Lady Catelyn’s sister.

_And she assaulted my daughter?_

“Myrcella?” Cersei asked, taken aback. “Is she dead?”
“Dead? What? No, of course not. There is no need for worry. She is fine.” Tyrion reassured quickly, managing a smile that served only to infuriate her more. “But it seems Lady Lysa was mistreating her. I don’t know details about what happened and what kind of abuse was inflicted on the girl, but Baelish assured Myrcella is fine. Lady Lysa was trialed and Lord Robert ordered her execution. Honestly, I find odd that the boy asked for her death, considering how attached he was to the woman but—”

“This is all on you.” Cersei said, hoping to put an end to the conversation. “It was you who shipped her off to the hands of those lunatics.”

“Our bond with the Arryns was weak.” He said. “And that was long ago, Cersei. You can’t hold a grudge after—”

“I want Myrcella back on the Red Keep.” She declared. “And I will make sure she returns within two weeks.”

“Cersei, you are overreacting again.” Tyrion said quickly. “Can you let me finish what was saying? Well, we need Myrcella on the Vale, now more than ever. That’s why we married her to Lord Robert. We need the Vale’s army on our side. That’s how you can help us.”

Of course it is.

“You want me to travel to the Vale to convince a sickly boy to grant us his army as if it was a toy?”

Tyrion frowned.

“I’m afraid it’s not the boy who needs convincing, but the Lords Declarant. We could send someone to deal with them, but as the mother of the Lady of the Vale and the Queen Dowager you could—”

“No.” Cersei snarled. “It’s out of the question.”

“Very well.” Tyrion replied promptly, daring to pat her on the leg. “Then I’m afraid the Crown has
no use for you, sister. You shall depart to Casterly Rock tomorrow. The Silent Sisters are ready to escort Jaime back home.”

Cersei laughed, and the sound that echoed through the sept made her shiver.

“Was that amusing?” Tyrion asked sarcastically.

“I could order your arrest this very moment, Imp.” She said, viciously. “And let you rot in a cell.”

“Cersei, it’s no time for idle threats.” He said. “I’m doing the best for the Realm and I’m sure one day you will thank me for it.”

“Yes.” She said. “You always do the best, don’t you? But it was you the one who killed Mother when she gave birth. It was you and that filthy woman who brought chaos to the Riverlands right before Joffrey’s reign. And yes, it was also you the one who sold my little girl to a sick boy. It was you who placed a crown on Tommen’s head. So, I must ask: was it also you the one behind Joffrey’s death?”

Tyrion blinked, taken aback.

“What did you just asked—?”

“And what about Jaime? Was it you the one behind his death? Did you conspire with the Starks?”

“How dare you!?”

Tyrion stood up, his face burning red. For a moment, Cersei was amused with the idea of him striking her. She wanted him to do it. But he simply sighed, shaking his head and looking at her with disgust.

“Those were simply the words of a mad woman.” He said, trying to justify her. “I’ll not heed them for the sake of Jaime’s memory.”
“Jaime’s memory?” She felt the blood boil in her veins and knew the moment was close. She could hurt him, she could destroy him, she could ruin his world like he had ruined hers. “And what memory is that, Tyrion? Are you referring to the day he took you to that Tysha girl you married or to the one father asked him to get rid of her? Oh, I can remember how we used to laugh about your little romance with the girl. You still believe she is a whore after all this time, don’t you?”

Tommen gasped and automatically stood up. The way he placed himself at Tyrion’s side hurt her.

“Mother, this has gone too far…”

“Tysha?” Tyrion asked, receding to the bench again. He fell on it, completely lost in his own pain.

No, not lost.

_Crushed._

“Yes.” Cersei said, feeling empowered. She wished Qyburn could see her now and understand why she had waited. “All of us knew about the girl, but—”

“It’s a lie.” Tyrion said, shaking his head. “You’re lying.”

Tommen placed a hand on Tyrion’s shoulder.

“Uncle, maybe it’s time to get some rest. We can talk about this on the morrow.” Tommen tried to intervene, but his words got lost.

“How does it feel now, Tyrion?” Cersei asked, relishing in every tear that ran down her brother’s eyes. “Can you feel the pain?”

Tyrion raised his head to face her again.

“You’re evil. I don’t know what I have done to you, Cersei. I don’t know… I truly don’t know why you impose such pain on me…”
Cersei advanced a step and placed a hand on her brother’s shoulder.

“Yes, you do.” She said, softly. “You’re the valonqar.”

Just as Tyrion tried to get free from her grip, the golden dagger Cersei had removed from Jaime’s hilt, the one she had held in her sleeve since morning, was quickly on her hand. The gold flashed in the candlelight and just as quickly as it had appeared, the dagger danced in Cersei’s hand to rip Tyrion’s throat.

The valonqar shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you.

But then the unexpected happened.

Tommen, who was standing right by their side, threw himself to shield Tyrion as soon as he saw the dagger. Cersei lost balance on her feet when her son’s body hit her. However, she still plunged the dagger onwards, hoping to reach her target. A scream echoed through the Royal Sept, right before she fell on the ground, hitting with her head on the feet of the table holding Jaime’s body. The dagger slipped from her hands and fell loudly on the floor, scattering blood drops everywhere, just like rain. A second later, Jaime’s body rolled from the table, falling on the ground with a sound like thunder.

What just happened?

Cersei stood on the floor for a few seconds, terror settling in as the realization of what had just occurred dawned on her. Why was she staring to Jaime’s face, and why was he laying just a few inches from her?

“Guards!” Someone cried.

Tyrion.

Yes, she remembered.
Making an effort to sit, she grabbed the dagger again. She had to finish Tyrion, she had to break the prophecy, she had to.

And then she saw her brother kneeling on the ground, pressing a red cloth against Tommen’s face. Her son was laying on the floor, staring at the ceiling with tears running down from his eyes and moaning with pain.

_Gold shall be their crowns, gold their shrouds._

The cloth was not red.

But blood was.

“What have you done to him?” She asked, crawling desperately to them. “Get away from him, dwarf! I won’t let you kill him…!”

“You deranged woman.” Tyrion said, turning to her with fury gleaming in his eyes. He was still pressing the cloth against Tommen’s face. The boy was growing pale, and his moans of pain were like death itself. “It was you who did this!”

“No, no!” Cersei cried, feeling tears wetting her cheeks. “He tried to protect you. He tried to protect… He—”

She pushed Tyrion aside and grabbed the cloth. Looking closely, she felt a pang of relief. Tommen had a wound cutting the left side of his face, but the blade had missed his eye by a few inches. The
wound ran from his brow to the middle of his cheek. He would live.

“Tommen, it was an accident. I…”

The king opened his eyes and looked directly to her.

“Mother…” He cried, sounding once again like the little boy she wanted him to be. “Mother, I’m sorry.”

“No, you have nothing to be sorry about.” She reassured, pressing the cloth. He was so gentle that even after what she had done, he was begging for her forgiveness. “Everything will be alright as soon as I take you out of this place. I promise, and this time I’ll heed my promise.”

“Yes, I do have to ask for your forgiveness.” He continued, tears running from his eyes. “I’ve no other choice now.” Cersei shushed him. She didn’t want him to grow tired pointlessly. “From now on, you are banished from court, Mother. You’ll leave to Dorne on the morrow, and there you will marry Prince Doran.” He saw the look of confusion and hurt in his mother’s eyes, because he hesitated for a moment. “You’ll never be welcome to King’s Landing again.” He raised his hand slowly to touch her hand and take the cloth. By that time, he had closed his eyes again. He didn’t want to see her again. “Guards, take the Queen Dowager to her chambers.”

When the guards grabbed her, Cersei Lannister couldn’t believe in what was happening, but she could also do nothing.

She went with the guards willingly, unable to look at her son again. Tyrion was back at his side, hiding the face of her precious Tommen, pressing the cloth against the wound as if that could save him from fate. Jaime’s body lay right behind, in a strange position, saying his last goodbye to her. And her eyes had not the time to look for Joffrey, or to that charred thing she was leaving behind.

*What have you said to Ned Stark?,* Jaime teased, laughing in her ear.

She sobbed and smiled as the guards dragged through the Red Keep.

“You don’t have to die to be dead.”
Before anything else, I’m sorry for the delay. Unfortunately, my father passed away a month ago and my life changed overnight. This chapter is dedicated to him. I did my best. I’m also changing jobs, and that will be exciting, but well… I guess life can really change when you least expect.

On a more positive note, thanks for all the reviews for the previous chapter. On this one, we’ll follow Jon and his struggle to get some solid ground on Bhorash. At least a surprise or two will wait for you in the next paragraphs. Some of you have mentioned this is a grim story, and I agree, but A Song of Ice and Fire is grim in general. I’ll try in the future to insert more comic relief in the story.

Also, I’m seriously thinking of dividing this fanfiction in parts. Part I would end somewhere between the 35th and 40th chapter. I would start Part II with new POVs and some of the ones I worked up until now. What do you think is the best option?

PREVIOUSLY: After reaching the city of Bhorash, Jon found out through a dwarf girl called Penny that Daenerys Targaryen had left the city on the back of her dragon. Lost in the city, Jon is attacked by a group of starving children and beaten, warging into Ghost to resume the fight. In the end, observing in the shadows, is a man called Ralso and, by his side, Penny.

"A westerosi in a faraway land.” Ralso said, keeping his golden eyes on him. The mysterious man seemed amused, pacing around the room with a mug of beer in his hands. “I confess I’m curious to hear how you ended up in this shithole.”

Whoever he was, Ralso was trying to be what he would never be.

A friend.

Yes, he had pulled him out of the street after the incident with the cannibal children, but Jon knew better than to trust a stranger. Observing silently from his chair, Jon was gathering any bit of
information about the guest.

Ralso – or Master Ralso, as Penny had called him on her visit the previous night – exuded an excess of confidence. There might be reasons for it. He was a handsome man, yes, even if his face was dirty and his brown curly hair in disarray. Even wearing clothes suitable for a sellsword and with the shadow of a beard covering his face, Ralso upheld his good looks. But there was something more about him. A sense of power, as if he had the city under his thumb.

*He is for sure an arrogant pretty man.*

The extent of his power was yet to be known. Penny and her brother, at least, had to work for the man somehow. She had been the one telling him about the westerosi with a direwolf and a bag of gold. Could he be some sort of King of the Slums of Bhorash? It was not impossible. With the city divided into religions factions, and a menace approaching by sea, any man capable of using a longsword could be king.

“*Two westerosi in a faraway land.*” Jon corrected, displeased with the sellsword's accurate guess. Another thing he noticed was that the man used the Common Tongue perfectly, as if he had been born into a noble House. “Penny tells me you’ve as much westerosi blood as I do.”

By that time, dawn entered the room, bathing it with a cold light. Outside, Bhorash was waking up to the sound of vendors yelling to anyone who passed by, in their desperate struggle to sell the roasted vermin they had hunted during the night.

However, that morning more sounds joined those of the vendors and hungry beggars. Just minutes before Ralso had knocked on his door, Jon had seen a battalion of fifty Unsullied and Dothraki warriors marching down to the docks. The city was getting ready.

“Penny talks too much sometimes.” Ralso said, pushing a chair to sit right in front of Jon. The mug of beer was still dancing between his hands. “But she is a good friend.”

“Just a friend?” Jon replied quickly.

“You’re not suggesting the little devil is my lover, are you? I don’t think that is even legal in this hell.”

*Oh, he also believes he is quite the seducer.*

“No.” He said, noticing how dry the word sounded leaving his mouth. “I was suggesting she could be a protégé, or a ward—”

“Oh, that. Yes, yes… A protégé may be a better term for it.” Ralso said, flashing a white smile. “She and her brother suffered enough. I look after them, and they look after my interests. Back in Westeros, there are a few who call this sort of friends their little birds.”

Jon scoffed, feeling the pain as the muscles on his face contorted. Father had never spoken much about his time in King’s Landing, but he had joked once, with old Maester Aemon, about how the Master of Whispers referred to his spies as little birds.

“If you are here to enlist me as one of your little creatures, I’m afraid I’ll have to pass.”

Once again, Ralso laughed. The man loved to laugh.

“Oh, don’t look so grim. I’m not here to enlist you. You’re far too big for a job like that.” His eyes settled on Ghost, resting by Jon’s feet. “And your reputation in the city already precedes you. Do
you know what they are calling you? The *Wolfsword*. I like the sound of it, don’t you? Songs are being composed in your honor. Your victory over the Bloodteeth devils is the stuff of legends”, he joked.

*And there goes my discretion.*

“Well, you’re not one for smiles, are you?” Ralso insisted, after a few seconds staring at each other.

“I don’t have reason to smile.” Jon said somberly, slightly impatient. “Honestly, why don’t you save us some time? Tell me what you want. I’ve businesses to attend down in the city.”

Ralso arched an eyebrow in surprise.

“A bit of gratitude would suit you well.”

*I’m not your friend*, Jon wanted to say. *I don’t want to be your friend.*

“You’re not here for my gratitude.” Jon cut, his voice as cold as steel. “Let’s not pretend otherwise. You don’t strike me as one who is willing to do favors free of charge. I can pay you gold and then we can part ways.”

Ralso’s smile kept spreading at the sound of those words, the smugness gleaming in his white teeth.

“You offend me, ser. If it was gold I wanted, I would’ve looted it from your body and let the children drag you down to the sewers.” Ralso said, promptly.

Jon closed his fist. The way Ralso had spoken made him feel like a child. *You know nothing, Jon Snow.*

“Then what do you want from me?”

Ralso smiled.

“I just want *answers.*”

Up until that moment, Jon was sure the man wasn’t a threat. A mere vulture looking for some prey. A lazy sellsword hunting for a treasure. A greedy charlatan not letting go a good opportunity. That was why he had agreed to meet him, sure it would be nothing more than a business meeting. Now, though, it was clear the man wanted more than what he had bargained for.

As if sensing danger, Ghost woke up and sat on his hind legs, looking intently to Ralso. Jon stretched his hand and scratched the direwolf behind the ears.

“Answers about *what*?”

“Well, for starters… Why is a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch after the Mother of Dragons?”

*You’ve walked into a trap.*

Instantly, Jon’s hand moved to his waist where his sword usually was fastened. But the sword was not there, but instead lay on the floor, resting a few feet away from the bed. Ghost, however, prepared to attack. The direwolf was already snarling, baring his fangs in a clear threat.

“Oh, no need for that.” Ralso said, not so smug as he had been. He raised a hand to calm down Ghost as if he was just a dog, but pulled it back quickly when the direwolf bit the air, missing his fingers for a few inches. “Really, there is no need for that!”
“How do you know where I come from?” Jon asked calmly.

“I scavenged your pockets!” The man confessed, quickly. “You would’ve done the same thing. And then I saw the letter sealed with the Night’s Watch stamp and I guessed who you were.”

While Jon simply watched the man squirm in his chair, Ghost kept snarling.

“Who I am it’s none of your business.”

“Actually… I was hoping it could be my business.” Ralso answered just as quick, gulping. He would not take his eyes of Ghost. He blurted the next few words quickly. “I could get you an audience with Ser Barristan Selmy in less than an hour. Is that what you want, isn’t it?”

For a moment, even Ghost paused, turning his head to Jon, curious to see his reaction. Had he heard right? An audience with Ser Barristan Selmy The Bold, the man commanding the Queensguard and ruling the city in the Queen’s absence? Jon smiled, caressing Ghost’s pelt to calm the creature. His ears hadn’t betrayed him. Such a proposal would solve all his matters in a blink of an eye.

“You are lying.” He said, bluntly. “How would a sellsword manage that?”

Ralso shrugged, the smug smile back on his face.

“I’m much more than a sellsword.” He stood up, shielding himself behind the chair. “Ser Barristan Selmy welcomes any westerosi at the Queen’s service if the man in question has something of value to offer. And as you may know, the Dragon Queen won’t stay in this shithole forever. She is preparing to sail to Westeros. Alas, before doing that, she needs to tame her dragons and to make alliances back in the Seven Kingdoms.” Ralso stopped for a few seconds, as if preparing to say something dramatic. “That’s why I can get you an audience. I’m Ser Loras Tyrell of Highgarden. You may know me as the Knight of Flowers, even though there are a few now calling me the Knight of Fouls.”

_Loras Tyrell._

Yes, of course he had heard that name. When they were children, Sansa wouldn’t shut up about the young knight of the Reach who was rumored to be just as handsome as the most beautiful rose in Highgarden. Ralso was nothing more than a riddle hiding his true name.

Jon stared blankly at him, not at all impressed.

“I thought House Tyrell supported the Baratheons.”

“They do. In fact, that’s why I left.” Loras said, pacing around the room. He was getting his confidence back. “But when the sun has set, no candle can replace it. When the only king I accepted and respected was murdered with blood magic, I turned my back to my family. I still believe it was my sister the one coining my new nickname. But I just couldn’t bend the knee to the Illborn King and join my father in his adulation for the Lannisters. Instead, I decided to avenge Renly Baratheon with fire and blood.”

_There is love in his words,_ Jon noticed, looking now toward Loras Tyrell with a little bit more respect. _But foolish blindness as well._

“And that’s what we have in common, right?” Ser Loras said, convinced he had won Jon over his side. Ghost had stopped snarling. “I know who you are. I know Robb Stark has a half-brother on the Wall and that the Stark children have direwolves as pets, just as the Young Wolf had his during his battles against the Lannisters on the Riverlands.”
“Careful now.” Jon threatened. Ghost could rip is throat in less than a second, and the man knew it.

“You’re not used to have friends, are you, Snow?” Loras asked, sighing. The arrogance was back. “I’m throwing you a line here. You can join me and we’ll be meeting Ser Barristan in less than an hour. Or you can stay here, and get murdered when the Greyjoy fleet arrives and those smelly ironborn burn half of this city to the ground. The other half will perish under those religious fanatics anyway.” He finished his beer in one last gulp and placed the empty mug on a table. “It’s your decision to make. I’ll wait downstairs for half an hour and then I will be gone.”

“What do you want, Ser Loras?” Jon repeated for the third time, before the man could leave. “What do you truly want from me?”

“I told you I wanted answers.”

“But what will you do with those answers?”

“Oh, I just want to make the right friends… And I got the impression the Bastard of Winterfell is exactly the friend I could use.”

With those enigmatic words, the Knight of Fouls left Jon alone with his own thoughts.

“Seven Hells.” He said, standing up. He was not expecting that.

He had always known his cover up wouldn’t last long. With a direwolf at his side, he would be easily spotted among a crowd. However, he had hoped that by the time his identity was revealed, he would have at least presented himself to the Dragon Queen.

You have to do whatever needs to be done.

Those words had come from Father, just a few days before he had departed Castle Black to fake his own death. But was the honorable Eddard Stark asking him to get involved in political intrigue? After all, as a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch was his duty to keep out of any game of power between the Great Houses.

But that was what Ser Loras was asking of him. He could read the secret meaning hidden between those flowery words. An alliance. He believed Jon was there to swear his allegiance to the Dragon Queen, as if the Night’s Watch could interfere throwing support for her claim to the Iron Throne.

“No.” Jon whispered, softly, thinking out loud. “He wants the North.”

Of course it was not the Night’s Watch Ser Loras wanted. He could be stupid, but he had to know the Watch had its limits. No, Loras believed Jon had been sent to Bhorash as a Stark envoy to strike a deal with the Dragon Queen. Had the Tyrell forgotten that Sansa was the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms? House Stark would never raise arms against the Iron Throne, not unless they had a good motive to do it. He shook his head, feeling his head heavy. The headaches from the attack were painful with all those thoughts roaming inside his head.

Bring us fire, Jon.

Yes, that was it. He was there for one purpose only: to convince Daenerys Targaryen to turn her ships toward the Wall and fly her dragons, or at least one, to help their cause. Even now, closing his eyes in a smelly warm room on the far east, he could still sense the cold in his bones and the fear instigated by the blue eyes of the walkers marching toward the Wall. The sense of urgency screamed inside him, telling him to run downstairs and accept the proposal. It was the easy way to get to the palace, even if he had to deal with a bit of political intrigue.
Twenty minutes later, after shaving and changing clothes, he had made a decision.

“You have seen what Ghost can do.” Jon said, when he joined Ser Loras in the main room downstairs. He was limping slowly, relying on his sword as a crutch. “Lie to me, and you are dead. Led me into a trap, and you are dead. Do you understand?”

“Are all the crows up on the Wall just as grim as you?” Loras asked, rolling his eyes. “Yes, I guess they are... All those nights in the cold must have left you with the sensibility of an ice cube.”

Jon placed a hand on Loras’ shoulder.

“Oh, thanks for reminding me.” For once, he smiled. “Cut the bloody jokes, or you are…”

“Dead.” Finished Loras, pulling back from Jon’s grip. “Yes, I got the idea.”

Two cloaked figures left the inn minutes after. With their heads bent low, they moved through the filthy streets of Bhorash which, fortunately, were not yet so crowded. Following them in silence was Ghost, checking every corner and alley to make sure there were no children with red teeth lurking in the shadows. However, the odds of finding Bloodteeth Children were very low that morning.

Dozens of Unsullied soldiers patrolled the streets, their spears ready to strike anyone who dared threaten the Queen’s peace. It seemed the number of soldiers had been reinforced in the previous days, as the city prepared to deal with an enemy called Victarion Greyjoy. Rumors had started spreading in the city just the day before. It seemed a fleet hoisting the Kraken had been seen passing by Volantis, traveling swiftly toward Dragon’s Bay to bring fire and pillage to Bhorash, just as had happened five years before in Meereen. Then, the Queen was also missing. History seemed to be repeating itself.

“And there are rumors the fire maniacs are preparing something.” Ser Loras told him, when five Unsullied guards passed by them. The reek of smoke filled the air of Bhorash, as if bonfires had been lit all through the city. “Guards from the Faith Militant have gone missing.”

The city was falling to pieces.

Daenerys Targaryen could have dragons, an army, and free people under her rule... but she was failing. The religious freedom had led to the emergence of religious leaders with influence over their followers and, soon enough, to a war between faiths. Poverty, hunger, sickness and violence were just another set of chains that dragons or armies couldn’t break. The Dragon Queen had been ambitious, dreaming of a utopia that could never be built. At least, not in a hundred years.

“What kind of work do you do for Ser Barristan?” Jon asked, as they approached the castle gates. Even at that early hour, there were already people gathering to beg for the queen’s help.

Ser Loras shrugged.

“Recruitment.” He simply said, before pushing something from his pocket. It was a square of white cloth, with a dragon of three heads embroidered on it with a red thread. He showed the bit of cloth to one of the guards.

Quickly, the Unsullied nodded, but his eyes looked worriedly toward Ghost.

“The wolf cannot enter.”

“The wolf is with me.” Loras replied quickly. “I vouch for him.”
“No.”

“For Gods’ sake, there are dragons roaming the skies.” Loras said, slightly irritated. “A direwolf should be the least of your worries.”

The Unsullied grew tense.

“Do we have a problem here?”

A knight with a golden armor and a white cloak crossed the courtyard just behind the gates. A group of ten boys with practice swords followed him. By the looks of it, the boys seemed to come from different places. Two of them had skin as dark as copper, and seemed to have the Dothraki features in them, even if they were wearing westerosi armor. There was also another boy, very tall, that had a tattoo on his face, one of the symbols that marked him as a Volantene slave. And surprisingly there was also a girl, just as skinny as his sister Arya, looking curiously to the direwolf.

“Ser Ergolith, finally someone with good sense!” Said Loras, turning again to the Unsullied guard. “Will you now let the wolf pass or must I fight you?”

Ser Ergolith sniffed, and told his squires to return to the practice courtyard. Only after that did he stepped forward. He was Volantene, Jon realized as the man started giving instructions to the Unsullied guard. His accent didn’t lie about his background. After exchanging a few remarks, the guard finally consented in letting them pass.

“Do you bring good news?” Ser Ergolith asked, as they crossed the gates. He looked suspiciously to Jon, curious to know who the stranger was. Hastening their pace, they started climbing a set of stairs that led to the great, ruined castle on the top of the cliff.

“News the council won’t expect.” Loras replied, smiling arrogantly. “But yes, good and hopeful news.”

“Ser Loras, Ser Barristan is counting they will be here by tomorrow. If you fail, the city will fall and you will be held accountable for—”

“I won’t fail.” Loras said, suddenly angry. “We’ll talk about that soon enough. First, another business requires our attention.”

Ser Ergolith scoffed, and they continued their climb.

The ruined palace was indeed fit for a Queen. As white as snow, it seemed to be built with bones and not stones. In the background, a stunning tower made of glass and steel glinted in the morning light, like the most precious jewel in the world. It had to be the work of architects of the time of Old Valyria. There were no palaces like that anymore. It was safe to say that more than half of the city could fit inside the palace such was his dimension.

After teaching the front doors a few minutes later, Ser Ergolith led Jon and Loras down a corridor and then through a beautiful garden with scented flowers. It was strange to see such an oasis when the city was rotting a few miles below.

*Oh, the glory of the mighty,* Jon thought, feeling sick. The image of the Bloodteeth Children approaching, hungry to kill and meet him passed his mind and made him feel angry. It was unfair.

From the garden they reached another doorstep, the one conducting to the insides of the Broken Tower. As if he was the master of the castle, Loras took the lead ahead of Ser Ergolith, climbing yet another set of stairs, reaching at last a circular room with a round table made of glass and a few
chairs. A council room, it seemed. A window, with a balcony that looked over the sea, allowed a fresh breeze to enter the room. The view didn’t face the ugly city, but the wide sea ahead.

“I’ll let Ser Barristan know you are here.” Ser Ergolith said, before leaving the two of them in the room.

While Ghost started sniffing the room to make himself familiar with it, Jon turned to Loras once more.

“Why did you say that?” He asked.

“What?” Loras asked, pouring himself a glass of wine from a tray on the corner.

“About good and hopeful news.” Jon reminded him. “You don’t know why I’m here.”

“Oh, that.” Loras bit his lip. “One can always guess.”

Pretty head full of stupid guesses.

They waited for a while in utter silence. Loras seemed amused with something, taking a seat on the table and tapping his fingers on its glassy top. Jon, in the meanwhile, felt more annoyed than nervous. The tapping resonated inside his head like a drum. He was slightly nervous, yes. Who wouldn’t be nervous in his place? After all, the details of his mission were delicate and it wouldn’t be easy to explain to one of the most seasoned knights of the Seven Kingdoms that the dead men were arising beyond the Wall. Even more, if that man had known the man who had fathered him.

But the tapping, and Ser Loras slurping wine, was getting under his nerves. More than ever, he wished he had never left that cave with Ygritte. Are you a coward now? He could almost imagine her voice in the back of his mind, daring him to say the words that would change his life forever. Are you a coward crow?

“Is that a bloody direwolf?” Someone asked, interrupting his line of thought and, thankfully, Ser Loras’ tapping.

Just as he turned toward the door, expecting to see the Lord Commander of the Queensguard, he realized the man standing there was not Barristan The Bold. Instead, it was a man with long blonde hair, and a smile just as smug and arrogant as Ser Loras. He looked curiously at Ghost.

“You were not supposed to be here, Drinkwater.” Loras said, annoyed.

“Neither were you, Knight of Fouls.” The Drinkwater man said, turning his eyes to evaluate Jon. “Who is this?”

“None of your business.” Loras said.

It was more than clear the Drinkwater man and Ser Loras Tyrells were not friends.

“Ser Loras, I hope you are here for a good reason.”

Just as quickly, another voice filled the room as another man entered after Drinkwater. This time, Jon was sure it was Ser Barristan Selmy the Bold, the very same man he had heard so many tales about during his childhood. He was older than he imagined, with blue eyes glinting something sad in them. However, despite his advanced age, he looked strong and graceful when he entered the room all clad in his golden armor. Two other men followed him, one of them bald and tall, wearing the golden armor of the Queensguard and the other one wearing the Unsullied armor.
“Ser Barristan, it’s good to see you again.”

“I would like to say the same.” Ser Barristan said, pushing a chair. He had noticed Jon and Ghost, of course, but he had not directed a word to them. “But it seems you returned again without the Golden Company behind you…” Annoyed, Ser Barristan looked toward Jon and Ghost. “And you have come bringing us what this time? Peasants? Wolves trainers?”

Jon gulped and prepared himself. Ghost rubbed against his legs, trying to give him some courage.

It was time.

“I’m Eddard Stark’s bastard son.”

A lie.

By that time, each one of the other men had taken their seats around the glass table. One by one, from Ser Barristan to the Drinkwater jerk, they turned their heads to look at him with a renovated curiosity. The Commander of the Queensguard watched him intently, and nodded, as if looking at him was confirmation enough to confirm what he had just said.

My father is Rhaegar Targaryen, the Last Dragon. That was the truth he had kept under his tongue. Was he prepared to share it? Well, it might have provoked a more interesting reaction than the one that followed.

“Ned Stark’s son is not the Golden Company, Ser Loras.” Ser Barristan said after a few seconds, turning to Ser Loras. “You said you could get us the Golden Company before the Greyjoy is here, but you have returned bringing me a single man. What can I do with a man?”

“Ser, if you please, I bring an important message from—” Jon started, but he was cut short. Ser Barristan raised a hand to stop him. He was not finished with Ser Loras.

“I start wondering if you are as loyal as you say, Ser Loras. Will you tell me now why you have ignored the mission you received? Our victory can depend on it.”

Arrogant as always, Loras Tyrell smiled and answered in the very same tone he had addressed Jon earlier. The one that made the others feel just as stupid as a child.

“The Bastard of Winterfell travelled to this shithole, ser.” Ser Loras replied. “I’ve found brought you the North.”

The North.

“Are you telling me Lord Stark is sailing to Bhorash to help us defend the city from the men he couldn’t stop in his own land?” Ser Barristan asked bluntly, with obvious sarcasm.

“Ser, this is not a jest. You already have the bloody dornish on your side.” Ser Loras said, pointing toward Gerris Drinkwater and the bald man wearing the golden armor. “With the South and the North strength on her side, it will be easier for the Queen to take back her Throne. I’m sure I can get the Reach on the Queen’s side as soon as we land in Westeros. The city will fall in a few days and we are just fools to ignore that. Why waste good men defending people that are already set to destroy each other? Even if you manage to defeat the Greyjoy, Bhorash will fall in the hands of the fire priests or the septons. So, I must repeat what I said a month ago: let’s leave this city while we can. We can take our homeland.”

“Do you suggest we leave without the queen?” The bald man asked, grunting.
“Ser Archibald, don’t twist my words.” Ser Loras protested, angrily. “The queen has a dragon. She will find us once she realizes we’ve left.”

“The queen will never leave without her children.” The Unsullied added, in a very heated tone.

“Her children are untamable beasts.”

Ser Barristan turned to Jon once again, and his face was red with anger, even though he had control over his voice.

“What’s your name?”

Jaehaerys Targaryen. No, the name would never leave his mouth.

“My father named me Jon, ser.”

“Well, Jon, I’m afraid I don’t have much time… Even so, out of respect for your father, I’ll hear what you have to say. Is this true? Is Lord Stark interested in aligning the North with the Queen?”

Jon looked directly to Ser Loras.

“No, ser.” He said, solemnly. “My brother is not even aware I’m here.”

Ser Loras gasped in surprise, while Ser Gerris Drinkwater laughed out loud, before starting to applaud.

“Behave like men or I swear I will cut both your heads gladly.” Ser Barristan said, on the verge of his patience. Ser Gerris managed to muffle the laughter, but Ser Loras, feeling betrayed, seemed ready to pull his sword and fight Jon right there.

“Why are you here then?”

Before providing an answer, Jon retrieved the letter Cotter Pyke had given to him. He passed it to Ser Barristan.

“As a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch, I’ve travelled from the Wall to request an audience with your Queen.” Jon said. The Commander of the Queensguard nodded, as if he already knew that.

“But I heard Her Grace is not—”

Jon’s words were cut short by the sound of wax breaking. With his wrinkled fingers, Ser Barristan was opening the letter. After clearing his throat, he started reading its contents out loud.

To Daenerys Targaryen, the Queen Beyond the Narrow Sea...

“The Queen Beyond the Narrow Sea?” The Unsullied man asked, uncomfortably.

“Grey Worm, we would be here tomorrow if they had addressed Her Grace by all her titles—”

Ser Barristan resumed after a few seconds.
The cold winds are rising and the dead are rising with them. Thousands of wildlings died unnecessarily at our gates by the decision of Lord Commander Bowen Marsh, and there is fear that they will soon rise to fight the living. The stories of old are to be believed. If the Dragons are back to the world of the living, you have to trust us when we say the Others are back with the dead as an army.

The Night’s Watch fought the dead in the Fist of the First Men, losing their Lord Commander and many sworn brothers bound to the Night’s Watch. It is a matter of time now until an attack comes to the Wall, bringing to us a war we can’t fight alone. We’ve not enough men, or provisions, to hold our posts during Winter. When we fail, the Seven Kingdoms will be engulfed in a nightmare just as dark as the Long Night.

Don’t let us fail. We need your support in the Great War to come, Your Grace. We need fire.

For the Realm,

The Night Rebels

With the letter was an old page, ripped from a book Jon had read a few times over the last few months. The only copy that existed was back on Castle Black, in the office of the Maester. On its black cover was the title The Heroes and Foes of Old, a chronicle by Maester Samwell, compiling all the research he had gathered on the Citadael about the Others.

“The Others?” Asked the man called Gerris, reading the page scribbled with Sam’s calligraphy. “Are we really losing time with this?”

“This is not a ludicrous story.” Jon said. He caught a glimpse of Ser Loras, who seemed astounded. He was not surprised with the news of dead marching on the Wall, but with the fact that Jon had shared a fairytale with a war council. “The dead are rising beyond the Wall and already marching south. An army of thousands, led by the Others…” He lifted his left hand, showing them the scar ruining his skin. A scar made by fire. “This scar reminds me every day the night I saved Lord Commander Mormont from being killed by the dead body of one of our sworn brothers. I grabbed a torch with my own hands, feeling the fire devouring my skin, and I threw it to the dead man. He died in front of me, consumed by fire. No steel or arrow or anything else stopped him.”

Ser Barristan placed the letter on the table.

“These are grave news you brought us.” He said, seriously. “We’ve our own informants in the North who feed us the rumors about what is happening on the Wall and how your brother is lending his army to the Night’s Watch, but I heard nothing about the dead or the Others or anything like that. In fact, the rumors that came to our attention were about the wildlings…”

“The Night’s Watch is not united regarding that matter, ser.” Jon said, pointing to the word. “You saw how the letter was signed. The Night Rebels.” He said, proudly. “Many of my sworn brothers are against Lord Commander Marsh’s decisions. We are doing our best to get the Night’s Watch on the right path.”

“The Queen disapproves of what has happened to the wildlings.” Ser Barristan said. “To her, the carnage the Night’s Watch provoked by closing their gates to thousands of wildlings seeking refuge is no better than what the slave masters did for centuries. It was unnecessary.”

“Ser Barristan, the Night’s Watch guards the Realm from menaces from beyond the Wall since the
Age of Heroes. Many of my sworn brothers are fighting to open the gates, or even smuggling wildlings to save their lives... But the ones commanding the Watch won’t wield from their conservative policy.”

“Well, ser, I have no time to discuss the Wall’s problems with you. Even if this tale you tell us about is true, our Queen can’t give you what you ask.”

“We need to even the odds against the dead.” Jon replied just as quickly. “The Queen can give us fire.”

Gerris Drinkwater laughed, but it was not he the one who spoke.

“You want dragons.” This time, it was Ser Archibald who spoke.

Dragons.

“The last man who attempted to get his hands on a dragon was my friend.” Ser Gerris said. “And a prince.” He continued. “And he died screaming.”

“I don’t want a dragon for myself.” Jon said quickly. “We call the Queen to the Wall to help us fight with her dragon. The Night’s Watch cannot depend on the forces of Lord Stark forever. We have sent word to all the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, but none of them came to our aid. The Dragon Queen is our last hope.”

“And would the Night’s Watch accept Daenerys Targaryen as their Queen?” Asked Gerris, promptly.


“But your brother does.” Loras pressed. “If Robb Stark were to swear his fealty to Her Grace, then —”

“I don’t speak for my brother, Ser Loras.” Interrupted Jon, raising his voice. “It’s not my fault if you insist believing otherwise.”

“And Ser Loras...” Ser Barristan added. “You have no power to propose deals in the name of the Queen.” He said with finality. With the same tone, he faced Jon one last time to put an end to the audience. “I sympathize with your cause, ser, but I’m afraid the Queen can’t do anything for you. Not in the near future. Even if she hadn’t left on a diplomatic mission, I’m sure she would have declined your call to arms. The Night’s Watch has a Wall separating them from the dead, but we don’t have a Wall separating us from the living. The city is on the verge of war.” He turned toward Ser Loras. “We won’t turn our back and flee like cowards to join another fight. We’ve too many battles to fight here before we can turn our eyes to Westeros.”

“By the time Her Grace turns her forces to Westeros it may be too late.” Jon urged, already feeling the taste of defeat in his mouth.

Ser Barristan sighed and exchanged a glance with Ser Loras, as if accusing him of bringing another problem to his doorstep.

“I’m sure the Queen will do anything that is in her grasp when the right time comes, ser. But first she must defend Bhorash and—”

“Ser Loras is right about Bhorash.” Jon intervened, using his lost ammunition. “The city will fall, Ser
Barristan. Just like Meereen did. And then what will your Queen be? A joke? Back at Westeros, people laugh at the mention of her name.” Jon interrupted. “In the first years, when he heard about the dragons and the slave cities, she instigated fear in the people’s hearts. But now they laugh, they call her the Mad Queen, the Failed Targaryen, the Mother of Dragging…” The man, who Jon presumed to be the captain of the Unsullied, looked at him as if he had been personally wounded. “She will lose Bhorash, and then she will lose Westeros, and then she will be nothing.”

“Beware your tongue, ser!” Ser Archibald threatened.

“There is no need for that, Ser Yronwood. He is just heated because he turned him down.” Ser Barristan intervened, standing from his chair. “We all know the queen doesn’t care about rumors—”

“She could prove her worth by coming to our aid, ser.” Jon interrupted.

“I’m afraid this audience has come to an end.”

Tell him, his father’s voice whispered in his mind. Tell him who you are.

The truth could change everything, but the words wouldn’t convince any of those men. Not even Ser Barristan.

“Ser, as a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch, you are most welcome at the court of Bhorash.” The Lord Commander of the Queensguard said, hastily.

No, there was no point in telling them the truth.

He would just be the mad man claiming the Others existed and that his father was Rhaegar Targaryen. And why would they believe him? After all, at the moment he couldn’t look less like a Targaryen. His face was swollen from all the punches he had suffered, one of his eyes was black and an ugly cut scared his forehead. Besides, he suspected Ser Barristan or one of the other men would not take the news well. He would do no good for the Watch locked in a cell for telling lies.

Or losing my head.

“Ser Loras, you are excused from your mission.” Ser Barristan added, before leaving the room. “Someone more trustful will be sent to negotiate with the Golden Company.”

“I can get them!”

“You had your chance.” Ser Barristan said, nodding. “Now, if you’ll excuse me…”

He left, followed by the others, leaving Jon behind with Ghost and Ser Loras.

“You tricked me.” Ser Loras said, furious, without looking at him. “You knew I thought your brother had sent you and that the Starks were ready to side with the queen, and you didn’t say a word.”

“I’m not your pawn, Ser Loras.” Jon said, standing up. “If House Stark wants to align with your Queen, Robb can travel himself to strike an alliance. I’m a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch. Nothing more. It was your mistake to believe otherwise.”

Ser Loras scoffed.

“Go fuck yourself, bastard. You wasted a good opportunity for your House and made a fool of yourself.” Loras said, viciously. “I should’ve let you rot on that street.” Before Ghost could snarl, he
stormed out of the room.

*So much for making the right friends.*

Alone in the room, Jon stood up and paced to the balcony. The wind caressed his face, disheveling his hair. But it was good to feel cold again.

He had lost the battle, but the war was not lost. He had travelled too far to return home empty handed. The queen could be gone, the Lord Commander could not believe him, and the city could be on the verge of doom… But there was still an option, one he didn’t like, one that could cost him his life, but that could save the Wall if he was victorious.

“Maybe.” He whispered, softly, scratching Ghost behind the ears.

Maybe it was time to prove he had the blood of the dragon.
Tyrion

Wow, guys, thank you so much for your reviews and all the love and support. Thank you, really! Keep reviewing, it's really keeping me motivated. So, this was supposed to be a Myrcella chapter. I intended to bring a Tyrion chapter only later in the fanfiction. But as I was starting to write Myrcella, I quickly understood the board for the new game had to be set. So, here it is. In less than a week, I wrote the largest chapter to date. And I believe an Arya chapter will come next, and only afterwards we’ll have Myrcella.

Be gentle judging my first portrayal of Tyrion. It’s strange to write him as a character in control of the Seven Kingdoms and not on Daenerys’ side, but at the same time is funny. I had the opportunity to explore what happened to Tyrion in the time jump. Beware, though, that a major part of the chapter focus on a Small Council meeting where many decisions are made, where new characters are introduced and where old ones are back. There is a really sad moment here, so I would call this chapter, if it hadn’t Tyrion’s name, the following: “The Victories and Defeats of Tyrion Lannister”. I hope you like it.

Tyrion

“I hereby declare Tyrion Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, as Lord Regent, so he can act on my behalf.”

Grand Maester Yandel’s voice trembled as he finished reading the decree. It was not the snow storm outside that made the man shiver, or the cold wind running through the Red Keep corridors. No, Grand Maester Yandel was shivering because, for the first time since he had moved to King’s Landing, he was afraid.

He fears the terrible Imp is going to throw him in a cell.

Yandel placed the piece of paper on the table and looked up grimly to face the few lords around the table.

“I can confirm it, my lords.” The wind blew against the window, and the sound it made sounded like a woman screaming. “It’s signed by His Grace, Tommen Baratheon, the First of His Name.”

Look at them, Tyrion said to himself, feeling the burden over his shoulders. My council of misfits.

He could almost imagine what people would say from that day forward.

“The Imp is an evil, evil creature”, they would tell on the warm chambers at the court and the dirty inns down at Flea Bottom. “The Imp shipped her sister to Dorne, made his Uncle flee the city and grabbed for himself the title of Lord of Casterly Rock, and the regency as well!”. And they would
even add “The Red Keep is no better than Flea Bottom these days”. They had only to take a look to his council to see whores, bastards and deformed things.

“I hope no one else has doubts regarding His Grace’s decision.” Tyrion said, adjusting himself to the chair where not long ago his father had sat. “The king signed the decree earlier this morning, hoping it would solve any doubt regarding his wishes. We don’t have more time to lose, my lords…” His eyes passed by the gorgeous woman sitting on the table. She was already causing a commotion, attracting the eyes of every man in the room. “And my lady, of course.”

Silence was the only answer he received. If looks could kill, he would already be laying on a grave underneath Casterly Rock, between father and Jaime. Half of the men sitting in front of him wanted him dead. The other half was completely loyal to him. The odds were better, but were not enough.

“Well, I’m glad this nasty business is over us.” Tyrion said, picking up the royal decree and rolling it up. “Now, before we continue, I believe presentations are in order. We have new faces joining us.”

Eight days had passed since the Red Melee. Five since Tommen had married Margaery Tyrell and a crown had fallen on his head. Three since Cersei had left King’s Landing to take Doran Martell as his husband in Dorne. And only two since Uncle Kevan had attempted to remove Tyrion from the king’s side.

It all happened suddenly. The court was in such a disarray, and the city still rioting down on Flea Bottom, that Tyrion didn’t see it coming. Unable to accept his nephew as regent, Uncle Kevan rallied a few men to take Maegor’s Holdfast late at night. He commanded the men to raise the drawbridge and for one long, tense day he refused to let anyone in.

Tyrion was already making plans to invade the holdfast – a task that wouldn’t be easy – when Tommen himself came to the battlements, with half of his face bandaged, and ordered the men to lower the drawbridge, unless they wanted to be executed as traitors. As soon as the drawbridge was lowered, Tyrion ran to the king’s side, fearing the worse.

“I’m afraid Uncle Kevan doesn’t like the idea of you being my regent.” Tommen had said, half way to bed. He was still drowsy thanks to the milk of the poppy. “He said he would only stay if I were to give the regency to a Council. So I said he could leave whenever he wanted. And oh, yes, he said something about me regretting my decision, and then he left.” By that time, Tommen had been already abed. “The regency is yours, Uncle Tyrion, as well as Casterly Rock.”

Even weak as he was, he had spoken like a true king, with a will stronger than Tyrion would ever expect from the boy. He had always seen Tommen as a soft-hearted child, living most of his life in the shadow of his older brother. Maybe that was the reason why he had grown to be so different from Joffrey.

Moved by his nephew trust in him, Tyrion put his hands to work as soon as he left the holdfast. By that time, Kevan Lannister had already fled the city. Decisions had been quickly made, the ravens had left the Red Keep and people had been brought him. And now here he was.

“As you can see, Lord Ronnet Connington is our new Master of Laws.”

The Master of Laws was nothing more than an honorific job in times of war. He had decided to give it to someone from the Stormlands, hoping it would help strength the ties with the stormlords and bring them into the fold. Since the man had stayed in the city after the Tournament, Tyrion had not hesitated to send an invitation. Yes, Red Ronnet was nothing more than a knight, which proved to be the perfect situation to tempt him into loyalty. A good service could mean a good reward, and Storm’s End was currently without a lord. Ronnet knew his name would sound much better with a
lordship.

“I’m truly honored to serve His Grace, my lord.” He said.

Yes, of course you are. Tyrion nodded, and then passed to the enchanting lady sitting beside Red Ronnet.

“And let me present you, my lords, the Lady Deyrice of Lys. She will act as our new Mistress of Whisperers.”

Deyrice of Lys was indeed a gorgeous creature, with her voluptuous breasts tightened in the most scandalous cleavage. To pass unnoticed, she was of course wearing a black satin dress. Her eyes, grey and cloudy as morning mist, glinted as a red smile flowered in her lips. A tiara of silver, with three sapphires on it, glinted in her blonde hair. On her neck, a collar with five tear shaped diamonds glinted mysteriously, tempting men and women to look after the treasures of her bosom.

“Are you telling me the king has truly agreed to this?” Lord Randyll asked, sternly. He was the only man not smiling toward Lady Deyrice. “He agreed to let a whore sit in the Small Council?”

Lady Deyrice giggled and stretched her neck to look directly to the Hand of the King.

“A whore, my lord, deals in secrets.”

“And a Mistress of Whisperers will do as well as a Master of Whisperers.” Tyrion added, glad to see the woman could defend herself. “And if you call her a whore again, my lord, I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Lord Randyll sniffed, and crossed his arms. He had understood the veiled threat.

“Even so, this is baffling—” The Grand Maester started.

“Grand Maester, do you know a better suitor to take the place?” Tyrion retorted, looking from Yandel to the other lords around the table, daring them to give an answer. “I assure you there is no one better in the entire city trading in secrets and whispers like Lady Deyrice. She has dozens of marvelous ladies under her command, taking care of their pleasures and secrets.”

Deyrice smiled, acknowledging his words with her red smile.

She had started under Chataya’s care more than twenty years ago, when she was nothing more than a girl of eight. However, by the time she had seventeen, she had made a reputation for herself. From that point onwards, she had spread her legs and influence through Westeros. Recruiting whores in the most peculiar places, she trained the girls under the mysterious commandments of the Weeping Lady of Lys.

“I insist, my lord, the Small Council is not the place for a lysene with her talents.” Yandel pushed again.

“There is a tradition about whores, foreigners and bastards taking the seat of the Master of Whisperers. Had you read the The Great Book of the Dragon Dynasty by Archemaister Pollarius, you would have found that Tyanna of Pentos was not only wife to Maegor the Cruel, but also his Mistress of Whisperers. She came to the city being nothing more than a whore. Varys was also lysene, and had no balls, and even so he has held his seat since the days of the Mad King until he disappeared into thin air a week ago. And I almost forgot, yes… During the Dance of Dragons, if my mind isn’t betraying me, Rhaenya Targaryen had also a lysene woman serving her secrets. Lady Myseria. Her husband’s lover, a whore also found in a brothel.” Tyrion stopped to catch his breath.
“Do you still think Lady Deyrice unfit?”

None of them dared to reply.

“Good.” Tyrion said. “Lady Deyrice, I'm eager to your reports about what’s happening all over the Realm. Now, regarding the Master of Ships.”

This was another delicate matter. Since Cersei had sent Horas Redwyne on a fool’s quest to Essos, Lord Aurane Waters had stepped in. Being a handsome and thin man, the Bastard of the Driftmark had the silver-gold hair and grey-green eyes of the Velaryons, an inheritance passed by the valyrian blood running in his veins. His nephew, Lord Monterys, was a few years younger than Tommen and his close friend. Both had been raised at Storm’s End.

“Lord Aurane Waters, I’m glad you joined us so quickly.” Tyrion said, nodding to the man. “I’m sure we will do a fine job reinforcing our fleet. The king has picked you for the job, and I couldn’t be gladder.”

Well, I could, Tyrion thought. The bastard owed nothing to him and he also had no dirt to manipulate Aurane into obedience. Even so, he believed the friendship between Tommen and Monterys was strong enough to bind Aurane to the Iron Throne. At least, during war.

“Ah, and yes, we have a new Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.” Tyrion gulped. All the feelings he had tamed the previous days started snarling inside his head, begging to be freed.

Ser Balon Swann had taken the seat next to Aurane Waters.

*Jaime’s seat.*

He was by far the best choice for the Kingsguard. After escorting Cersei, Tommen and a small party of nobles back to the Red Keep while the Red Melee was happening, the knight proved his worth. Besides, his sworn brothers were either dead or lost.

Ser Meryn Trant’s corpse had been found in the king’s pavilion. Ser Boros Blount and Ser Josmyn Peckledon had been slain in the fight by the King’s Gate. And Sandor Clegane had been seen leaving the Red Keep, headed toward North, ignoring the orders he had received. Even though there was no sign of his white cloak, he had left his golden armor behind.

And, of course, they had lost Jaime.

*I can remember how we used to laugh about your little romance with the girl.*

Cersei’s word twisted in his guts, raising doubts and suspicions that were like salt over an old wound. Jaime had always sworn Tysha was nothing more than a whore, a jest to make him lose his virginity. He would not lie about that, would he?

He couldn’t know.

He would never know.

Only pain and doubts rested, and the burning desire to make Cersei pay for ruining his memory of Jaime.

*Tysha.*

No, he couldn’t dwell on that now.
Later.

Pain will come later.

He shuddered at the thought, but did his best to focus.

"Later I’ll provide a list of names adequate for the Kingsguard, ser.” Tyrion said. “A few candidates for the positions left vacant.”

Ser Balon Swann had already recruited three men. Ser Hugh Beesbury, a fine knight from the Reach, who had won a Tournament in Highgarden a few years before. Walder Brax, the grandson of Lord Andros from his youngest son. And Elwood Harte, a knight from the Crownlands, whom Ser Balon had picked from his prowess during the Battle of Blackwater, remembering how he had defeated his brother Ser Donnel Swann. Ser Aerys Oakheart, in the meanwhile, remained at the Eyrie with Myrcella.

All the counts done, two places were yet to be filled.

“And yes, well, that leaves you three.” Tyrion said, setting his eyes on the three men who belonged to the original Small Council. “My good friends.” He added, ironically.

The remnants of Cersei’s council, he remembered bitterly.

Lord Randyll Tarly, the Hand of the King, the very same man who had helped Uncle Kevan with his little revolt. He would have to deal with Randyll, and knew how doing it, but he had to wait to talk to him in private.

Grand Maester Yandel was seated next, looking as if had swollen the most acid blood oranges of Dorne. Tyrion had never liked Yandel and the man knew it. That was why he looked so sick and afraid. He had come from a House of the Reach, and had always treated him as if a dwarf had less wit than a full-sized man. Tyrion would give the Grand Maester a chance to prove his worth. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be the first of his Order he had thrown into a cell.

On the other side of the table was Ser Addam Marbrand, the Lord Commander of the City Watch. He had been a good and loyal friend to Jaime, but Tyrion was not Jaime and he had never approved father’s decision to appoint the man as commander of the gold cloaks. Ser Addam was a natural leader, someone made for other purposes, for the battlefield. Besides, to let six thousand watchmen under Ser Addam’s command could be a risk, especially if such army was defending the city. Eddard Stark had trusted Janos Slynt and had received a black cloak for his mistake.

“Ser Addam, we may start with you.” Tyrion said. “The king and I have spoken last night about your good service. Can you tell us how is the investigation running?”

“Yes, my lord.” Ser Addam said, loudly. “We’ve finished interrogating the prisoners.”

“And what were your conclusions?” Lord Randyll asked, dryly. The man didn’t believe an investigation was necessary.

Ser Addam Marbrand rolled a parchment over the table.

“The tally is high, as we suspected, and many are still missing. At least thirty-seven from the noble Houses are dead, as well as three hundred people from the small folk, my lord.” Ser Addam pressed.

“We then counted fifty-seven soldiers of the City Watch, forty-three from the Lannister Army, thirteen servants and then, of course, four knights sworn to the Queen…”
“Yes, another riddle.” Tyrion said. “How is that four members of the Queensguard, who were supposed to be in their cells, were found armed and dead underneath the keep? And who kill them?”

“Maybe the Queensguards tried to defend the prince.” Ser Ronnet suggested.

“Defend the prince from whom?” Tyrion asked. The man was slow. “There was no one else on the chambers underneath the castle beside the sellswords, ser. If you want to be our Master of Laws, you have to keep up.”

“Certainly, my lord.” Ronnel’s smile vanished from his face immediately.

But there it was another riddle.

Who are the sellswords serving?

“Let’s not debate what only time will answer.” Tyrion interrupted. “Ser Addam, continue.”

“Yes, my lord. Well, regarding the sellswords we have reason to believe they belonged to a small pentoshi company called The Bloody Ravens. A force with less than a thousand men. They are usually hired to fight in small skirmishes between the Free Cities or to grant protection to remote villages. Even though hundreds managed to escape, my men caught their leader and the man has confessed the details of his contract. A woman and a man, who didn’t identify themselves openly, hired the company to kill the king and kidnap the prince. All of them believe the North must be behind the attack, my lords, but there is no solid ground on that.”

A single man’s beliefs must not be trusted.

“We also learned the Bloody Ravens were welcomed in the capital a week before the Tournament, and that they met with a man who provided them with armours, swords and all the equipment necessary to storm the keep and infiltrate the Tournament’s grounds. It was not the same man who hired them back in Pentos, even though it was him leading them through the secret passageways underneath the castle.”

Varys, Tyrion thought to himself.

He had known the eunuch was behind it as soon as they found out how the sellswords had entered the keep. How many times had the Master of Whisperers smuggled Shae into the keep using the passages?

Shae, no.

He gulped, feeling his throat tightening.

No pain allowed.

“And… And Lord Varys is still missing, I presume?” Tyrion pressed, stammering. Lord Randyll looked at him, frowning.

“The last person seeing him was a maid, the night before the attack. He was in his room, preparing to go to bed.”

Of course he was.

“Well, this security breach astounds me, ser.” Tyrion said. “That’s why I’m not leaving any room for mistakes this time.” He looked toward Grand Maester Yandel, who was just inclining over Lord
Randyll to whisper something in his ear. “I want the Realm to know we are looking for Lord Varys for the crimes of conspiracy, treason and murder. An order for his capture will be signed by the king tomorrow.”

“The eunuch?” Lord Randyll asked. Yandel was already taking notes. “This is a waste of time. The prince was kidnapped and a banner with the Stark sigil hanged from Maegor’s.” Lord Randyll said, hitting the table top with his closed fist. “I don’t think we need more proof than that.”

He may be a fine warrior on the battlefield, but he is still a bad judge of character.

“It’s interesting you seem so sure about it, my lord.” Tyrion interposed. He was eager to shut up Randyll once more. “But banners are just banners, just as armours are just armours. A game is being played right under our nose, and whoever is in control is getting what he wanted.” Varys was the puppet master. It was clearer than water. If the other men were not able to acknowledge it, it was their fault. “We will have no other choice than to march to the battlefield to fight the Starks. However, before that, I hope we can plant some seeds of our own.”

Randyll Tarly smirked, as if Tyrion was nothing more than shit under his boot.

“Keep playing your games, Lord Regent.” Randyll teased, and Grand Maester Yandel smiled weakly. “Keep planting your seeds. Maybe you’ll stop playing when Lord Stark comes to our gates parading his little king.”

He thinks I’m stupid.

“Haven’t you just heard what I said, my lord?” Tyrion asked, closing his fists. “Maybe it’s better to repeat myself using simpler words. The bastard Edwyle Waters will be crowned. All of us know that. Maybe he already has a crown on his head as we speak. No doubt remains that soon enough we will have two kings in Westeros and only one Iron Throne.”

It was still strange to call Edwyle a bastard. He had always been fond of the child. But now he was nothing more than a pretender.

“However, whoever planted the seeds to start this war, wants us to clash against House Stark and drag the Realm to another war.” Tyrion continued. “What this invisible enemy wants to achieve by seeding havoc in times of peace I can only imagine.”

If it was indeed Varys behind it, he suspected the chaos would benefit a certain queen beyond the Narrow Sea.

“But do you truly think Robb Stark is stupid to the point of hiring sellswords to kill Joffrey and kidnap the prince? Lord Stark isn’t planning a war to put a bastard on the Iron Throne. He has been fighting wildlings for years. He is not happy that we did nothing to aid him, but he is not interested in starting a war. He would more easily bend the knee and ask us to move our troops to the Wall. That’s why he didn’t come to defend his sister and mother when they were imprisoned. He won’t start a war to put his nephew on the Iron Throne.”

Robb Stark didn’t strike Tyrion as a coward. At fifteen years old, he had rallied his men and marched south to defend his father’s honour. He would not pay sellswords to fight his battles, to kill for him. It was not honourable. It was not how Starks did things. His decision to stay at the Wall was odd, yes, but it also meant he wanted to prevent a war. Winter had come, after all, and the Starks words had to mean something.

“You know nothing of warfare.” Randyll retorted, hitting once again the table top with his closed
fist. “The Young Wolf is nothing more than The Fearful Wolf nowadays. I put my hands on the fire that he sent his sister to Pentos, lending the little bitch money to hire the sellswords and plot everything in the dark. We have proof that Arya Stark was here—”

“Ah!” Tyrion interrupted, pointing a finger to Lord Randyll. “Yes. The Stark girl is the key to everything.”

If there are any Gods, I pray they smile to us now.

There were reports that the youngest daughter of Eddard Stark had been seen in Flea Bottom weeks ago and then later, when Jeyne Westerling, a handmaid to Sansa Stark, had seen the girl entering the Queen’s chamber wearing a Lannister armour. She was the most likely suspect for the prince’s kidnapping. More intriguing than that was that she had come to King’s Landing after returning from a trip to the Free Cities with her younger brothers.

“We know Robb Stark doesn’t want a war. But a man doesn’t make his whole family.” Tyrion said. “I’m afraid, my lords, that House Stark is currently divided. There are many reasons to believe Arya Stark is the one holding the prince, yes. She was in the city, she was wearing an armor and she is gone. But I don’t think she was here with her brother’s blessing.” Or without friends. He could almost imagine Varys recruiting the girl so she could serve his purposes. “That’s why I want to touch this wound, my lords. I want to deepen the abysm separating brother and sister.”

Ser Addam Marbrand nodded, understanding what Tyrion was trying to suggest.

“You want the wolves at each other’s throats.”

“Yes.” Tyrion said. “If our enemy weakens itself first, they may also weaken the North. Lord Stark has a military strength of forty-five thousand men at his disposal. Even with some causalities during their fights in the Wall, their numbers are strong. Yes, I know, Lord Randyll… With armies from the Westerlands, the Reach and some Houses from the Stormlands and the Vale we have more than enough men to crush them. But the North is prepared to fight during Winter, and united they can last years, especially if they kept hold of Moat Cailin. I don’t want this to turn into a long war. I want our people safe, back in their homes, living through the most glorious winter there is memory of. And preferably without much blood in our hands. So, the terms I pretend to offer Robb Stark are the following: if the North manages to deal with Arya Stark’s crimes, thus delivering the bastard Edwyle Waters to be raised as a ward in Casterly Rock, the Iron Throne will make peace.”

“The North will never agree.” Grand Maester Yandel said.

“I don’t want the North to agree.” Tyrion said. “I want the North to destroy itself.”

“What?” Ser Balon Swann asked, surprised.

“All we have to do is plant our own seeds and let them grow into chaos. My father used to say some wars can be won with quills and ravens… So I intend to use a lot of quills and ravens.” He turned to Grand Maester Yandel, to give him another command. “Get as many scribes as you can, Grand Maester. Letters with the terms must be copied and sent to each lord between Moat Cailin and the Wall. We’ll ask Lord Stark and the whole North to deal with Lady Arya. Everyone will be hunting the girl and the prince to either join her or fight for her. In just a few days, they will engulf themselves in the greatest hunt of all time. And we will sit here, seeing what happens.”

“This could work, yes.” Red Ronnet said, with his eyes glassy. He was already imagining all the strategies in his mind.
“And may not work.” Randyll interrupted. “The Northmen would never betray the Starks.”

“That’s the beauty in it, isn’t it?” Lady Deyrice asked, teasingly. “The North won’t be betraying the Starks. They will only have to choose which Stark they want to serve. Their lord or their lady.”

“Robb Stark is the lord and the eldest heir of Eddard Stark. They’ll follow him, my lady.”

“Some of the lords sworn to House Stark are already not following Robb Stark.” Deyrice said. “One of my girls in the North told me Lord Umber left Winterfell a few weeks ago, and has pulled all his men from the Wall. There are rumors Umber and Stark argued regarding what should be done concerning Queen Sansa. She was a prisoner at the time.”

“This proves the North can be broken.” Tyrion said, bowing his head to Lady Deyrice for her opportune testimony. “Believe me, many Houses will want to side with the Stark girl. Most of them already want an excuse to leave the Wall. And that is all we need. An empire with a questionable leader can be easily overthrown.”

*Chaos, distrust, brother against sister.*

It had worked with his own siblings, so why shouldn’t it work with the Starks? It was a bold plan, one far too ambitious, and the chances that Robb Stark wouldn’t declare war to avenge his family were almost inexistent. But by fighting his sister first, the tactic would give him what he needed: time.

“While they waste their time moving armies from the Wall, we will deal with their most likely allies.” Tyrion said. “The Riverlands and the Iron Islands.” He looked toward Lord Randyll and winked.

Lord Randyll moved uneasily in his seat.

“I still believe this is utterly unnecessary.” The Hand of the King said. “If we were to march now, we could storm the most valuable thing the Starks have. The Neck. If they find a way to defend it, they can last the entire Winter.”

“Without the Greyjoys, the Starks won’t have ships. Without the Tullys, they don’t have another ally in the Seven Kingdoms besides their own men.”

“You seem always bloody sure of what you say, my lord.” Lord Randyll said, irritated. “But hasn’t your father taught you that real life is different from the books?”

Tyrion smiled.

“I’m forging alliances, my lord, and I want to ensure those alliances will last for many years. The relations between Dorne and the North are not tight. Besides, even if Prince Doran doesn’t want to side with us and sends me my sister’s head back from Dorne – which unfortunately he won’t do - he’ll never join the Starks. Dornish men fighting in the icy plains of the North? Can you imagine that? It would be a joke.”

His fingers walked up a bit, as if he was walking through an invisible map.

“The Reach is also ours, even if we have to mend our relationship with Lord Willas.” *Lie.* “He is burying half of his family, but his sister is Queen at last and the Tyrells hate the Starks.” *Truth.* “It would be nice if we could secure the alliance through another marriage, though.” *Oops, another lie.* “We must talk about it another time.” *And another truth.*

Tyrion’s fingers moved up again.
“Then, the Westerlands are ours, obviously.” His Uncle Kevan had left to cause disarray back home, but if the Gods were good, he would be stopped. He looked at his fingers. “Ah yes, the Stormlands. Ser Ronnet, how do you think the Stormlands will behave?”

“Many stormlords think they are forgotten, my lord.” Ser Ronnet answered honestly. “I believe many will side with the Iron Throne, but there is a few who remember how Lord Eddard was a good friend to the late king Robert Baratheon. A few could side with the Starks.”

“No more than five thousand.” Lord Randyll said, sniffing. “They can be dealt with. It’s the Vale that is worrying me.”

“The Vale would have been a matter if Lady Lysa Arryn was alive.” Tyrion said. “But now that she is dead, power is shifting. There are rumors the Lords Declarant are taking over the governance of the Vale, but I cannot be sure about that. I’ve already written to Lord Yohn Royce, as well as Lord Robert Arryn and my niece Myrcella. I truly believe they will remain impartial if there is a war, just like they did during the War of the False Stags. If they decide to rally, they will rally for us. I’ve asked Princess Myrcella to press her lord husband to send us some troops.”

“Thus, only the Riverlands and the Iron Island remain.” Ser Addam said.

“Yes.” Tyrion said. “Lord Edmure is already locked up behind walls and has summoned his bannermen. He is afraid someone will repeat what happened at the Riverlands six years ago.”

“Has he reasons to be afraid?” Lady Deyrice asked. “Personally, I think it was ghastly what happened, my lord. So many people dead, killed like cattle, after seeing their houses burn to the ground. It was unholy.”

“We’ll not inflict unnecessary violence on the people.” Tyrion said. “In fact, any violent acts committed against the smallfolk will be dealt as crimes of war. It’s time to treat our people as people. I’ve also appointed Lord Blackwater as the new commander of the Lannister army. Since he is not at Casterly Rock at the moment, Ser Harwyn Plumm is the one mobilizing the army.” His eyes locked on Ser Addam Marbrand. “Which brings me to you, Ser Addam. You will depart tomorrow to join Lord Blackwater and Ser Harwyn Plumm. You’ll be a captain under their command, and follow any orders they are to give you.”

Ser Addam blinked, and his mouth opened. Grand Maester Yandel gasped and around the table tension could be felt, as everyone moved uncomfortably on their chair.

“A captain? My lord, I’m the Lord Commander of the City Watch. I would be ashamed if I were to —”

“Ashamed, ser?” Tyrion asked. “Let me give you this advice: be humble. The attack that resulted in hundreds of deaths, among those the deaths of our king and queen, happened under the noses of three men.” Tyrion said, lifting three fingers. “The Commander of the Kingsguard, the Commander of the Lannister Army and the Lord Commander of the City Watch. That being said, all of you must be punished.”

He stopped for a moment, catching his breath.

“My brother is dead.”

He lowered a finger.

“My uncle has fled to Casterly Rock and will be soon judged as a traitor.”
He lowered another finger, and turned the last one standing toward Ser Addam.

“But you are still here.”

Ser Addam looked at the finger as if he wanted to break it.

“You’re being unfair, my lord! None of us could knew an attack was about to happen.”

“You couldn’t know or you didn’t want to see?” Tyrion asked. “The bastard Edwyle Waters was hurt while riding his horse. The Tyrells were poisoned. And the Lannister Army ranks grew overnight with hundreds of sellswords. And no one noticed? Those were signs that something was about to happen. You failed by not seeing them. Be glad that you are being appointed as a captain, ser. My nephew Joffrey would have asked for your head.”

Ser Addam Marbrand laughed before standing up. Always with a smile on his lips, he removed his cloak and unfastened his sword, placing them on the table. He was prepared to say something that he would regret when Tyrion opened his mouth again.

“You’ll travel to the Golden Tooth on the morrow.” He said. “Lord Harwyn Plumm will be waiting there for you within two days.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tyrion nodded.

“You are now excused, Ser Addam.”

As if he couldn’t yet believe what was happening, Addam Marbrand turned to the other lords around the table, hoping someone would come to his defense. But the only men who could say something on his behalf were the ones fearing similar fate. Whispering something that sounded “fuck this shit” in a very low tone, the man turned to the door and left.

“And… and who will command the City Watch now?” Stammered Grand Maester Yandel.

“A friend.” Tyrion said, with a heavy heart. “I expect he’ll arrive in the city today.”

A friend I brought back to inflict pain on myself.

“Which friend?” Lord Randyll asked, casting a look toward Lady Deyrice. Another whore?, was he asking silently.

“You’ll see soon, my lord.” Tyrion said, tapping the table with his hand. He stopped for a few seconds, gathering all his thoughts again.

I shouldn’t have called for him.

But once again, there was no time for that. Later, a bottle of wine would help him deal with the pain.

“Now, there a few matters we must discuss.”

The silence in the room was tense, but Tyrion ignored it.

“Where were we? Ah, yes, the Riverlands and the Iron Islands, yes. Well, Lady Deyrice…” Tyrion turned to her. “Can you tell the Council what you told me this morning?”

Lady Deyrice smiled and nodded.
“Yes, my lord.” She sang, and then turned to the other lords, with her eyes wide open. “Theon Greyjoy is taking charge of the Iron Islands, my lords. His sister is stepping down, and her own men are turning their back to her. They refuse to follow a woman in her condition, saying it’s a bad omen.” She said, enigmatically. “Lady Asha Greyjoy is pregnant.”

“So The Kraken’s Daughter is pregnant.” Red Ronnet said. “Good for her.”

“This means Theon Greyjoy is now in charge of the Iron Islands.” Deyrice continued. “He has a small fleet compared to the Iron Fleet his Uncle led to Essos, but he still has enough ships to help the North.”

“We have a larger fleet.” Aurane Waters said. “The Greyjokes’ ships could harm us, but they wouldn’t defeat us.”

**Greyjokes.**

“Lady Deyrice, please finish telling me what you gathered.” Tyrion asked.

“Yes.” Lady Deyrice said. “It seems Theon Greyjoy and Robb Stark are also in bad terms, since Torrhen’s Square was freed from Euron Greyjoy’s grip.”

“Bad terms?”

“They argued over a prisoner.” Lady Deyrice said.

“This may give us the opportunity to bring the Iron Islands to our side.” Tyrion said. “I want to leave the North completely alone.”

“Theon Greyjoy is like a brother to Robb Stark.” Lord Randyll said.

“Even so, when I met Theon Greyjoy I saw in him a boy full of resentment.” Tyrion said. “If he is on bad terms with Robb Stark, we must at least try to get him on our side. Is there a way, Lord Aurane?”

Aurane Waters smiled.

“There is only one thing the Greyjoy’s want, my lord.” He said. “Victarion Greyjoy’s head.”

The man was called the Iron Captain. He had turned against his own brother Euron Greyjoy, robbed his entire fleet and sailed to Dragon’s Waste to steal a dragon to Daenerys Targaryen, or so said the rumours. Bringing his head to Theon Greyjoy would mean settling once and for all the matter of succession of the Iron Islands, but it wouldn’t be easy.

“We can’t promise that.” Tyrion said.

“We could promise, my lord.” Aurane said. “If we act on our promise, or when we do it… That’s another question.”

**Aurane is full of tricks.**

“No.” Tyrion said, shaking his head. “I must confer with our king about the Greyjokes. The ironmen are hard to please, but we won’t fight their battles for them.” He looked to Aurane. “Or promise to do so.”

Once again, Grand Maester Yandel scribbled down.
“Let’s put the Greyjokes aside for now… I’ve discussed the matter of succession with the king.” Tyrion said. “Even if it’s a topic that I wouldn’t like to discuss, decisions have to be made in case of the king’s death. So, His Grace decided to do the most logic thing.” He looked to Maester Yandel, who had grown pale since Ser Addam had left. “Since the king has no child of his own yet, Princess Myrcella will be recognized as the king’s heiress. His Grace has asked me to issue a decree recognizing Princess Myrcella not only as his heiress, but also as Lady of Dragonstone, as its custom. She is to appoint a castellan and to receive any revenues that come from the land.”

“It’s a wise decision, my lord.” Ser Balon Swann said.

“The moment the king has a son or daughter, Princess Myrcella will abdicate from her title and place as Lady of Dragonstone in favor of the new heir.” Tyrion finished.

An heir.

Lady Margaery would never provide an heir to Tommen. She had been bleeding since the poisoning, and it was not her moon blood. It was something else, something rotten inside her. Her situation, however, was to be kept private. She was dying, of course, but slowly. She did not share the king’s bed, and she had not been able to let Tommen consummate their marriage. She was just standing there, locked in her chamber, with a crown on her head, sustaining the frail alliance with the Tyrells.

An alliance he needed so badly.

“Very well, my lord.” Grand Maester said, taking note of it to prepare the decree.

“Now, Lord Randyll…” Tyrion turned to the Hand of the King now. “Have you had any luck finding Lady Catelyn’s remains?”

The Hand of the King shook his head.

“Qyburn disappeared from his chamber. I think he left the city.”

“You think?” Tyrion retorted. “I don’t want you to think. I want you to do what I asked of you.” He shook his head. “We have the remains of all northmen who died, and those of the queen, but I can’t send them North without Lady Catelyn’s. Where the hell did Qyburn took her?”

Queen Sansa was officially dead, even though there was no actual proof the body was hers. Tyrion suspected the girl could have found a way to escape with her sister, but if that was true, nothing had been said about it yet.

“I can find out where that rat is, my lord.” Lady Deyrice told him. “Give me a week and I’ll have an answer for you.”

Tyrion nodded.

“A week it is, Lady Deyrice. It is of the utmost importance that we send the bodies to the North.” Tyrion said.

The image of Jaime’s body falling on the sept floor flashed in front of his eyes again. I can remember how we used to laugh about your little romance with the girl. Tainted, all the memories he had from Jaime. Everything tainted.

Pain, pain, so much pain.

“We must respect the dead.” He stopped for a few seconds before continuing. “Lastly, we must not
“Forget Daenerys Targaryen. Lady Deyrice, is there any news about her?”

“There are strange rumours coming from Pentos, my lord, but I would like to confirm them first.”

“Has she found a way to control the dragons?” Tyrion asked, somehow interested.

“No, my lord. The creatures are still flying over the ruins of the Slaver Cities.”

“Well, then we will not discuss her today.” Tyrion said. “I’ll make sure the new Lord Commander of the City Watch is aware of the defense plans to deal with dragons. I guess I have a few years to do so, though.” Laughter filled the room at the jest that was, nonetheless, true. Lord Randyll, as usual, was the only one rolling his eyes instead of smiling. “Now, is there anything you would like to discuss, my lords?”

Yes, there were a few matters, and it took them more than an hour to go over everything. Regarding the smallfolk, it was decided that bread would be delivered freely to anyone who asked for it at Flea Bottom, as well as soup. It was a small price to pay for the people’s love. As if they could ever love us, Tyrion thought. Some petty decisions regarding disputes all over the Seven Kingdoms were passed to Ser Ronnet, who would deal with them and act accordingly.

The prisoners’ fate was also decided. The men were to be executed for crimes committed against the crown. Finally, when darkness had long fallen over King’s Landing – even if they hadn’t yet reached the middle of the afternoon – someone knocked on the door.

“My lord regent?” Someone asked, opening a sliver of the door.

An ugly and deformed man, with cat-like eyes, sneak-peeked into the room.

“Labuelle, please, do come in.”

Labuelle was a fascinating man. Counting more than seventy years in his back, the man had a story of life to which Tyrion could easily sympathize. The man had been born as a deformed creature, just like him, but instead of dwarf features, he had a strange hump in his back that made in walk as if he was constantly bowing to someone else. It was by no mistake he was known as The Bower.

Just like Tyrion, Labuelle had worked for a life he had dreamt for himself, but his dreams had been crushed by superior voices. When the Maesters refused to accept him as a novice in the Citadael, he made his way into the service of Casterly Rock. Starting as a boy in the stables, he managed to make his ways from the stables to the library, becoming the librarian of Casterly Rock. He had maintained such place, until a week ago, when Tyrion had written to him requiring his services.

“Labuelle? What is it?” Tyrion asked.

All the eyes on the table were on the man, but the Bower didn’t feel intimidated by it and ignored the sniggering coming from Red Ronnet.

“My lord, I’m sorry to disturb you, but a message has come from you.” Labuelle said, stepping into the room.

Tyrion nodded, understanding what he was meaning.

“Yes, thank you, Labuelle.” Tyrion said, turning to the lords and the lady of the Small Council. “I believe we can adjourn our meeting. We’ll convene tomorrow at the same time.”

Immediately, the chairs dragged through the floor and Lady Deyrice left the room, escorted by
Aurane Waters and followed by Ser Balon Swann. Red Ronnet, who seemed interested in the deformed man, walked slowly until he finally left.

“Lord Randyll and Grand Maester Yandel, stay, please.” Tyrion said, while receiving the piece of parchment Labuelle had for him. “I would like to have a word with both of you.”

Grand Maester Yandel let three rolls of parchment fall on the floor.

“No, this also concerns you, my friend.” Tyrion said, saving the bit of parchment inside the sleeve of his coat. “And Grand Maester, there is no reason to look so afraid.” Tyrion said, even though the smile on his lips said otherwise. “I know you fear for your position, especially if you heard what I did to your predecessor by the time I was acting as Hand of the King... But I assure you, you’ve nothing to fear if you stay loyal to the Iron Throne.”

“My lord, I’m bound to serve the Iron Throne and those who work for the prosperity of the Realm and—”

“Yes, yes. Pycelle also said that, Grand Maester.” Tyrion sniffed. “Unfortunately, I don’t care about words. You’ll have a new assistant, who will be living in your quarters and who will attend all the ravens and letters from this day forward.” He pointed to the hunchback man at his side. “His name is Labuelle and he worked as a librarian at Casterly Rock until he arrived the city yesterday. I trust him, and I trust he’ll do good work by your side.”

“My lord, this is quite irregular.” Grand Maester said. “I’m perfectly capable of—”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Grand Maester.” Tyrion said. “If you want I can transfer you to more accommodate rooms and give your quarters and the rookery to Labuelle’s care. It may be a better idea—”

“My lord, no!” Grand Maester shrieked. “No, my lord, I can manage. Yes, I can manage, yes.”

“You can?” Tyrion asked, arching an eyebrow. “Well, then the matter is sorted. You can go now, Grand Maester. Labuelle, you can also go.”

“Very well, my lord regent.”

It was odd and somehow funny to watch Grand Maester Yandel leaving the room, with his frightened face, followed by Labuelle. It was indeed a strange pair, but a perfect solution. Labuelle would make sure no letter was sent or received at the keep without his eyes reading its content. If Yandel was to give any sign that he was playing a different game, he would be quickly thrown into a cell.

“Well done, Lord Tyrion.” Randyll said, pacing around the room. “You are the last Lannister standing. You’ve got rid of Ser Addam. You’ve put a hunchback watching the respectable Grand Maester. What about me? Will you threaten me like your father and sister did?”

Tyrion laughed.

“Oh, no.” Lord Tyrion said. “To be honest, my lord, I’m annoyed as fuck to look at your face every day.”

Randyll Tarly stopped and looked at him and, for the first time that day, he laughed.

“You’re not good looking either.”
Randyll Tarly was a weapon in their hands, carefully designed by Lord Tywin to appoint someone trustful and competent in the place of Hand of the King. Mysteriously, Lord Tarly didn’t like the Lannisters. He had not liked Lord Tywin, or Cersei, or even Uncle Kevan, even if the two of them had plotted to grab the regency for themselves. No, Lord Tarly didn’t even like to maintain his seat on the Small Council or chit chat about politics. He was a seasoned warrior, well known for his feats on the Seven Kingdoms and for being the only man defeating Robert Baratheon on the Battle of Ashford. And, above anything else, he was sworn to House Tyrell.

To choose such man to act as Hand of the King was a risky move and, some could say, even inappropriate, especially considering how close the Tyrells were to the power by the time Tywin died. But to choose him as Hand of the King would also mean that no rose would be planted on the Small Council, and so they wouldn’t feel insulted for not having the Reach represented.

What Highgarden didn’t know was that Tywin had ensured Randyll would be their pet, a trained warrior bounded by a leash.

“So, what new charade have you for me, Lord Imp?”

You’ll regret that.

“My lord, I advise you to be careful.” Tyrion said, amused. “Unless you want to lose your seat to a bastard.”

Lord Randyll’s smile disappeared immediately.

“So, you have inherited the bloody paper from your sister. Is that it?”

Tyrion grabbed one of the parchments in front of him and waved it in the air.

“Yes, here it is.” He said, reading the decree once again. “Your freedom.”

Fate sometimes can be ironic and no man knew it better than Lord Randyll Tarly. Years ago, his eldest son had abdicated his inheritance to become a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch. There were rumours the boy had been forced to leave, preferring the company of books than swords. So, Randyll’s heir had become Dickon Tarly. It was said the boy was a better choice indeed. He was a talented warrior, just like his father, and proved his worth fighting Stannis’ army during the Blackwater Battle.

But four years before, just a few months after taking Lady Mooton as his wife, Dickon had been killed in a tragic accident, falling through a ravine while hunting. Overnight, Lord Randyll saw himself surrounded by women. Since Dickon had died without leaving an heir, he had only three daughters and a son living on the Wall. By marrying his eldest daughter, Talla, to Horas Redwyne, he had hoped a boy would be born to them, thus continuing the Tarly lineage, but so far Talla was childless and the chances for her to get pregnant were slim. Cersei had sent her husband to Essos.

“It’s curious what a piece of paper can do.”

Lord Tywin had always admired Lord Randyll for his prowess on the battlefield, and saw him as an ally, but he also knew the man had to be controlled. So, an opportunity appeared when Varys shared some gossip about Samwell Tarly: the man had fathered a child to a wildling girl. In a few days, Tywin managed to move the girl and the child to Casterly Rock and had convinced Joffrey to sign a decree that would make the child not a bastard, but a Tarly, and thus the true heir of Horn Hill. The decree would be made official and recognized by the Council if Randyll were to betray them.

Threat a man’s legacy in his last years was an intelligent, yet cruel, move. Of course, Randyll had
tried to get his hands on the grandson he had never wanted, but the boy was protected behind the walls of Casterly Rock.

“You can’t hold that over me forever.”

“I don’t intend to.” Tyrion said “But if you dare betray me, ser, I’ll put a wildling bastard at the head of House Tarly. I’ll lend the men your grandson needs to take the castle. I’ll turn the Seven Kingdoms against you and your House. I’ll make the Tarlys the new Reynes.”

Lord Randyll laughed, once again, and the sound of his laughter was colder than the storm outside.

“I’m not afraid of a boy.” He said. “He is just a coward like his father.”

“A cowardly boy with an army is nonetheless a threat.” Tyrion said. “But if you serve the crown well, I’ll make sure your grandson remains a bastard and is sent to the Wall to take vows as a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch. Your House will then pass to someone of your choosing.”

“That was what your father said.” Randyll continued. “And then your sister.”

Tyrion nodded.

“I’m aware of that.” He said. “That’s why I thought in a way of granting you your freedom once and for all.”

Lord Randyll looked at him for a few seconds, but then he nodded.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to raise the Reach.” Tyrion said, smiling. “I can’t trust Willas Tyrell. He will never give us the aid we need, and he may even try to stab us him if his sister dies.”

Which is most likely.

“So that talk about marrying him to secure the ties between the Iron Throne were lies?”

Tyrion laughed.

“Lies, lies, lies.” He confirmed. “I don’t believe in the Seven Hells, my lord, and I don’t believe Highgarden will stay peaceful for much time. Our dear Lady Olenna must be laughing at us from beyond the grave.”

“Willas is not like his siblings.” Randyll said. “He may be lame on the leg, but he has a mind like no other.”

“Even so, we can steal his men from him.” Tyrion said. “My father didn’t want you only to keep the Tyrells happy. He knew how influential you were. You can raise the Reach and bring us an army that not even the Tyrells can provide. They care too much about their gardens, and parties, and tournaments. But you are not a rose. That was what my father always kept on saying. The Tyrells can have roses, but Lord Randyll’s has the thorns.”

“Your father was a wise man.”

“And I’ve inherited his wisdom.” Tyrion advanced quickly. I hope is the only thing I’ve inherited from him. “So this is my proposal: bring me swords and you’ll have your freedom… and maybe something else.”
"Lord of the Reach."

He had not offered it to Randyll, but he had caught the scent of it, just like a hound preparing to hunt.

“I will?” Lord Tarly asked, doubtful. “All I have to do is raise the Reach for you?”

“Yes."

Lord Randyll stretched an arm to exchange a handshake with Tyrion.

“I hope you don’t die, Lord Regent.” He said, sternly. “Or I’ll pursue down to those Seven Hells you don’t believe to make you pay what you promised.”

Their conversation ended there. After discussing the last details about Lord Randyll’s departure, the Hand of the King left and the Lord Regent was finally alone with his ghosts.

Tired, Tyrion took off his boots and placed his feet on the table. The table top was almost as cold as the freezing ground outside, but he could finally relax. He stared into the feeling for a few seconds, before closing his eyes.

Yes, everything was as planned and every minute that passed, he was more confident in himself with the fact that he owned the Red Keep. He didn’t want power, or anything else. Well, not for him. But he cared about Tommen, as the son he had never had, and if he could do something to make his reign a unforgettable one for the good reasons, he would do it.

It took him a while to remember the parchment on his sleeve, the one Labuelle had brought. The message was short, but it made Tyrion smile with relief.

*I’ve an old lion in a cage.*

*Fuck Father,* he said to himself. *Fuck Cersei,* he continued. *And fuck you, Jaime,* he finished. All of them dead and not even one had believed in what he could do. Not really.

Tyrion ripped the message immediately and threw it in the fireplace.

Lord Bronn of the Blackwater, Lord of Skoteworth through this marriage to Lady Lollys – and the “unfortunate” death of her sister, Lady Tanda – had done well once more. Following Tyrion’s instructions, he had captured Uncle Kevan on the Kingsroad and put the old traitor in a cell. He could not risk letting Kevan Lannister, the last son of Tytos, rummage the Westerlands rallying men against the Iron Throne. Those familiar intrigues were reserved for the Starks.

With his eyes closed, he allowed himself some minutes to rest. Predictably, since he had slept a total of seven hours the previous three days, he fell asleep. He didn’t know how, but at the beginning he dreamt of battlefields and dragons and of roses burning under a sky made of fire.

And then the other dreamed began, the one who gave form to his demons.

It started with Cersei, glancing over his nursery.

It was so vivid, so real. He was nothing more than a baby, still on a rocking cradle, but Cersei already hated him. She was screaming at him, pointing a bleeding finger to his face, screaming. Drops of blood smeared his eyes, burning his skin, making him cry.

*You killed Mother!*, she screamed.

*You ripped her!*, she continued.
Valonqar!

And then she was not Cersei, but Jaime, and instead of cursing and screaming, he was laughing.

*You should have trusted your guts,* he said.

*Tysha was never a whore, brother,* he continued, laughing so hard Tyrion’s ear started bleeding.

*She was not even deflowered.*

And he laughed, and the cradle rocked back and forth, and then a woman he had not seen for a long time was there. He only knew who it was because of her eyes. Her green eyes. The rest of her face was veiled, time erasing every trace of her features.

*My lion,* she said, rocking the nursery. *Are you my little lioness, Joanna?*

And then he screamed, because he knew the woman hiding behind the veil was not Tysha, but another woman he loved.

*Shae.*

And the pain made him scream, and the pain made him cry, and the pain made him scream back to his senses.

“*My lord!*” Someone screamed close to his ears, shaking him by the shoulder.

The dream shattered quickly, as reality settled in again. He jumped in his chair, looking around. He was covered in cold sweat, his clothes glued to his body.

“Are you sick, my lord?”

It was only a guard.

“Yes, yes…” Tyrion said, cleaning the drool from his face. “*What is it?*”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but you asked me to inform you as soon as Ser Payne arrived.”

*Ser Payne.*

“He is here?”

*Why does this pain hurt so much?*, Tyrion asked himself.

“Yes, my lord. I escorted him to your chambers.”

“Yes, yes… Thank you, Tommy.”

He stayed in the Council Hall for a few minutes more, preparing himself to face the inevitable. It was as if deep down a part of him wanted to run to his chambers, to meet Podrick after all those years. But another part of him told him that that moment would make him suffer all over again.

*But I need him.*

Podrick, as much as Bronn, had saved his life before and thus had proved his loyalty to him. If he wanted to return the Realm to all its glory, he needed men like Bronn, Labuelle and Podrick by his side. Men who would never stab him in the back, who would obey without question, even if they
had to change their whole lives and say yes to what they didn’t want to accept.

As he walked through the corridor, headed to his chambers, he looked at his reflection in the glass of a window. The image he saw was that of an old, little and tired man. Besides the scar running through his face and cutting his nose off, he seemed older than he had looked five years before.

*When they saw me for the last time.*

He knew she was there the moment he opened the door. He had expected her to come when he had sent the invitation to Hilltower. Deep down, he knew the time had come to face her again.

Tears burned his eyes when he felt her scent, even before reaching the door.

*Pain.*

He pushed the door and there she was.

She looked so candid and pretty, candlelight illuminating her as an angel. She was standing by a window, with her back to him, watching the snow storm outside. A blue cape, dark as the night sky, dripping to the floor. Her black hair was longer, reaching the middle of her back, and her skin had grown pale as milk.

“She Shae.” Tyrion whispered, gulping. He was not prepared for this.

And then she turned and his world trembled.

Yes, there it was. The hurt and hate gleaming in her dark eyes. Her lips were pressed into a thin line, without allowing room for a smile. He could feel her gaze burning, questions gleaming in her tearful eyes. She was eager to know why he had never come for her as he had promised. Why he had not run with her. Why he had shipped her away like a burden, carrying his child. Why he had ordered Podrick to marry her and take Joanna as his own. And why he had done it. Why he had been so afraid of father and Cersei.

*Why?*

“My lord.” She said, curtsying like a lady.

*My lion.*

“I—I… I was not expecting you”. He lied.

Yes, of course she had come. In his message, he had not put much effort ordering Pod to leave her at home.

He looked accusingly to Podrick, who was sitting in a chair by the fireplace, looking guilty and defeated. In his lap, shivering, was a little girl with five years-old, with her lips quivering and her golden hair gleaming in the light coming from the fireplace.

*Joanna.*

That was the blow he was not prepared for. As his eyes focused on the girl, he quickly felt like the worst man on the Seven Kingdoms and closed his fists, pushing the nails against his palm.

*No, not Joanna.*

He had sent gold to make sure the girl had everything, but he never had thought he would ever see
his daughter. Shae he wanted. He had prayed for her. His penis had got hard many nights at the simple thought of reuniting with her. But the pain was unbearable.

“My lord.” Ser Podrick said, standing up and placing the girl on the chair. He bowed before Tyrion. “I’m sorry, my lord, my wife insisted I was to take her.”

“My husband wanted me to stay in that Tower freezing to death.” Shae said, patting Podrick on the back so he could stand up. She was still graceful, still cheeky. “But I’m tired of being ordered to stay where other men want me. I missed the city, so I came, and no one had to beg sorry for it.”

“Yes.” Tyrion said, unable to look her in the eye. He wanted to run. This was my worst idea. “There is no need for that, Ser Podrick.”

Shae was fired by that remark. She knew Tyrion had no balls to face her, not after all he had done. “I’m sorry for your loss.” She said, full of resentment. “I know how much you loved your brother.”

Tyrion gulped, feeling the pain burn even more.

Oh, can someone stop this?

“Yes.” He said, just as dumb as a donkey. He closed his eyes. He was unable to look at the Paynes without hiding his own pain. “Yes.”

“But it was time for your father.” She said, now in a harsh tone. “And that bitch you have as a sister. I hope you can be a man now, my lord. Rather later than never, isn’t it?”

He looked at her again.

“I’m sorry, Shae.”

They stared at each other for a few seconds. Inside his pants, Tyrion could feel his penis growing hard, pressing his leather pants. At the same time, he felt disgusted to even think about raising Shae’s skirts and take her right there, on the floor, and then against the window and maybe next to the bed.

I need to fuck her to heal our wounds. He needed that more than ever, but she was no longer his to take. The pain was messing with him. She stared back, perfectly aware of what he was thinking, making him pay for what he had let go.

“Sorry?” She asked, laughing. “Is that it? You say you are sorry?”

“Shae, what—”

“You’re still weak, my lord.” She retorted, turning his back to Tyrion. She walked to the door and grabbed little Joanna. The girl laughed, stretching her arms toward Tyrion.

“Little man!” She said, laughing happily.

Oh, the joys of being a child.

Tyrion smiled, even if tears were running down his face.

“This was a mistake…” He said out loud, as Shae left the room with the child.

“No, my lord.” Podrick said, coming from behind. He passed a glass of wine to Tyrion. “Believe me.
She still loves you.”

He turned his back to Ser Podrick. He could be regent, he could be surrounded by friends, allies and men he had leashed to loyalty, but somehow, he was still a loser.

Tyrion drank to that and that night his old squire kept filling his glass.
PREVIOUSLY: In the Vale, Myrcella made a move against her mother-in-law. Faking an attack, Myrcella managed to get Lysa arrested and trialed. However, even though she believed Lysa was to be pardoned and sent to a Motherhouse, Robert ordered her death. Later, Lady Anya threatened Myrcella, letting her know she knew that Myrcella was working with Littlefinger. She advised Myrcella to pick her side wisely in the future. In the end, Petyr kissed her, right after promising to make her queen.

MYRCELLA III

There is no turning back from this, Myrcella thought bitterly, unlacing her husband's pants.

The castle was submerged in an eerie silence. A handful of candles were still lit, casting light and shadows down the corridors. The soft and gentle sounds of life surrounded the semi-darkness. The occasional hoot of an owl hunting in the cold darkness. The crackle of wood burning on the fireplaces. The purr of cats sleeping, close to each other, to keep themselves warm.

The sweat ran down Myrcella's forehead. She had never felt so below herself and yet, she had never felt such a craving for power. Something had changed. The touch of Littlefinger's lips on hers, the fact that someone had seen in her something more than a little girl and, of course, the feeling that the world was under her grasp. Yes, everything had changed. Yet, here she was, being nothing more than a whore.

You can call yourself Lady of the Vale, but you don't have power and you're a fool if you believe you do.

She could still feel the tingle of Lady Anya's words as if the woman had slapped her every day that had passed since Lysa's death. In a way, she knew the woman was right. On the other hand, she wanted to prove her worth.

Her hand moved. Up and down. Up and Down. It was the sickest and twisted game she had ever played. Up and down.

"Oh, what are you doing?" Robert moaned, giggling like a child. Her skin crawled.

For the seventh time since Lysa's death, she had tried to make love with him, show him how he could enter inside her and make a baby. An heir. But for the seventh time, he had grunted, irritated, complaining how sticky she was between the legs, how hot he was and that the sweat filling his forehead was gross and uncomfortable.

There are other ways to please a man.

Yes, there were. Littlefinger was still the owner of half of King's Landing brothels, so he knew how to please a woman, a man, and even a eunuch. He had shown her, during their private meetings, how she could do a pleasing job with her hand. No, it wouldn't be enough to make a baby, but it would make Lord Robert happy enough to whisper in his ear.

It's like a game, she tried to convince herself again. A game that hurts. Her arm was paining. A game that will make him happy.

It was unexpected, but it worked. At first, she thought Robert was in pain, but then the scream of
surprise turned into a scream of pleasure and, without further notice, he came. His seed was something liquid, nothing more than a few drops of something that resembled watery milk. Feeling her stomach turning, Myrcella pulled her hands from him and, before throwing the dinner, went to the water basin to wash her hands.

In just a few minutes, she was back at her husband's side on the bed, pulling the warm blankets and furs around them.

"Can you do it again?" He asked, kissing her freezing hand.

Myrcella managed to fake a laugh.

_I would rather die._

"Maybe later, my sweet." She said, touching his face softly. He shivered at her touch. It was always cold now. Winter was upon them, and every day that passed the world seemed colder than the previous day.

"Why?" He asked, pressing his body against her, hungrily. "I could play this game forever." He said, smiling to show all his teeth. "What I felt... It was like my heart was going to burst, but it was not my heart who burst... It was-"

"Well, I could play this game again..." Myrcella said, and her hand danced down his chest. "But Robert, you know what I want in return."

Immediately, those words had the effect she dreaded. He pulled away immediately and the smile vanished.

"I told you!" He said, angrily. "It can't be done. The Lords don't want to go."

"You are the Lord of the Eyrie and Warden of the East." She repeated, already losing her patience. "The Lords have the duty to obey to you, my lord, and you must obey the orders coming from the king. Not the other way around."

"But Lady Anya keeps saying that your brother is not the king."

Myrcella gulped.

_One of these days I will throw her into a cell._

"Robert, must I say this again?" She said. "My brother has no other choice. The Starks killed Joffrey and Sansa Stark, and then they kidnap the bastard child to start a war. If you want to survive the Winter, you must be at the side of whoever is sitting on the Iron Throne. We need peace."

"The Vale is at peace." He said. "We don't have to partake in-"

"What will you do when the country is divided by war, under snow storms, and your people start growing famished because the carriages bring food cannot reach the Moon Gates?" Myrcella asked sternly. "Isolate yourself, Robert, and the Vale won't survive until Spring without a rebellion."

"A rebellion?"

"Oh." Myrcella took her hand to her mouth, faking regret. "I should not have said that-"

It was exactly what she wanted to say.
"Have you heard something about a rebellion?" Robert asked, his voice shaking.  

"Oh, it's nothing, my sweet."

"Liar!" He said, clasping her arm. "I don't like the word rebellion. You know I don't like that word."

The incredible tales of how her father had started a rebellion against the Targaryens had always impressed Robert Arryn. But somehow, it also scared him. The idea of losing his authority before his own men and being backstabbed like the Mad King made him paranoid. So, it was the perfect way to reach his heart. She had only to find out which chords to stroke.

"Well… I really do think it's nothing, but… Myranda heard some whispers down in the kitchen. A maid from Lady Anya's entourage."

"What of it?" His grip was surprisingly strong.

"Do you know Ser Harry Harding?" She asked, feeling her face grow red.

Robin's mouth opened, aghast.

"Yes, of course. You know we've met."

"Well, there are whispers, my lord… People are saying he'll be a better lord when Lady Anya finds a way to kill you in your sleep." Myrcella snarled, not aware how the words sounded leaving her mouth. "I'm sure it's just gossip. Jealous people saying hurtful things they don't intend to do."

"GET OUT!" Robert started yelling. "OUT! IT'S-A LIE! A LIE!"

Hiding a smile, she didn't ask twice. Hastening her pace, Myrcella left the room, closing the door behind her.

Ser Arys was waiting for her right outside.

Myrcella looked at him somberly, as if he knew exactly what had happened in the room behind her back. She simply shook her head and started walking down the corridor, back to her room. Back in her private chambers, she stripped down from her nightgown and went directly to the water basin to scrub her skin again. She could still feel Robert's seed in her hands. Only when dawn was breaking through the slits of the window, did she get into the bed, but she didn't sleep.

Once again, she was waiting.

A war was about to begin somewhere in the Riverlands, but another a war, a private one, was about to end in the next few hours. The Lords of the Vale, as Lady Anya had promised, had given close attention to Robert in the wake of his mother's death. And all of them knew as news of Joffrey's death reached their ears, that a great decision would have to be made regarding the Vale's involvement in the conflict.

"We need to be part of this war." Littlefinger had confided to her. "You must convince your husband."

She closed her eyes, but not to find sleep.

Yes, she could see it, gleaming in the darkness.

A golden crown.
Not something fancy, with gemstones gleaming in it. No, the crown she had in mind was a simple thing. A ringlet with a single ruby. Nothing more. Had she ever dreamt about such crown? About ruling the Seven Kingdoms? Well, a part of her knew it could happen, even if was highly unlikable. When she was nothing more than a toddler, when Tommen was not even born, she had been the second in line to the Iron Throne, after Joffrey.

*Just like I am now.*

The Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. She liked the sound of that. According to Littlefinger, there was a way to do it. They would not even have to harm Tommen. The only thing she had to do for now was to convince Robert to rally the Vale's army.

It was mid-morning when, finally, a maid came to her room.

"My lady, Lord Baelish is here for you."

"Send him in, please."

As Littlefinger appeared on her door, she was surprised. He was not wearing black, as he had done since he had heard the news of Catelyn Stark's demise. He was wearing a long, grey fur and high knee boots, as well as gloves.

"You are leaving." She realized, raising her hand to her mouth. Shock crept through her skin, shaking her to the core. "Those this mean we have failed?"

Littlefinger closed the door before saying anything else.

"You are right., I'm leaving." He said, and only then a smile flowered in his lips. "And do you really think we could have failed? You should know better, Your Grace." He said, placing a hand on her waist. "Your lord husband summoned the Lords of the Vale this morning to let them know we are marching to war."

Myrcella laughed, feeling a pang of relief.

She did not know how or why, but when she realized she was kissing Lord Baelish, tasting again his hard lips, she did not regret it. They kissed for a few seconds before Littlefinger pushed her finally back.

"I don't have much time." He whispered, locking her head between his gloved hands. "Soon, you'll be leaving the Vale with an army, heading to the Riverlands. It will take a while until you join your brother's army."

"What will we do then?"

"Taking hold of Riverrun, for starters." He said. "I suppose your Uncle will want to make sure the Riverlands are secure."

"And then?" She asked, feeling her voice tremble.

Littlefinger gave her one last kiss, finally releasing her from his grip.

"And then the game starts again, Your Grace. You'll get your crown sooner than you think." He said. "But first, I've to make sure you have more friends on your side. I'm headed to the Stormlands to let them know the daughter of Robert Baratheon is ready to fight for their respect. The Stormlords crave for glory and power, tired of being shunned into poverty and darkness. You'll be their
champion." He said, smiling. "And I have another gift in mind. If my informants don't fail me, next
time I see you again I'll place a crown on your head."

"Next time?" She said, feeling desperate. Her hands descended through his chest, headed to his
pants. "Can't you send someone else…?"

Littlefinger laughed, grabbing her wrist to stop her.

"Believe me… You need me somewhere else, fighting your battles for you." He looked around.
"There is no much else I can do here."

"Yes, there is…" She said, pressing her body against him.

This time, he gave him to her touch.

By nightfall, when Littlefinger left her room headed to the stables, Myrcella Baratheon smiled to
herself, hiding her naked body under the furs of her bed. She was winning, finally. Her mother in
law was dead. Her lord husband was committed to following her orders for a handjob. And
Littlefinger was leaving for the Stormlands to get her a crown.

"Mother would be proud…" She whispered to the cold dark, imagining Cersei Lannister inside a
carriage, being transported to Dorne as a prisoner. "I have learned how to play this bloody game."
For a very long time, I wanted to complete this story. However, I barely have the time to write nowadays. So, while reading "Fire and Blood" - which I'm loving, by the way - I have come up with the idea of finishing this story with a small number of brief chapters, as told by Grand Maester Yandel, narrating all the events that would have happened through this tale. I hope you like it.

To all of you who have read and reviewed during all these years, thank you so much. This was for all of you.
The masters at the Citadael refer to the incidents recorded between 301 and 307 AC as the Winter of the Traitors, which comprises the infamous Dance of the Wolves, the Fiery Tempest and, of course, the War of the Three Queens and the Threat of the Shadow. Even so, for theoretical reasons only, I prefer to call it *The Glory For Traitors: The Tale That Changed the Seven Kingdoms*, since every treason committed during those years was done for glory's sake. It was a time of war, of blood, of ice and, of course, fire. Brother raised sword against brother, traitors rose among the snow and ashes, and the dead returned to walk the world as they did on the tales of old.

By the time the conflicts began, I had the opportunity to closely record all the incidents at King’s Landing, serving at that time as Grand Maester to the recently crowned King Tommen Baratheon. There I stayed, serving every single person who sited on the Iron Throne until it was torn apart. In my long chronicle, I rely on the notes and diaries of maesters from all over the Seven Kingdoms, that recorded what they saw or heard from the mouth of those who had been at the head of such events.

With the conciseness and skill that has been conveyed to me, I will endeavor in the arduous task of passing to words all that has happened. It shall be you, and time only, the one to judge what befell upon Westeros when it was still known as the Seven Kingdoms.

**Tome I:** The Dance of Wolves (3 chapters)

**Tome II:** The Fiery Tempest (6 chapters)

**Tome III:** The War of the Three Queens (7 chapters)

**Tome IV:** The Shadow (6 chapters)
I shall begin, of course, with the conflict that divided one of the great houses of Westeros by the end of 305 AC: the rivalry between Robb Stark, Lord of Winterfell, and Arya Stark, his younger sister. Although they shared the same blood, the Stark siblings were in very different places after the Red Tournament that resulted in the death of King Joffrey and in the abduction of the Heir to the Crown, Prince Edwyle.

I remind you that, after this fateful Tournament, the king and queen were murdered by sellswords, while Lady Catelyn Tully was slaughtered by Ser Jaime Lannister, before the Kingslayer himself was killed by Arya Stark's hand.

In the aftermath of such events, there was not a single soul who believed that the Assault of the Red Keep had not been orchestrated by the Starks, since their banners were hanging over the battlements. The truth would be revealed months later when the true culprit stepped up to light. But forgive my tired mind, because I fear I'm getting ahead of myself.

What matters at this point is that Lady Arya Stark – described by his friends and family as a wild woman, used to consort with mercenaries, pirates and whores – was indeed present during the attack on the Red Keep. This act was, by itself, treason: Robb Stark had previously refused to raise his army to aid his sister, Queen Sansa, who was locked behind doors, accused of plotting against the king's mistress, Lady Margaery. Such refusal is at the origin of the rift within House Stark.

"If you summoned your banners to free Lord Eddard when he was put into chains, why don't you do the same for your sister, mother, and nephew?" Many lords asked. "Have you grown old and coward, or are you just confessing you don't love the women in your family, to forsaken them in such a way?"

Lady Arya, finding herself in King's Landing during these times of turmoil, ignored her brother's orders and decided to take justice into her own hands.

Some say the Dance of Wolves started right here.

Besides getting her hands dirty with the blood of the Kingslayer, which infuriated the Lannisters, Lady Arya also kidnapped her nephew, the Heir to the Throne, taking the child to White Harbor,
where both of them were received by Lord Manderly. Initially, she wanted only to protect the child from King Joffrey's threat, believing the King would murder his own heir in order to annul his marriage with Queen Sansa and favor another lineage.

But once the news about the king's death reached White Harbor, Lady Arya realized her nephew was not a Prince any longer: he was the legitim king to the Iron Throne. Some would say, later, that the She-Wolf of Winterfell felt guilty for pulling his nephew from the court and thus made her best to make amends, rebelling against her own brother. Others defended she was moved by her hunger for power, even though those arguments don't match with what we know of the woman.

Meanwhile, chaos quickly settled in King's Landing and, without a king and an heir, everything was left to the Seven... and to an unlikely, as well as brief, a partnership between Tyrion Lannister and Olenna Tyrell.

Oblivious to the actions of his rebellious sister, Lord Robb Stark was focused on more pressing concerns, which his sister had no knowledge about or wanted to ignore. Since 303 AC the Starks of Winterfell had concentrated their forces on the Wall, assisting the Night's Watch with its battle against the Wildlings and, as rumor told, the silent threats coming from Beyond the Wall.

Even though most of the westerosi had heard tales about the dead and the Others, no one truly believed them. Many lords, among them Lord Tywin Lannister before he died, noted that those rumors from the North were only lies concocted by the Starks to make sure nobody else would invade his undefended land while he was doing the Night Watch's job.

However, according to Maester Luwin's notes of that time, this is why Robb Stark made the controversial decision: he said no to his sister, Queen Sansa when she asked for help.

"I will not start a petty, small war. Not now, not tomorrow. Another war is coming to our doorstep, and it will end all these bloody Seven Kingdoms and blind lords if no one stops the true enemy". That was a terrible truth, yes. But humankind is an expert in hiding the ugly truths of the world.

Let's look, for instance, to the extinction of the Sworn Brothers of Night's Watch: divided between those who believed in the existence of an enemy coming from Beyond the Wall and those who didn't, the secular order ended itself fighting each other.

So, yes, Robb Stark was too focused defending the Wall to pay attention to the events unfurling in King's Landing. Rickon Stark later told that his older brother never believed Arya would actually rebel against him, or that his vassals would turn their backs to him. After all, more than being young, she was a woman. That, mayhap, was Robb Stark's greatest mistake.

When a raven came to Winterfell to bring news about what had happened at King's Landing, the Lord of Winterfell had already left for Mole's Town to rescue the last sworn brothers of the Night's Watch, including his father. Eddard Stark and some of his brothers had organized a rebellion against Lord Commander Bowen Marsh and the extreme measures he was taking to deal with wildlings on the other side of the Wall.

On the aftermath of an incident involving most of the sworn brothers placed in Castle Black, Robb Stark and the few survivors of the Night's Watch fought a small hoard of Wights among the ruins of Mole Town. That was the first proof that the dead could walk again, and how they were getting closer to the realm of the living. Besides, since the Night's Watch seemed now extinct, the castles by the Wall were unguarded, letting wildlings cross the frontier, as well as wights, Others, and creatures from the Long Night.

After the Battle of Mole Town, Robb Stark sought refuge at Deepwood Motte, already joined by his
father - who had survived the cold, with a meager group of Castle Black survivors. There, the Stark men received harsh news: Catelyn and Sansa Stark were dead, Arya was being accused of regicide and, to make the matter even more serious, she had summoned all the Northern houses to an Assembly in Moat Caillin.

Acting swiftly, Robb Stark wrote to his sister once again, ordering her to dismiss the Assembly and return immediately to Winterfell, bringing with her the Crown Prince.

"Winter has come, and the dead are already rising," wrote the Lord of Winterfell.

This was not the only raven that flew from Deepwood Motte at the time.

Hurt by the loss of the wife he would never see again, Eddard Stark grabbed a feather to write to Lord Tyrion, trying to negotiate a peace treaty. The letter arrived only too late to King's Landing and it seems unlikely that it would have changed the course of events. I saw it with my own eyes, but Lord Tyrion had already left by that time. If he had taken the bargain Lord Eddard proposed, the fate of our world could have been different.

Robb Stark considered sending a small army to fight his sister, to bring her back home. But in the end, he changed his mind.

"He loves you too much", wrote Brandon Stark to Arya, sharing his fears about the conflict between his siblings. "And the winter has truly come. Please, come back home before it's too late."

However, Arya Stark had no ears to her siblings' words or the tales that came from the North. Away from the sight, away from the heart, old women say. And that seemed to be the case with young and rebel lady Arya.

She was too much focused on her own battles and schemes, too much inebriated by power. In fact, Lord Robb Stark was seen as a coward and an unworthy man for turning his back to his family. Many great houses, such as the Mormont, the Karstark, the Boltons, and even the Umbers did not hesitate to join the Manderlys and Tullys in the assembly at Moat Caillin to hear, at last, the She-Wolf of Winterfell. In a letter Lord Edmure Tully wrote to Robb Stark, he accused him of being a liar, building tales that relied on the horror stories of old: "You are a cowardly wolf, nephew."

And so, the Moat Caillin Assembly took place.

Gathering the support needed for her nephew's cause, Arya Stark finally crowned King Edwyle of House Baratheon, First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. The Seven Kingdoms had a king only five years old, a little boy deprived of his place on the Iron Throne. It was said that he usually cried for his Mother and wanted to remain in his chambers playing with the wooden toys he had received from his Uncle Tyrion, the very same man who now wanted to depose his claim.

Yet more than half of the great houses of the North joined the cause of the Pup King in some form, sending as many swords as they could. Ignoring her brother Robb's commands, and challenging him instead to join her, Arya Stark took to herself the duty of Hand of the King and settled in Harrenhal. Hundreds of swords came every day, sent both from the North or the Riverlands. In fact, from the Riverlands, only House Frey didn't answer the call to arms, mainly because Robb Stark was married to Lady Marissa Frey.

The North was then divided in two: the Southstarks, fighting to prove the honor of House Stark and put King Edwyle on his throne, and the Homestarks, who remained back home, defending it from the perils of the night.
Only now, looking to everything that happened, can we understand why Robb Stark did not march south to face his sister face to face. The dead continued to rise in the North, moving closer and closer to the castles and villages. The men still behind Lord Stark, among them, the Glovers and the Reeds, helped him fight in small skirmishes that always ended in more death. The dead were growing restless and stronger. How much time would the North resist?

The Riverlands, however, didn't feel that calamity.

In fact, the Wights never reached the lands south of Winterfell and, to this very day, many westerosi still doubt that the Wights and the Others really walked among men again. Even so, death was due to make an appearance in the Riverlands, when an army of Lannister and Tyrell men carrying the banner of the King at the Red Keep marched against the forces of the King at Harrenhal.
We cannot be sure how many men met their death at the battlefield by Harrenhal, near the margins of the God's Eye lake where Aemon and Daemon Targaryen had met their end two centuries before. However, estimates suggest that the She-Wolf of Winterfell and her northern gathered about seven thousand men, plus eight thousand swords sworn to Lord Edmure Tully. They were still waiting for more men, so they could march to King's Landing when war came to them.

So, let us turn briefly to the court of King Tommen... or, as the ladies in court name it, to the Imp's Playhouse. The brief reign of King Tommen was managed mostly by Lord Tyrion Lannister. After the brutal death of King Joffrey and the Kingslayer, the Dowager Queen Cersei Lannister was sent to Dorne to marry Doran Martell – a union that would never happen, as I will soon share - and the Imp, the last son of Tywin Lannister, took over the duty of Hand of the King.

Queen Cersei could have prevented all of this, of course, had she not suffered the death of her firstborn and that of her twin at the same time... It was a heavy loss. Her sanity was blunted by pain, even causing her to intentionally mutilate King Tommen's face, thus condemning the end of her days at court.

Finding the Iron Throne vacant and without an heir, Tyrion Lannister acted quickly, securing the future of his nephew by placing a crown upon his head. Besides a crowning ceremony, one of the first acts decided with the utmost secrecy was to finally marry King Tommen to the Tyrells of Highgarden, thus securing a significant military force to his nephew's cause. Up close I watched it all unfurl, and I even took part in some of the Imp's privy councils. King Tommen married Lady Margaery Tyrell, after an alliance struck with Lady Olenna, in the last moments of the Queen of Thomes' life.

The Tyrells, as you may recall, fared not well those days: they had been brutally poisoned by Lady Margaery’s jealous cousins - though many at court suggested that Queen Sansa and Cersei were the real culprits behind the Crimes of the Figs. The poisoning, however, was fatal to the Tyrells: Ser Garlan, Lady Olenna and other family members died within days. Lady Margaery survived the poison, but at a great cost: she was barren and physically weak for the remaining of her days.

But more than an heir, Tyrion Lannister wanted to assure his nephew had an army strong enough to defend his interests as soon as Edwyle, the son of King Joffrey and Queen Sansa, rose to reclaim the Iron Throne. The Imp was not a fool, and fools were, in fact, those who thought him in that way. As ravens left the Red Keep, with letters signed by myself, spreading the lie that King Edwyle was a bastard, the Imp gathered around him old friends, prostitutes, and a peculiar sort of allies. As much as one might say about Tyrion Lannister, there is no doubt about one important detail: the Imp’s mind was fascinating and his friend brought him the means to achieve his goals.

Tyrion Lannister anticipated the coronation of Edwyle Baratheon, as well as the fact that the forces of the King Boy would gather in the Riverlands. By the time Arya Stark summoned his Assembly, Wyllas Tyrell had already honored his grandmother's agreement and sent an army to King's Landing...
consisting of ten thousand swords. Led by Ser Baelor Hightower, the army from the Reach joined the eight thousand soldiers Lancel and Martyn Lannister brought from the Westerlands.

Meanwhile, the Imp reinforced the city’s defenses, planting spies among the She-Wolf’s forces, and even trying to get Lord Arryn’s support from the Eyrie, since he remained married to Princess Myrcella. In a single letter, Robert Arryn answered that he would come to the help of the king, but only after Winter: which meant the Vale wouldn't truly come. From the Stormlands, a few supporters answered, honoring not only their fealty to House Baratheon, but also their friendship to Tommen, who had been a friend and guest to many of the stormlords during his upbringing. However, strangely, their men didn't reach the battlefield in time.

Meanwhile, the Imp's plans came to form way too early. I truly believe it was the first time in our history that someone failed by not failing. Since his forces were ready to march by the time Arya Stark and her Southstarks installed themselves at Harrenhal, King Tommen grew impatient and ordered his Uncles Tyrion and Kevan to march to the Riverlands and surprise the northern forces.

"Robb Stark is the true coward of the Seven Kingdoms. Let us show that murder what we are capable of, Uncle."

Tyrion Lannister opposed to the insistence of his nephew, arguing that King's Landing could be defended from behind walls.

"Stannis Baratheon and his fleet can say so from the bottom of Blackwater Bay."

But King Tommen did not listen to this advice and ordered his army to move north anyway.

"I don't want my people to fear death again, wondering if our enemies will be able to break our gates to kill them and rape their women and daughters."

The king's will prevailed. Tyrion Lannister's only victory in this matter was but one: he was able to persuade his nephew to stay in the safety of the Red Keep. Tommen, unlike Joffrey, was a fierce warrior, so it was expected that the King would join the army. The thing that dissuaded him was his Uncle's words, capable of reminding him of the burden he had over his shoulders now that a crown weighed over his head.

"As long as you do not have an heir, your lineage is not secure. If you die on the battlefield, your father's name ends in you."

"Father a child?" Tommen asked, with a sad smile on his lips. "We both know, uncle, that the odds don't play in my favor."

I still remember how Lord Tyrion grabbed his nephew's hand to kiss him, in his last goodbye, and leave a golden coin.

"Then find a woman who can bear you a child, my boy. And get yourself an heir."

And so, the army of King Tommen marched to meet the army of his nephew in what became known as the Battle of God's Eye. Arya Stark and her army were ready to the fight, even though their rivals had two thousand more men than them.

But something happened hours before the battle took place: the second betrayal of this terrible Winter.

On the eve of the battle, the Tyrell army - which Tyrion Lannister had bought by marrying his nephew to Lady Margaery, a marriage with no prospects of succession - left the battlefield.
King Tommen's numerical superiority was so decimated by one of the most unusual blows in the history of Westeros. The odds were reduced to one to three against Arya Stark's army.

What happened to the Tyrells, you ask? Well, the maesters call it *The Rose Retreat*. Only weeks later would we understand this gameplay, orchestrated by Lord Wyllas Tyrell himself, intended to avenge the wrong done to his family protect his barren sister and cast support to another cause.

When dawn came, the forces of the She-Wolf descended to confront the Lannister outside Harrenhal's gates. It was a quick battle, but in the end, the She-Wolf's forces prevailed. Rumors say that the Northerners only won because a snowstorm ravaged the battlefield, something the soldiers from the North were used to, unlike the Lannisters. But let's be honest, Arya Stark had more swords, and that will help in any scenario.

Many lords sworn to House Lannister perished during the battle. The consequences of the Battle of the God's Eye resulted in a terrible famine in the Westerlands during the following months. Some of the Westerland's Lords bent the knee to King Edwyle on the Hall of a Thousand Hearths, of course. But the few who refused suffered a quick and clean death, given by Lady Arya Stark herself on Harrenhal's courtyard. Lancel Lannister was the only captured Lannister ending in such a way. His brother, Martyn, had managed to flee the battlefield with a few men.

As for Tyrion Lannister's fate, the records differ greatly.

Some say he was murdered by the She-Wolf of Winterfell with her sword Needle, in open battle. Others believe the Imp died of a hundred wounds, after fighting thirty-seven Northerners by himself on the battlefield. But the favorite tale, which has been sung in taverns all over Westeros, is the most romantic one: Tyrion Lannister fled with his long-time lover, a prostitute whose name was never known. They managed to cross the Narrow Sea with their daughter and the knight ser Podrick Payne, living happily ever after.

Truth or myth, it's very likely that we will never know the truth.

What is important to remember from this day is that Lannisters were heavily defeated by the Starks, greatly because the Tyrells betrayed King Tommen. Had they honored their alliance, the outcome of the Battle of God's Eye could have been very different.

Back on King's Landing, King Tommen waited with only a few men beside the secure walls of Maegor Holdfast, never leaving his wife's side, whom he truly loved. I saw Lord Tyrion presenting the golden coin to his nephew, but I never saw the king bringing prostitutes or ladies of the court to his chambers. Every night, he laid with his wife, praying the Seven would perform a miracle. But everyone saw the truth: he had the Iron Throne, a barren a wife, and a small army at his command, but his claim was weaker than ever.

The She-Wolf knew that, and her eyes were already turning hungrily to King's Landing, but she had no way to know that another army would get there before her.
While Arya Stark and a great part of the Northern military force were south fighting King Tommen's army, Robb Stark kept himself busy battling the threat posed by the Others. It was during one of his excursions to defend a village that tragedy struck Winterfell.

Brandon Stark threw himself from a window tower, killing himself instantly.

The young lord, who had not been able to walk since he had fallen from another tower when he was a child, had grown up with a weak body but a strong mind, studying history, myths, and strategy. The fact that he had put an end to his life so unexpectedly would later be explained, even though such an explanation would be a single man's opinion. Maester Luwin, serving at Winterfell, shares some insight about that time in his notes, lamenting what happened to the young lord.

"Perhaps it would have been different if Lord Stark had sent young Brandon beyond the Wall, as he so often asked", he wrote.

But neither did Lord Stark and Eddard Stark laid down their swords to shed tears for young Brandon. The two continued fighting in the region of the Gift, grieving in the battlefield, bringing down their enemies.

The rumors and news from the North reaching Harrenhal were so strange and confusing after the Battle of the God's Eye that Lord Umber and Lady Mormont rode North to see with their own eyes whether the calamities described by the Cowardly Wolf were true. Lord Umber even promised to Lady Arya, before leaving: "I will force some sense on your brother's head, my lady."

But by the time he reached home, the North was burning like the seven hells and the dead had been defeated.

Let us get to that now.

As you may know, at some point in the year 305 BC, the Wall fell and, unexpectedly, Lord Stark's forces, who up until that moment had been able to fight the Wights, were completely supplanted. The terrors of the Battle of the Wolfswood are still remembered today and, sadly, are still compared to another Battle that happened months ago.

Eddard and Benjen Stark, considered today as the last Sworn Brothers of the Night's Watch, are among the men who died during the conflict, not only by the Wights' swords but also under the attack of the Others themselves, that appeared from the night mounted on ice spiders and wargs. Maester Luwin reckons there were at least fifty Others on the Battle of the Wolfswood, but Maester Hubbard of Deepwood Motte swears that they were only twelve. Twelves powerful enough to pass for a hundred, since they could raise an army of thousands with a snap of their fingers.
And so they did, as maesters and lords reported later. With his decimated strength, Robb Stark ordered all the men North of Winterfell to seek refuge in their liege lords' castles. The dead were scattered all over North during those dark days, killing hundreds who awoke moments later to join the army of the dead. The real terror of the Long Night made itself felt in those days, and as the threat grew stronger, the harder became to fight it.

Left without a choice, Robb Stark orchestrated the Siege of Winterfell, barring all the doors of the Stark seat and preparing to withstand the dead from its walls. Ravens were once again sent south, spreading the ultimate terror, but not in the hope of getting men to come to their aid, but so that they could be prepared.

During seven nights of intense snow, Winterfell resisted the army of thousands of wights that gathered around the castle walls. From the battlements, Robb Stark and his men fought the ones who tried to climb the castle and invade him. On three occasions, as recorded by Maester Luwin, the wights managed to actually get over the battlements and kill some of its inhabitants or refugees. There were also two moments when men, sheltered in Winterfell, died of some disease or cold and woke up like Wights before anyone could find them dead: those two men killed about twenty people before being destroyed with fire.

One of the losses recorded during the Siege was that of Lady Marissa Frey, wife of Lord Stark. It seems, as told by Maester Luwin, that madness was starting to run deep among the cold halls of Winterfell. Marissa had never been happy in the North. As terror gathered, she grew afraid of what would become of her body after her death. So, to stop the terror, she attempted to immolate herself and her Lord husband when despair took all her hope. Her dark deed was stopped in time, prevented by no other than Rickon Stark, who found the poison destined to put everyone to sleep during dinner. Robb Stark was furious, and his despise for his wife didn't make him stop her when she set herself on fire on the castle's courtyard.

Those were dark days in the North.

In fact, Winterfell would have fallen during the tenth day, according to Maester Luwin. Fortunately, two dragons appeared in the skies over Winterfell after the seventh night. From the battlements, Robb Stark finally smiled, as tears frozen in his beard. According to Maester Luwin, the dragons descended to destroy the hoard of the dead and Others next to the castle's gates. And so the North was set ablaze and the Long Night was avoided.

The Small Night, the Maesters call it.

What would have happened to Westeros if that evil had not been restricted to the North? How would the southern lords have dealt with that threat? What would have happened if the dragons had not arrived? These are only chimeras, and answers we will never have. Still, the dragons who put an end to the Siege of Winterfell would entail new intrigues to the games of the Seven Kingdoms, as time would tell.

With two dragons perched on his battlements, Robb Stark opened his castle gates and joined the fight, putting to rest the dead army at his gates. Then, he embraced his half-brother Jon Snow, the man who would still be known as Jahaerys Targaryen. He was the rider of the dragon with green scales.

Brothers cried in each other's arms.

Maester Luwin wrote the first words the brothers exchanged, between tears and sobs.
"We defended the North, but we failed our family," said Robb Stark, realizing for the first time the price he had paid.

"Every fight in time, brother," Jon Snow replied.

With the Others' threat defeated for the time, the Starks now understood the price they had paid. They had lost Eddard Stark, whose honor was restored years later; Lady Catelyn, whose story was surprisingly still unfinished; Queen Sansa, dead in such a treachery way; Benjen Stark, the younger son of Lord Rickon; Brandon, a broken body with a sound mind. And the North also grieved their own, crying for the many heirs and children that had perished. The Glover family, as it came to be confirmed two years later, was completely extinguished. And it was only one of the many houses that ended that time,

But the wildlings represented a new hope. After coming to Robb Stark's aid, many of them were rewarded with castles and lands.

Even so, let us not forget all the pieces in this game. While siblings gathered, another figure was present in Winterfell at that time, the rider of the black: Daenerys Targaryen. The exiled Queen walked the ground of Westeros for the first time, finding herself in the shadow of a man who claimed to be her nephew and who had managed to ride one of her dragons successfully. She was, at the same time, a mother in mourning, after losing one of her dragons in Bhorash.

Also, the tension between Daenerys and Jon was evident, as Maester Luwin noted early on, as if the duo could not tolerate each other, but was forced to do so. To understand the Fiery Tempest, we must now turn a look to Essos, to events that took place a few weeks earlier. Surprisingly so, it will also be here we understand the reasons behind Brandon Stark's death.
To understand how two dragons appeared flying over Winterfell, we must contemplate the events that took place on the other side of the Narrow Sea. Let us return then to Bhorash and the ruins of the town of Meereen, where two dragons flew over the heavens, free from the will of any man… or woman.

The story of Daenerys Targaryen is undoubtedly peculiar, although many masterminds argue that the laurel of madness that tarnished her ancestors was also part of her downfall. More than tainted by madness, some say Daenerys Targaryen's fate was decided by her inability to lead.

After bringing down to ruins the cities of the Slaver's Bay, the Mother of Dragons founded her own town in the same shore, with the purpose of establishing a beacon of hope, of freedom and peace to all those who had lived a life in chains. Even so, from that point onwards she had few victories up on her sleeve. In a few years, the utopia became a den of disease, poverty, and fanaticism. Slaves freed from all corners of Essos reached the city every day, demanding the Mother of Dragons to give them the promised life... But all they received was another kind of slavery.

Misery.

About these days, we have the records recovered from Maester Marwyn, the fanatics words wrote by Septon Taelen and also some testimonies wrote by Ser Barristan Selmy, the commander of the Queensguard. All those testimonies allow us to understand how life was during those days. As shared by Ser Barristan, Daenerys Targaryen's intention was never to remain in Bhorash for more than two years. In the end, she stayed there six. Her Queensguard, in all his candor and loyalty, reflected upon this long stay, believing the Queen could have marched to Westeros and win her father's throne earlier if she only had control over her dragons and her people.

The original aim was to deliver the city to a Council of Freemen – composed by representatives from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures - before flying to claim the Iron Throne from the usurpers.

Where there is misery, there is also despair.

Thus, Marwyn tells us in his notes of growing tensions in the city: the Faith of the Seven started a war with the Red Priests. Or the other way around. What we know is that at some point Bhorash was divided into a religious war, in which each religious faction tried to buy followers using the only currency that mattered: soup, bread, and shelter. The religious pressure did not only culminate in a real confrontation of arms because the city guard, almost entirely made up of Unsullied soldiers, kept
order ... and because both sides feared Drogon, who so often watched the city from the ruined castle of the Queen of Dragons.

Aside from the city government, Daenerys Targaryen also received countless visits from sorcerers, magicians, priestesses and other charlatans who tried to teach her tricks and share dragonlore. All of them knew about her inability to tame the other dragons, Viserion and Rhaegal, and thus turn her forces to Westeros. But all those alleged wise men and women failed and, at last, the Mother of Dragons yielded to the pressure imposed by Maester Marwyn and mounted her dragon to fly to Asshai Beyond the Shadow.

The Queen's Abandonment, as many would call it, is still controversial today. In the city, the liberated sons of Daenerys Targaryen assumed that abandonment as a betrayal. Many returned to their masters, to be chained again. Others preferred to fight, while groups of thugs began to rule the city more blatantly, evading all laws imposed by the Council of Freemen.

In this broken city, however, came a mysterious ship from the North of Westeros carrying a man many believed dead back at the Wall: Jon Snow, the bastard son of Eddard Stark. This sworn brother of the Night's Watch was in Bhorash with a mission: to reveal to Queen Daenerys his true identity, which he had discovered so recently, as well as to persuade her to fly to Wall and prevent the threat imposed by the dead.

But by this time, Daenerys Targaryen was no longer in Bhorash.

After being received in audience by Ser Barristan Selmy, Jon Snow decided to take fate with his own hands and left the city again, to find the dragons in the ruins of Meereen and try to mount one of them.

We are not sure what happened to Jon Snow when he reached Meereen.

The only record we have of this trip is a note from Maester Luwin of Winterfell, who allegedly heard this story through the very lips of the Wolfrider. This is what is known: for two weeks, the bastard of Winterfell lived among the ruins of the slaver city and tried to approach the infamous dragons Rhaegal and Viserion. It seems that after a few days Jon Snow got close to Viserion, the most docile of the two, and was making good progress until the golden dragon roared unexpectedly and rose to the skies, leaving Dragon's Waste forever. This mysterious flight will be explained in due course.

Jon Snow, however, remained among the ruins of Meereen where Viserion had set up his nest. There alone, he had the opportunity to investigate the dragon's lair and find a dragon egg that he took with him.

But how did Jon Snow managed to ride a dragon?

The masters who studied dragon lore still find it difficult to perceive many of the mysteries that probably only the lords of Old Valyria knew. Is it the dragon that chooses its knight? Does the rider feel any empathy with the creature? Could the dragon have felt the valyrian blood in Jon Snow? Or was the creature aware of the horrors that were already happening in Bhorash? All we know is that Rhaegal descended from the sky, invading Viserion's former lair where Jon Snow had found refuge. As if the Wolfrider was just an old friend, the dragon bowed his neck allowing the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark mount him.

And this Jon Snow rode Rhaegal, becoming the man who history will always remember as Wolfrider, and claiming his Targaryen heritage at last.

However, victory couldn't be celebrated for long, for when he reached Bhorash he found it in flames.
An enemy no one anticipated, and many had forgotten, came to change forever this twist of dragons. No one wanted to believe, let alone at the Queen's court, that the fleet of ships approaching the city displayed the Kraken's black banner. But there it was, the hard truth in plain sight: Victarion Greyjoy had returned to Slavers' Bay. This time around, though, he did not come just to plunder the city and bring destruction as he had done years before.

Victarion Greyjoy had come to get a dragon for himself.

Honestly, we do not know a lot about Greyjoy's intentions. His travel records were lost when his own fleet was destroyed. After his brother Euron had died and his nephews turned their backs to him, Victarion became an outlaw, having his fleet and nothing else under his commander. Well, he had something. His brother Euron had entrusted him with an ancient relic: Dragonbinder, a horn rescued from Valyria, which would give to any man who blew it the control of a dragon.

And there he was, knowing the Queen of Dragons was far away and that two of her dragons were still to tame. And so, without hesitation, Victarion Greyjoy blew the Dragonbinder horn as soon as he reached the bay. At that moment, Maester Marwyn records that there was a thunderous clangor, which shook the whole city of Bhorash ... and a human roar as if someone were being consumed by fire.

Victarion Greyjoy died within seconds after blowing the Dragonbinder horn.

His chest burned from within, sucking his whole life as if the horn had kindled a fire inside his loins. We don't know the ancient magic that has put in action that day, but we do know that Viserion, the very same dragon Jon Snow had approached in the ruins of Meereen, descended from the sky and, as if enraged with pain or possessed by a superior force, attacked the city.

"It was as if the ghost of Victarion Greyjoy mounted the creature," wrote Marwyn.

And so a rain of fire fell upon Bhorash, while the leaderless army of Victarion Greyjoy invaded the town, beginning the Battle of Three Days. This was a confusing fight, as well as difficult and meaningless. Only one of the factions fought for a purpose: the Queen's Unsullied tried to calm the mutiny and stop all those who caused havoc, but they were easily supplanted by the remaining forces.

On the one hand, there were the fanatics of the Faith of the Seven, who rose their swords to fight the Red Priests. The Red Priests, for their part, did not hesitate to light their fires from the flames provoked by the dragon destroying the city. And finally, the Ironmen were also there, taking advantage of the chaos to plunder and rape.

Barristan Selmy, the Unsullied and the Council of Freemen tried to restore order, but they couldn't do
Septon Taelen, who lived at the court of Daenerys Targaryen and was one of her advisers, committed the betrayal that no one expected on the second day of the battle, opening the castle doors to let in an army of the Faith. The Bloody Faithful, they are called now, since they executed the Council of Freemen, as well as Maester Marwyn, who was confined to a cell.

Barristan Selmy escaped the slaughter, taking refuge in the city with Ser Loras Tyrell, that was by then posing as a sellsword. Ser Barristan's big dilemma was just one in this fiery hour: would he have the audacity to kill the dragon Viserion? The creature was still enraged, rising every day with a new shower of fire and devouring any men that would pass before him. But did those crimes justify killing one of his Queen's children?

When the castle of Bhorash was invaded by the red priests fighting the militants of the Faith, the dragon descended again from the cloudy sky and rained down a shower of fire as Balerion had done in Harrenhal three centuries earlier. Followers of the Seven and R'hllor were burned as equal inside the white halls of the castle, their bodies lost among the rubble. It is said that the screams echoed through the city and that even the ironmen returned to their ships, understanding it was time to return home ...

But then Rhaegal came, mounted by Wolfrider.

Viserion and Rhaegal confronted each other in the sky, in a battle that made the day shine as if a second sun had been born. Rhaegal was first injured when one of his legs was scratched by his brother's talons. But it was Viserion who ended up failing, the moment one of his wings was ripped apart by Rhaegal's jaw. The golden dragon fell, unable to sustain his own weight, crushing dozens of buildings on his way down. Still, sustaining his injuries, he was still alive... Until Ser Barristan Selmy unsheathed his sword to put an end to the dragon's life, nailing the blade in the creature's eye. This would have been Barristan The Bold's last fearless act since the man himself perished hours later due to inhalation of smoke.

Triumphing, Jon Snow descended from the sky, finding himself, miraculously, unharmed. He was received by the army of Unsullied and by Loras Tyrell, who initially wanted to arrest him for claiming a dragon.

"If you want to arrest me, I won't resist," Jon Snow replied. "But if you kept me free, I will fight at your side to restore peace to this wrecked city."

And so ended the Battle of the Three Days: a defeated dragon, thousands of slaves murdered, hundreds of ironmen imprisoned and many fleeing Bhorash forever. According to the records, Rhaegal would have destroyed the Greyjoy fleet if Loras Tyrell hadn't suggested that the ships could prove useful to the Queen's cause. All the traitors who survived were chained to await the Queen's justice ... as soon as she returned.

Before concluding this part, however, it is important to share the reveal Jon Snow confided to Maester Luwin during his stay in Winterfell after the Small Night Battle: the truth about Brandon Stark. Bran, who threw himself from a window with the help of the half-giant serving in Winterfell, did so on the very same day Victarion Greyjoy blew the Dragonbinder. According to Jon, who truly believed in on an old prophecy, his brother was destined to mount the third Dragon. But since the dragon was being commanded by such powerful and dark magic, Bran surely had grown mad, probably feeling the terror and pain the dragon had felt.

And then the young lord had put a term to his life, to relieve himself from that pain.

Or so Jon Snow believed.
"Ice, fire and balance." We can read it in Maester Luwin's notes. "Three heads have the dragon, and the prophecy stipulated that three heads are needed to fulfill the song. But now there are only two dragons remaining, and the danger persists..."

Again, I remember that Maester Luwin did not know the prophecy in its entirety... or the existence of a new dragon egg.
It is left to us, of course, the tale of Daenerys Targaryen.

The Queen's abandonment, in her attempt to find answers in Asshai, resulted in one of the greatest setbacks ever: the city created upon the purpose of providing a second chance to the freed slaves was now falling under fire and chaos. Besides, one of her dragons had been killed and the other tamed by the bastard nephew whose existence she was completely unaware of.

But I am getting ahead of myself, once more.

I must first tell what we know today about what the Mother of Dragons found in Asshai. I'm afraid it will be a brief entry since little is known from that journey. The records we have of what the Dragon Queen saw there belong also to Maester Luwin, after what Jon Snow told him.

As it turns out, Queen Daenerys traveled for days riding Drogon's back until she found the Great Temple of Asshai. Maester Luwin writes that the queen was received in Asshai by a host of hooded figures, people who hid they were faces behind iron masks, and who refused to touch her. The days were long, and the sky was red as if the clouds were burning in the sky. There was not a single animal, which made it difficult to feed the dragon. This hoard of hooded people, though, led the queen to the High Temple, the greatest building in the city.

"A palace entirely made of dragonglass, reflecting the sky like a black mirror…"

There she was greeted by a High Priestess, who assured she would return to Bhorash with answers to her questions and to find her dragons already tamed by their true riders.

All Daenerys Targaryen needed to do was prove herself worthy of those answers by lighting an obsidian candle. Not a small one, like those we have in the Citadael. No, this obsidian candle was long and sharp at the end, just like a sword. In her penitence, the queen tried to set the dark obsidian into fire, wondering among her fears and memories, until she was finally able to light it.

"My blood and fears kindled a pale fire… and it showed me what I wanted", she allegedly told Jon Snow.

And what did the queen see in the pale flames of her dark sword?

"The Song is made of fire, ice and balance: three dragons in the New Age to end the crime of the innocent, three knights to defend the New Order, three millennia to live the New Peace."

And three faces were shown to the Mother of Dragons in the white fire: the first, she recognized immediately, since it was her own face; the second, the face of a northern warrior whom the Queen of the Dragons later perceived to be Jon Snow; and the third, the face of a broken young man with
three eyes and broken wings, just like her golden dragon would end.

The queen finally understood the prophecy: her dragons would only be subdued when her knights were found. Those knights she fire had shown to her.

But as the High Priestess of Asshai warned her, it might already be too late for the prophecy... because another man, one who was not supposed to fly, had already claimed a dragon. And the little broken boy who was supposed to ride the third dragon was dead.

"Don't fret, Mother of Dragons. The fate of the world can be forged." The High Priestess told her, blessing her with fire and ash. "Keep this dark sword at your side, so you can strike your enemy when the time comes. And remember, you are Azor Ahai Reborn, and you are destined to open the threshold to let the Lord of Light join us. Turn your dragons to the place you are destined to rule and let ash rain over your vassals. Melt the ice and forge the kingdom of fire. Let the winter subdue and the summers grew long. Led us to the light, so that the Shadow bless us until the end of times."

With a fire ignited in her loins, and tears running down her face, Daenerys took her obsidian blade and clasped it to her side, where she kept it in the months to come. Lightbringer, many would whisper weeks later, watching the sword sheathed at the queen's waist.

She left Asshai right away, flying back to Bhorash, heeding the eerie words the High Priestess had whispered to her. Later, much later, she would share with Jon Snow how fear took over her when the excitement left her body. Only then did she admitted to have sensed something rotten in her visit to Asshai, as if she had been told lies. Just lies.

However, the High Priestess couldn't have told only lies, because when the Mother of Dragons reached the town of Bhorash the Battle of the Three Days had just ended... and one of her dragons was dead.
Many stories come to us today about the time Daenerys Targaryen met for the first time her nephew, Jon Snow, a man who the annals of history will also remember as Jaehaerys Targaryen, even though the young bastard never assumed his father's name. The evil tongues of the time say the Wolfrider was sitting on Daenerys' throne when the queen reached Bhorash. But this was only a lie propagated by the Free Cities, since the castle where Daenerys Targaryen had built her court had fallen into ruins.

It is Loras Tyrell, in his records *From Flower to Fowler: The Grace and Disgrace of a Knight*, who shares some light over that meeting. And it was a tense encounter, no doubt about that. The queen met Jon Snow in an Unsullied barrack, while Drogon threw himself into the skies in a friendly dance with his brother Rhaegal. In a matter of an hour, Daenerys Targaryen wept over the death of his dragon and her city and welcomed his bastard nephew, believing right away in the strange fable he shared.

Personally, I'm almost sure Daenerys Targaryen was haunted by the visions she had seen in Asshai, as well as the High Priestess' words. She recognized Jon Snow's face, and the words of the priestess had proven true so far. So maybe she was really destined to travel to Westeros and rule the Seven Kingdoms with an iron fist... and fire.

Records show that Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen spent the first night together, talking about the world that separated them and the one that brought them together. Their dragons continued to dance in the sky, while fire and ice gathered privately in a tent. Some even say that Aunt and Nephew shared a bed that night, keeping the Targaryen tradition.

The following morning, Daenerys Targaryen gathered together the few survivors of her private counsel and appointed Thirty-One Ambassadors, who would be accompanied by an entourage of Unsullied each. Every one of them would leave the debris of Bhorash to spread, from town to town, the need to free any slave put in chains. Even though this was a risky measure, it would spark rebellions all over Essos in the following twenty years.

Nowadays, slavery is almost abolished in Essos, thanks to the hope Daenerys Targaryen planted in people's hearts through fire and blood. The Mother of Dragons never returned to Essos after sailing to Westeros, but we can say that among all her feats, she finally managed to see her people freed.

The decision of leaving Essos once and for all was motivated also by another agreement Daenerys had made that night with her nephew: before taking her Throne, she would first defend the Wall and the threat of the cold that marched from the North. She was ready and, having now the obsidian sword with her, she felt it was time.

Even so, the Queen of Dragons bargained a price for her support.

Not that Jon consented in paying such a price. Daenerys would only fly to Westeros if House Stark...
were to recognize her as Queen, helping her conquering the Iron Throne in the future. Jon Snow did not give in to such pressure, reaffirming his position of speaking on behalf of the Night's Watch only. Besides, he found it unlikely that Robb would bend his knee to Daenerys since Sansa was Queen and her son would one day be king. Of course, he didn't know by the time what had happened in King's Landing.

"Remember, nephew, even though you are a bastard... You are a Targaryen." She said to him, trying to dissuade him to her cause. The words she used, however, were careful. In those early days, she wanted to reaffirm his bastardy, to make sure he wouldn't move against her own claim.

"I have renounced lands and titles the day I joined the Night's Watch, Your Grace."

Humility would have convinced Daenerys Targaryen, though in the back of her mind she had already decided to fly from Bhorash.

"We will talk again about this later, then." She promised.

It is important here to comment on Jon Snow's character. Never the bastard of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark advanced against his aunt with the purpose of seizing a crown or the Iron Throne. Although the Night's Watch was finished before Jon Snow flew to Westeros, the Wolfrider never broke his vows and always tried to defend his kingdom.

Back to that day, though, the two last Targaryens left the debris of Bhorash, mounted on dragons and advancing to destroy the hoard of the dead gathering in the North. The army of Unsullied that wouldn't accompany the Ambassadors would travel by sea to the Seven Kingdoms, boarding the fleet Victarion Greyjoy had brought to them. Loras Tyrell, sworn to the Queen and taking a position as lord commander of the Queensguard, would lead her army back to Westeros.

Jon and Daenerys flew directly to the Wall, only to find it destroyed and invaded. Tracing the dead marching through the North, the last Targaryen reached then Winterfell in time to finish the Small Night before the Starks subsided.

It was time to rid the North of the dead.
Let us then return to the night when Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen descended upon Winterfell to decimate the army of the dead surrounding the castle.

"We defended the North, but we failed our family," said Robb Stark, realizing for the first time the price he had paid.

"Every fight in time, brother," Jon Snow replied.

And the fight coming was not what they expected.

I remember that there were many things at stake at that moment: Arya Stark was still in the Riverlands making war and plotting to invade King's Landing, deposing King Tommen and his frail army. That meant, of course, that the North was still divided into two factions and, therefore, submerged in chaos.

Besides, Daenerys Targaryen had finally returned to Westeros to carve her path to the Iron Throne and claim her father's inheritance. At the moment she laid back on the shadows, the mysterious figure with a dragon that many feared, and others respected. She couldn't do much at the time since her army of Unsullied was still traveling across the Narrow Sea.

However, all of us are now aware that all those circumstances could have ended in a whole new war.

But Jon Snow knew the threat posed by the Small Night wasn't defeated yet and so he channeled all efforts to make sure the enemy was deposed.

The army around Winterfell could have been crushed, but the dead still continued to cross the ruins of the Wall, attacking other castles. There was a force still making them move, as if a source of energy kept them coming, awakening them, making sure they would march after others had fallen. The threat would have to be stopped as soon as possible, and to do so there was only one way: go beyond the limits of the Wall, in order to seek answers as well as solutions.

Only recently did we realize how Jon Snow outlined the journey to the North. Maester Samwell, the last Maester in the service of Castle Black, had found in his studies in the Citadel a horn and a parchment which dictated *The Song of the Earth*. The piece of paper told about an Age where the world was a balanced place, inhabited only by the Children of the Forest in communion with nature.

But what happened when the balance was affected? According to the parchment, the unbalance was provoked by the coming of the First Men. The Children didn't give up easily, though. Trying to regain control of their land, they meddle with powers unknown to them, hoping to balance the scales in their favor. Nevertheless, in doing so, they composed the Song of Ice.
Maester Samwell shared this enigmatic information with a very narrow circle of Night's Watch sworn brothers, including Eddard Stark. He also shared his theory that whatever the Children had done, they must have done it North, deep into the Lands of the Eternal Winter, from where the Others and their army of dead rose. If there was something giving them strength, some kind of source energy, then it must be there.

Many houses, as mentioned earlier, left Arya Stark in the Riverlands to return their homes and see for themselves what had happened, thus delaying the march toward King's Landing. Taking advantage of this, and having his siblings Rickon and Jon at his side, Robb Stark made a decision:

"I'm going to the Riverlands." He told his siblings before he left to cleanse the North. "Now that our enemy is at his knees, I entrust the North to you both, while I bring Arya back home and put an end to this nonsense." Maester Luwin remembers how somber the Lord of Winterfell looked those days. "Besides, I have to bring the ashes of Marissa back to the Twins. It's the least I can do."

Regarding the Dragon Queen, Maester Luwin also reports the young queen tried to bargain a treaty with Robb Stark, in the hope of getting his allegiance. Surprisingly, Robb Stark said he would willingly bend the knee to her since she had been the only who had come to the North to help them defeat the Others. However, before that, he had to understand the mess his sister had created, and understand how his nephew, Edwyle, would fit in the future of such games. After all, he was the legitimate king of the Seven Kingdoms following Robert Baratheon's lineage and, thus, the enemy of Daenerys. It created a conflict of interest.

"Go, then, Lord Stark." Daenerys heed him, more coldly than before. "But I hope you remember who came to you when you most needed. I hope you will do the same one day."

So, three days after the Battle of the Small Night, Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen set off North, leading two squads of men, while Robb Stark turned south taking three companions with him. Daenerys and her dragon Drogon set off west through the Wolfswood to rescue Deepwood Motte while Jon Snow headed toward the Last Hearth. It is recorded that it took them about three weeks to clear the north of the dead and all the evil forces that walked through these distant lands.

It should be noted here that the Greyjoy emerged again, after being isolated for a few months to recover from the crisis imposed by Euron Greyjoy. With his own fleet, Theon Greyjoy fought the dead across the coast, meeting Daenerys Targaryen at Sea Dragon Point. There, Greyjoy asked for clemency and apologized on behalf of the Greyjoy household for the crimes committed by his uncle Victarion.

It is even rumored that Daenerys Targaryen negotiated an alliance with Theon Greyjoy. There were even talks of marriage, according to Maester Kevin of Deepwood Motte, but the Dragon Queen knew she had to make a more powerful marriage if she were ever to marry again. Meanwhile, Jon Snow visited Bear Island and the Gift, where he reunited with his direwolf, Ghost. Many northern men and clansman joined the cause, bringing swords and torches, to help cleanse the North of such a deadly plague.

The final battle against the Others took place in Mole Town, where Jon Snow and his men encountered a resistance consisting of hundreds of dead and even some giants. Once again, many died in combat again, but the remnant of the Others' generals was destroyed with Jon Snow's valyrian steel blade.

Daenerys Targaryen never killed an Other with her Lightbringer.

"If I'm not to kill them with this, then what is the purpose of it?" She asked Jon Snow, after reuniting with him again.
The purpose would be revealed, but she would have to wait.

With the North finally cleansed from the dead, remained only the excursion to the North, to the icy confines at the far end, far beyond the known world. The journey resumed when Daenerys Targaryen met Jon Snow again and both, leaving their armies behind on Mole Town, flew to the farthest North to find the Children of the Forest and make sure the Song of Ice had been silenced once and for all.

However, here it is a little secret that only Jon Snow knew by the time: before setting out on his journey North, Jon Snow visited the crypts of Winterfell and hid the dragon-egg, the one he had encountered among the ruins of Viserion's lair. The egg was hidden next to his mother's grave, where it would stay until the day the Order of the Knights of Winter was founded.

We'll get to that later on.
But before we turn to the acclaimed War for the Three Queens, let us finish the account of Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow's journey to the farthest North. This is once again a brief chapter since the information we gather today is practically scarce and comes only from Maester Luwin's records and the assumptions raised by Maester Samwell before he died.

According to mythology, during the Age of Heroes, the world was balanced by a harmony that men never questioned. We all heard these stories. Tales about a world at peace, about Westeros being a place inhabited only by the Children of the Forest who were one with nature itself. However, when the First Men arrived and began tearing down forests with their Song of Steel, the Children of the Forest composed the Song of Ice, sure the scales would weigh again in their favor.

Even so, evil cannot defend goodness.

The children's innocence brought the Others, the dead and the Long Night. Legends say that a man, known only as the last hero, fought the Others during the Battle for the Dawn... But evil, as we know it today, was not entirely extinguished. The Others suffered a heavy defeat, yes, when his general was killed by the last hero, as Jon Snow destroyed the general of this Age in Mole Town... But to prevent the same evil from rising, Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen would have to advance to the Lands of Always Winter to find the Last Child of the Forest and discover how to restore the Song of Earth.

According to the testimony of Maester Luwin, who heard the story through Jon Snow's own mouth, the dragons reached the coldest desert in the North and found the Nightgrove, an icy forest where evil resumes and Others are reborn. Weirdwood trees, leafless, rose in this cemetery. Names, as old as time, had been carved in the wood as if the trees were indeed tombstones.

And there they met the last Child of the Forest, waiting hidden among the trees, with a dragonglass dagger clenched in his hands.

"We froze the heart of thousand men and locked them in tombs of ice." Said the Child, shivering with cold. "So they could rise with their Song of Ice and fight the Song of Steel sung by men… until every one of them was dead. We called them the Other Men. The Others. It was our mistake. A foolish mistake. We unleashed a dark force through our land, creating an army that won't end… Hundreds are still laying in their tombs, sleeping, waiting to rise one day and march against men… even if it takes a whole age."

"So, if we destroy this grove… we put an end to their threat?"

The Child nodded.

"Yes, Flame Queen… But if only could be that simple."

So the dragons, even in the cold, rained their flames over the Nightgrove in an attempt to destroy it...
but the ice was too cold and couldn't withstand the flames. The weirwood trees burnt to the ground, but the tombs, frozen under the dark trees, remained untouched. The men entombed there, frozen in time, had dragonglass in their hearts and would rise again one day.

The Song of Ice couldn't even be touched by dragon flame.

"The only way..." Said the Child, after the Dragonriders came down again. "Is to sing another song, the Song of Ice and Fire. Three dragons: one of ice, one of fire and a mediator between them, to ensure peace again."

"The prophecy." Daenerys said, understanding again the words of three dragons. She unsheathed her dragonglass sword, certain she could pierce the ice beneath her feet and reach the creatures sleeping down below. However, as soon as she tried, something happening to the dark blade.

The stone changed under her hands, and it was no longer just dark. Thin veins of pale blue, almost white, spread through the dark, as if ice and fire could dance together.

"What is this?" Daenerys asked the child, showing him the blade. "How could the ice spoil a dragonglass blade?

"I don't think the blade is spoiled." Jon said, approaching her. "I believe it is just tempered with something else now."

The purpose of the blade was still to uncover, even though the Queen was now convinced that it was useless. It hadn't been able to destroy the Nightgrove, and it hadn't claimed an Other. It had to be useless. In fact, since the prophecy was broken, it made sense that the blade had lost its purpose.

But did that mean that Westeros was doomed to failure?

Accepting defeat, Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen decided to return home. The discovery of the Nightgrove would stay on both their minds, as well as the threat posed by the army of the Others sleeping in the ice, waiting to get up again and resuming the mission they had been created for: end the humankind.

A small incident, though, took place before they headed back to Winterfell: mere days from reaching the Wall, they stopped for a night to shelter in a northern mountain. There, Jon and Daenerys were surprised when they found the egg of a dragon between Rhaegal and Drogon. Daenerys immediately shared her hope that there might be a third dragon again, a dragon that would be able to fulfill the broken prophecy. She even said that, after claiming her father's throne, she would hold a Tournament to gather guests from every corner of the Seven Kingdoms to try and hatch the egg.

That would be the perfect moment for Jon Snow to share with her that another egg was already safeguarded in the crypts of Winterfell. But he chose to keep the secret to himself. Daenerys took to herself the guard of the egg and kept it always at her side until the Order of the Knights of Winter was finally founded.

Days later, they finally arrived at Winterfell, discovering then that a new queen sat on the Iron Throne, that the cause of Prince Edwyle had lost its greatest asset and that Robb Stark was joining a new ally.

The War of the Three Queens had begun.
As the North fought the dead to rid the land of that plague, and the dragons turned to the Lands of Always Winter, many events unfolded south of Moat Caillin, which I shall now relate as best as I can.

Let's start with the story of the Dawn Queen.

That's how Queen Myrcella became to be known among our history for her part during the War of the Three Queens. Why did the small folk call her that? It's not hard to understand. Myrcella Baratheon represented a new hope for the Seven Kingdoms, after the tyranny imposed by her brother King Joffrey and the brief but messy rulership of King Tommen. Besides, she was pregnant the day she was crowned, and the child growing inside her represented a new future. A new dawn.

But let's go back, once again, to the point where it all starts.

As you may recall, Princess Myrcella Baratheon, daughter of the Dowager Queen Cersei Lannister and the late King Robert Baratheon, was sent to the Eyrie to marry the young and sick Lord Robert Arryn, shortly before the Battle of Blackwater.

In the Vale, Princess Myrcella had the opportunity to grow up, despite having left King's Landing no more than an easily impressionable and shy maiden. With a younger husband known for his childish temperament, the path of Princess Myrcella was not an easy one: she fought silent power battles against her mother-in-law, Lady Lysa Tully, trying to snatch the control of the Eyrie and her husband's will.

According to Lady Anya Waynwood's maester, Myrcella was very close to Lord Petyr Baelish ever since she moved to her new home. The advisor of Lady Lysa was a discreet and silent ally to the Princess in the Eyrie, as well as Ser Aerys Oakheart of the Kingsguard, who had traveled with her to secure her safety. Allegedly, those two allies helped her set up a trap that resulted in the execution of Lady Lysa.

Looking at the facts today, it is quite probable that such a trap was indeed planned because that was the beginning of a greater plan: making Myrcella Baratheon the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. But those ominous moments are often forgotten, hidden in the dark since the story of Queen Myrcella easily surpassed that chapter.

Allowing Lord Baelish to assume the regency of the Vale, Princess Myrcella also gave him free reins to prepare all the means to make possible her claim to the Iron Throne. Littlefinger started by
summoning all the swords of the Vale, with the pretext of marching to King's Landing to aid King Tommen to maintain his position against King Edwyle... though such aid would only come after winter, as it had been promised to Tyrion Lannister.

However, the army left the Eyrie and marched southwest: not toward the Riverlands, but the capital. Shortly before leaving the Eyrie, it was further reported that Myrcella Baratheon was finally pregnant of Lord Robert Arryn's child, which was a great relief to all the Houses of the Vale worried that their lord would go to war without leaving an heir. And the concern was legitimate... because while approaching the Bloody Gate Lord Robert Arryn was abducted by the mountain clans, to be brutally murdered. Parts of his body were found months later.

Being a widow strengthened Myrcella Baratheon claim, so rumors years late would suggest that the widow was, in fact, behind the attack that had killed her husband. With an heir growing in her womb and an army following her orders, she was now also free to marry again. Arguing she needed rest and protection from the snow storm coming, Princess Myrcella decided to stay behind in the Bloody Gates until the weather was safe enough for her to resume her journey. Lord Baelish and the army continued toward King's Landing.

Back on the Vale, however, Myrcella received a gift she wasn't expecting: her own mother. Cersei Lannister, as you may recall, had been sent to Dorne by his son Tommen to marry Doran Martell and assure the alliance with the Princes of Sunspear. But her litter never reached her destination, having been led astray by men at the behest of Petyr Baelish.

"You'll need someone to legitimize your claim before the lords." Petyr had said to Myrcella, before leaving the Vale. "Someone like your mother, the daughter of Tywin Lannister of Casterly Rock."

The Dowager Queen was then in a miserable state, still suffering from what had been imposed to her in King's Landing. But she was excited to see her daughter and happy when she found out she was pregnant.

Meanwhile, by this time, Tyrion Lannister was sending King's Landing forces to fight the She-Wolf in the Riverlands. I also recall King Tommen marched against Arya Stark with a strong army, made of men from the Westerlands and the Reach. But the Tyrell army betrayed Tyrion Lannister at the last moment... and turned back east to meet the army marching from the Vale. An alliance had been set up, through quill and ink.

This was a time of treachery, many of those betrayals we cannot even understand today... However, according to what I have come to discover during my time at court, a union had been proposed between Myrcella Baratheon and Wylllas Tyrell: a marriage proposal, set up even before Princess Myrcella was a widow. From what I have heard from Queen Myrcella herself, it was her own idea to combine her cause with that of the Tyrells, though they were already allied with King Tommen through his marriage to Queen Margaery. Nonetheless, Myrcella preyed on the weaknesses of her brother's marriage and the inability of the Rose of Highgarden to produce an heir. It is not easy to explain the fragmentation of two houses that were not truly fragmented... But I will try to do so.

House Tyrell, as we remember, suffered a heavy blow in the last days of King Joffrey's reign, when their entourage was poisoned during the dinner infamously named The Crimes of the Fig. Margaery Tyrell was the only survivor, which earned her a crown, yes... but being barren, that would present itself as a problem. Tyrion Lannister had overlooked that, realizing it was more important to secure swords at the time the bargain had been made.

However, Myrcella Baratheon recognized in this weakness of her brother's marriage an opportunity to secure the Tyrell's to her cause. Therefore, as I have heard from the queen's own lips, a missive was sent to Highgarden in the greatest secrecy, when the Vale was still gathering forces... Allegedly,
not even Lord Baelish knew about this alliance drawn in the dark, although it is unlikely that Princess Myrcella managed to lead the entire negotiations alone. Littlefinger came to find out about this union later.

The alliance, as we now know, would once again be supported in a marriage between Princess Myrcella and a vassal of House Tyrell, at the choice of Lord Wyllas, to cement this relationship. Lord Wyllas did not hesitate to agree with this proposal: he longed to free his sister from the court intrigues, bring her back home, put some sense into her head full of impossible dreams and grant her a life without risks. She had followed the dreams their father had imposed, losing herself in games.

And what happened then?

The forces from the Vale gathered in Darry, and from there they began marching to King's Landing, diverting from Harrenhal where Arya Stark and his troops stood. The army marched to Hayford Castle, where it then met with Tyrell's army as they abandoned Tyrion Lannister on the battlefield. In Hayford Castle, they stayed for about a week, long enough for the Battle of God's Eye to take place, and for Princess Myrcella to have time to finally meet them, duly accompanied by her mother.

The Queen Widow had then realized her daughter's plans and reports said she tried to detain her, urging her to stop that nonsense before it was too late. Years later, Queen Cersei revealed the reason for her fears to the maester of Casterly Rock... But Princess Myrcella did not listen to her mother then and, upon reaching Hayford Castle, she also refused to hear Lord Petyr Baelish.

Testimonies from that night account that Lord Baelish moved against the Princess, threatening to withdraw her forces... But Princess Myrcella replied: "Your forces, Lord Baelish? How many men do you have here at your disposal? As far as I know, not a single man from the Fingers have come to fight for my cause."

Lord Baelish had insulted the Princess and made ignominious accusations, assuring her that he would destroy her. Princess Myrcella did not even blink: she summoned her guards, among them Lady Anya Waynwood, and ordered the arrest of Littlefinger for murdering her husband and trying to kill the future heir of the Vale, growing in her womb. Later that night, Lord Yohn Royce gladly avenged his liege lord's death by cutting off Littlefinger's head.

What caused the falling out between Princess Myrcella and Petyr Baelish? We cannot be sure entirely, but many historians suggest that Littlefinger wanted to share a bed with Princess Myrcella and she refused him. Truly, Cersei Lannister later told that Littlefinger aspired to be more than an advisor and friend. He intended to be Myrcella's consort and that night, once he learned the details of the alliance with the Reach, he got jealous because his path to the Iron Throne had been threatened.

Myrcella Baratheon couldn't tolerate a risk such as Baelish, even though she owed in much. She had learned from him, as queen Cersei told me personally weeks later, and finally disposed of her master.

When dawn broke in Hayford Castle, Princess Myrcella broke her fast with all the lords and generals who accompanied her, thus solidifying all her alliances. They started to saw in her the makings of a true queen. They admired her and, more than anything, they believed in her, for she was a fair queen and a gentle one. Her path up until that moment could have been treacherous, yes, but her intentions for the realm seemed honest.

The lords of the Vale, who waited for an Arryn heir, thrust themselves to the princess to please her any way they could. All of them wanted to be honored with the regency of the Vale, a decision that Princess Myrcella, as the mother of their future Lord, would make herself one day.

Meanwhile, to Lord Tyrell and his men, the Princess promised justice for the acts committed against
the Reach, whether committed by the Stark or by men in the service of her brother; and to all the others present, she promised to secure peace in the Seven Kingdoms, crossing the differences between the Starks, the Tullys and even the Martells.

All they needed was to give her the crown.

And that same day the army left, reaching King's Landing two days later.

The city fell in less than an hour, not even realizing it had fallen.

Isolated on Maegor Holdfast, King Tommen had just received news of his uncle's defeat in the God's Eye. Knowing that an army from the Vale had come to his aid, Tommen ordered the city gates to be opened at once to let his sister in. I still recall the tears of relief glistening in the king's eyes when he saw the banners from the Eyrie approaching the Red Keep. But then, he understood something was amiss: Lord Tyrell also fitted this entourage, the very same man who had betrayed his uncle Tyrion on the battlefield.

A brief fight took place between the goldcloaks and the forces from the Vale, but only seven men died. The castle was easily taken, the City Watch surrendered quickly, as did the remaining Lannister entourage manning the castle.

King Tommen received his mother and sister in the Throne Room.

"I'm sorry, little brother." Princess Myrcella said when she advanced toward King Tommen. "You failed the realm. Your court is full of vices and shortcomings. The people don't love you and you are all alone. It is time to give your crown up."

"And why should I do that? I am the rightful king." He said. "The male heir takes precedence..."

"The male heir takes precedence, yes, but who comes after he dies?" Myrcella spoke, raising her voice high. "The lineage of our father will come to me, brother. Your wife is barren, and I'm growing a child in my womb. I represent the future, and that you will never be able to give having Lady Margaery at your side."

"Margaery will be able to provide an heir. I still believe that."

"No, she won't." Myrcella insisted, well aware of the queen's condition. "And you won't have a son unless you dispose of your wife." She stared at him for a few seconds, reading the pain written in his face. "But you are not Joffrey, are you? You love her, despite everything she did. You love her, and you will never betray her. That's why I beg you, brother, to do the right thing: put down your crown and get away from this city. Be happy with her, without the burden of something you could never achieve."

"Even if... Even if Margaery can't give me an heir, you will have to wait for your time." Tommen said, his voice trembling. I still remember how he refused to look at his mother. "That's what the law commands."

"Old laws, made by old men." Myrcella said. "We are better than that, brother. So, don't make this difficult. I truly love you, and I do not want to hurt you... You're leaving tonight for Storm's End, where you will resume your duties of Lord of the Stormlands."

Tommen didn't resist much longer, for he understood he had truly lost.

But he also loved his sister, and he had never asked for a crown.
And so ended the reign of Tommen Baratheon, First of His Name, remembered today as Tommen, the Uncrowned. His reign was short, lasting only thirty-eight days, but he would have been an excellent ruler: more balanced than King Joffrey, less ambitious than Princess Myrcella. Still, not having been born to take a seat on the throne, he soon realized this game of thrones was not for him: he removed the crown from his head, placed it on his sister himself, and kissed it on the forehead.

"Well, if you are willing to grant me life by my wife side, I will gladly bend my knee for you. Good luck, little sister."

And he left the throne room, escorted to his rooms by guards. His mother, the Dowager Queen, tried to embrace him, but he refused to look at her, still carrying in his face the scar she had accidentally carved in his face.

Later, he even dined with his sister in the Red Keep, at which point he asked to take his wife with him to Storm's End. Lord Wyllas, however, did not agree, claiming that his sister's place was in Highgarden and not Storm's End. She had suffered too much, and all he had done had been with one purpose only: to bring her back home. He wouldn't change his mind.

So, after willing lose a crown for love, Tommen Baratheon also consented in giving up the lordship of Storm's End to live the rest of his days at Highgarden, next to his wife. He could never know that it wouldn't be a long life together. He left two days later, with the fragile Lady Margaery, a reduce retinue of soldiers from the Reach.

As of today, there was never a change of power so peaceful.

Queen Myrcella, First of Her Name, was crowned a week later in Baelor's Sept. The bells rang, flowers were thrown down the street ... and the Queen's army prepared for the threat of Arya Stark, who would soon be knocking at her door.
While Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen set out on their crusade against the remnants of the Others, Robb Stark passed the govern of the North to his younger brother, Lord Rickon and departed to Harrenhal. His battle against the dead and the Others had come to an end, so it was time to heal the wounds that divided not only House Stark but the whole North: and it all started with his sister, Arya Stark.

Recently victorious from the Battle of the God's Eye, the She-wolf of Winterfell had been delayed by allowing her men to travel back to the North to check over their lands and homes. She refused to accompany them, fearing her brother would detain her and put an end to Edwyle's claim. So, she stayed behind, preparing to march against King's Landing, ordering war machines to be built and gathering provisions for a possible siege.

Maester Leo, the old master of Riverrun who had accompanied Lord Edmure to Harrenhal, writes that the days after the triumph of the battle were festive: the dungeons of the great castle were filled with Lannister prisoners and the Hall of a Hundred Hearths housed a feast worthy of note. The King

Meanwhile, news also came about Queen Myrcella sitting on Iron Throne, with an army of about fifteen thousand swords defending the city. Arya Stark did not take this news willingly, but she did not hesitate: her intention of avenging her mother and sister's death in order to return her nephew to the throne was still stronger than ever. According to Maester Leo, Arya Stark kept writing to many smaller lords of the Riverlands, North, and even the Stormlands, seeking support wherever it existed. In fact, even the Martells of Sunspear received a letter signed by the She-Wolf of Winterfell.

Out from the Riverlands came another five thousand swords from sworn houses to the Tully, while from the Stormlands emerged Gendry the Bull, a longtime friend of Arya Stark, accompanied by twenty swordsmen who called themselves the Brotherhood of the Lightning Strike.

Robb Stark reached Harrenhal a few days before Arya Stark's army advanced to King's Landing.

According to Maester Leo's records, Harrenhal held by the time around thirteen thousand swords. Dressed as a beggar, Robb Stark managed to infiltrate the castle unnoticed and to surprise his own sister in her chambers, where she was celebrating intimately with a friend. Arya Stark was so taken aback that she jumped out of bed and pointed her sword to his brother's throat as soon as she saw him.

"Is this how you greet your brother?" Asked Robb Stark, trying to ease the situation.

The relationship between the two had not been stable since Robb Stark had assumed the role of Lord of Winterfell. Arya had never controlled her rebelliousness predisposition, often contradicting her brother's commands. The fact that she had fractured her house, starting a war while the North was
devastated, had further aggravated the relationship.

The tension of that reunion was remarkable, and unfortunately, the differences between the siblings were not easy to control. After lowering her sword, Arya Stark sat with her brother for an entire night and exchanged all the stories that had separated them. No one was in the room beside them, and the siblings never revealed much about their encounter, but it seemed they were making their peace.

Nevertheless, even though it seemed Robb Stark was there to forgive his sister and join her in the fight to avenge their family, the Lord of Winterfell had plans of his own. Taking advantage of his sister's weakness after drinking so many cups of wine, Robb Stark put her to chains and led her to a cart waiting outside, so she could return immediately to Winterfell. All of those arrangements were made in the dead of night, as allegiances were exchanged among the battlements and Roose Bolton, who had traveled with Lord Stark, made sure Arya's most loyal men were put to chains. Drunk, Lady Arya tried to resist, managing even to break her brother's nose, but she was eventually beaten and locked in a carriage headed north that very night.

Harrenhal awoke the next morning with another Stark leading their forces.

Robb Stark met first with all the commanders, to make a status of the preparations in place. He immediately sent an emissary to negotiate terms of peace with Queen Myrcella, trying to set a meeting for them to parley and negotiate justice and peace. Maester Leo wrote that Robb Stark intended to convince Queen Myrcella to appoint Edwyle as her heir since the child she was growing inside her was promised to the Vale. After the meeting, however, a mutiny seemed to have started in the castle and King Edwyle was found in his chambers without his head, just like his father, King Joffrey.

And so, ended the reign of King Edwyle, First of His Name, remembered today as the Pawn King. At only five years of age, the young lad died without ever sitting on the Iron Throne, having been used multiple times as a mere pawn, without any power or influence.

Faced with the young king's death, Edmure Tully quickly moved against his nephew Robb and ordered his men to throw him in a cell. A small battle took place in Harrenhal's courtyard, between Tully and Stark swords, but even the Northerners doubted their liege lord and his ability to lead: Robb Stark was eventually arrested.

The Lord of Winterfell was close to his demise after surviving the Small Night.

During his trial that very same evening, Robb Stark was threefold accused of regicide, kinslaying and treason. Many claimed for his head right away, but another battle followed between the swords loyal to Robb and the ones fighting for Arya. Roose Bolton released the Lannisters' prisoners from the cells, causing havoc in Harrenhal, and provoking yet another fight. The chaos was enough to rescue Robb Stark, who would soon be executed by his crimes. Rallying a few men, he locked himself in the Tower of Dread. Edmure Tully besieged the Tower, and tried to invade it, but without success. He even became to the point of setting fire to the Tower, but the snow was falling heavily that day and fire couldn't burn high enough to damage the structure.

Meanwhile, men were sent to intercept the carriage carrying Arya Stark back to the North, bringing her back to Harrenhal.

As soon as she returned, the She-Wolf wept before the body of her nephew, believing she had failed him. Maester Leo himself says the young king's house was over. So, the fight was done. It would be a matter of days before the forces gathered in Harrenhal would disperse.
"None of this was supposed to happen."

Arya Stark, according to what Maester Leo wrote, wanted to understand her brother and the reasons behind his terrible acts. She refused to accept that the brother she knew, barricading himself inside a tower, would be capable of spilling his own blood or be even able to give such command. So, she insisted on talking to him privately.

But it was then, right before entering the tower, that Gendry Waters presented to Arya Stark a missive allegedly found among Robb Stark's belongings: the draft of a letter with details of a marriage between Rickon Stark and Queen Myrcella, as well as the promise that Prince Edwyle's problem would be solved definitely. In the face of these trials, Arya Stark's fury was burned down again, and Eddard Stark's daughter prepared her men to storm the Tower of Dread once again.

A minor fight happened that night, and finally Arya Stark managed to breach the protections of the tower, infiltrating it through the roof while men tried to go through the main door. When she found her brother inside and took him by surprise, she pointed her sword to his throat.

However, she couldn't kill him.

"I refuse to have your blood on my hands." She said. "I will bring you back to Winterfell and put in a cell, so you can rot there until the end of your days, feeling every ounce of guilt for what you have done."

"I didn't kill the child, Arya. Our uncle may believe that… But you know me better than. Someone is trying to get us against each other since the day you kidnapped Edwyle."

When she showed him the proofs Gendry had brought before her, Robb still insisted on his innocence, requesting Master Leo to give his testimony and confirm that he had sent a letter to Queen Myrcella, yes, but the one asking only to parley in neutral ground. Besides, why would he keep a draft with treachery contents? It didn't make sense.

He had nothing to do with the killing of his nephew.

By the time Arya understood who was behind the brutal death of King Edwyle, it was already too late. She came to that understanding by discussing it with Robb and, according to Master Leo, it was at that moment that the rift between the two finally ended.

Gendry, the bastard of King Robert Baratheon, was the true culprit.

It was his disappearance that first denounced him.

He was supposed to be on guard on Harrenhal but was gone from his position when Arya and Robb emerged from the Tower of Dread. Hours later, the Stark siblings read the meaning behind the false letter and accepted that it was forged. Together, they tried to make sense of all those puzzle pieces, but they began to understand even more.

The attempt on Prince Edwyle's life, that had placed Sansa against the Tyrells before the Tournament, had been orchestrated by whoever Gendry was serving, months before. The Stark banners flying over the walls of the Red Keep after the death of King Joffrey had also been hung by that enigmatic player on the shadows. Even the rumors that had placed the Tyrells against Queen Sansa had been planted by that enemy playing among shadows. Silent games, strategic ones, capable of turning Stark against Lannisters, and Starks against each other.

And now, that false letter showed them the truth. A letter presented to Arya by the man she had seen as a friend for years, who had been welcomed in Winterfell for years and that she had loved. A letter
that attempted to destroy House Stark, convincing that killing her brother was the right thing to do. A letter what wanted the extinction of House Stark.

But they had resisted the trap, and now knew the truth. The Lannisters were not the enemy. Not even the Tyrells. They had been played by another House, who wanted to weaken them. Who wanted to level the playboard of all its pieces before entering the game.

And then the names come up to Arya's mind when she remembered her quest to Essos with Gendry, when he wanted to discover his bastard half-brothers.

Gendry Waters.

Mia Stone.

Edric Storm.

Septa Bella.

Lewis Waters.

Phineas Waters.

Alyssa Snow.

And many others.

The Bastards of Robert Baratheon.
It is proved today that the events that happened since Prince Edwyle fell from his horse were provoked by this figure who played the game from the shadows. Through spies and old allies, this player made their moves being well aware of the tension between the great houses, setting them against each other, whispering ideas into their ears, planting seeds of doubt and opening thus a path to the Iron Throne.

Who was the mastermind behind all these events?

A Red Priestess called Melisandre.

Even though he had met his end on the Blackwater Bay, Stannis Baratheon had left a legacy. A small army, back on Dragonstone. His lady wife, the feeble Queen Selyse. His only daughter and heir, Princess Shireen. His bastard nephew, Lord Edric Storm. And, of course, a red priestess called Melisandre. And a considerable amount of gold he had gathered to support his war. However, after such a fiery defeat, the cause had seemed lost. Queen Selyse had decided to flee Westeros to find safety back at Pentos, where she could plot a way to get her daughter the throne that was hers by right.

Selyse was a fragile woman, tormented by the loss of many pregnancies. The pain and hurt had made her look for answers where no one would hope her to look. Old Maester Cressen, even before his death, wrote that Selyse was highly impressionable, believing firmly in the words of Melisandre of Asshai and R’hllor.

"Your husband may have failed, but I still see Baratheon blood on the Iron Throne, shedding light over the Seven Kingdoms."

And so, Queen Selyse started working with the red priestess, surviving through poverty and famish. She sold her jewels, rallied some support among the magisters of Pentos and finally managed to establish herself in the city. This broken, small retinue was known as the House of Herlinath. They were all by themselves, being turned back by the Houses that had supported them before.

But the red priestess had seen ways on her flames, or so she believed. And among all the visions she had seen, were the faces of the bastards of Robert Baratheon. Twenty-two bastards, with Baratheon blood running in their veins, dispersed all over the Seven Kingdoms.

"Get all those bastards on your daughter's side, Your Majesty. Promise them lands, wealth and titles. They are bastards, and they can never aspire more than what they have… But they can fight for your daughter. Spy for her. Plot for her."

And so, in an old pentoshi palace, the Conspiracy of the Stag started, even though it is better known as the Conspiracy of the Bastards.
Princess Shireen by that time was ten years old and was forced by to marry her cousin, Edric Storm. Those two would be victims of the games and plots of Selyse and Melisandre in the years to come. The princess was a very clever young woman, even though her face was deformed, tainted by greyscale when she was a babe. And she was a rather humble woman, one that would be happy living beside her husband as long as she had a voice to express her opinion and books to strength her mind. She had no interest in crowns, jewels or thrones. But her mother had, and the red priestess saw in the girl the way of bringing to form a prophecy of old.

"Your father didn't bring me with him when he sailed to King's Landing." Melisandre told the princess, according to the recovered diary of Shireen Baratheon. She loathed the woman but was forced to hear fearing her mother's wrath. "He died underwater... but he could have brought fire and ruled with the Lord of Light at his side. I guess you will be the one doing what he couldn't, child."

It is curious how people can interpret the same prophecy in such different ways. For the priestesses in Asshai, Daenerys Targaryen was the true Azor Ahai, the champion of the world that would defeat the old enemy. For Melisandre, who had left Asshai many years ago, that same figure was Shireen Baratheon. All over Essos, many others believed Azor Ahai were other men, women or even animals. But all of them were wrong because as of this day, the prophecy was never fulfilled.

However, let us go back to our story. Through the years, Princess Shireen's claim had been strengthened, little by little. The bastards of Robert Baratheon were found and recruited to the cause, one by one. By the year of 305 AC, thirteen bastards were sworn to Princess Shireen. They spread all over Westeros, spying, feeding lies, studying the ground, setting up wars between the Great Houses. Of course, they managed to get some friends to Princess Shireen's cause eventually and in the utmost secrecy. Lord Varys was one of them, maybe too innocent to understand what he was bargaining.

Lord Varys knew where Princess Shireen was hidden but never shared that information with the Privy Council, feeding them false lies instead, assuring the girl was dead. However, he saved up that bit of information, knowing it could be useful years later. And it was because Varys managed to quietly let in the city three hundred sellswords fighting for Shireen's cause on the eve of the infamous Red Tournament. The price Varys required was just one: for the sellswords to invade the Red Keep, masked as Lannister soldiers and rescue from its walls Queen Sansa and her child. After the deed, they could settle in the city, in secret outposts owned by Lord Varys, while waiting for Princess Shireen to come. Of course, the sellswords made what was asked of them that day, but they also added a twist Lord Varys didn't know: they murdered Joffrey Baratheon, hung the Stark banners above the Red Keep and ignited a war.

As events were put in motion by the Bastards in Westeros, Edric Storm signed contracts with sellswords companies. Many contracts were found in the Herlinath Palace in Pentos with the signature of Varlyn Herlinath, a merchant of silk, wine and gold that had built himself a fortune: it was the alias of Lord Edric. The boy had grown to be a talented merchant, able to establish good friendships with many good merchants and dealers all over Essos, who helped him create a considerable fortune on top of the one his uncle Stannis had left.

But things started to go amiss.

First, a bastard named Gwen Rivers was burned in Pentos, willingly giving her royal blood to the fire and the Lord of Light, so that the Red God could favor Shireen's cause. The terror of this event, as recorded by Princess Shireen, cast a dark shadow over her beliefs of what they were doing. Melisandre had burnt men before, at the service of her father, but she had never allowed such nonsense. However, Selyse kept treating her daughter as a mere pawn. Shireen wrote that her own
mother usually mistreated her, locking her behind doors and beating her without reason.

Days later after the bastard was burnt, reports coming from the North of Westeros brought alarming news. Initially, the news told about the dead rising from the snow. Then, came word about the Wall having been breached and the Army of the Dead marching to the realm of men. Melisandre lit up her fires again and told Princess Shireen, as well as her mother and husband that the end was near.

"The darkness spreads." She told, holding firmly the princess by her chin. "Only you can bring it down now."

It was time to sail to Westeros, and preparations were underway immediately. But not fast enough. Weeks later, when Edric finally managed to secure a fleet, a new report came about Daenerys Targaryen having left the city of Bhorash to join the fight in the North of Westeros with two dragons.

"Shall we send assassins to kill the dragon bitch?" Asked Selyse, afraid of the tales told about the creatures. Even though the Dragon Queen had come with only two dragons, it would be a force to be reckoned.

"We must not fear the fire…" Told Melisandre, looking to the flames burning on the fireplace. "The woman is a champion for light…"

"My daughter is the champion of the Lord of Light." Intervened Queen Selyse immediately. "You’ve seen it in your flames…"

"Yes, I have… I have seen your daughter on the Iron Throne, and towers of fire reaching to the sky in the honor of the Lord of Light. But… we must be quick now."

After the Battle of God’s Eye, more disturbing news came to Pentos. Lord Tyrion Lannister and his army had been destroyed by the Starks since the Tyrell army had left the battlefield on the eve of the fight. At first, those seemed to be good news. Melisandre and the bastards were convinced that Lord Willas had changed his course thanks to the lies the bastards had fed to the lords sworn to the Reach. They had planted false proofs and reports of Tyrion Lannister being the mind behind the poisoning of the Tyrells. However, Lord Willas had dismissed such rumors.

As was confirmed a week later, his decision had been made based on the alliance signed with Princess Myrcella herself. Thus, when reports came about Myrcella sitting on the Iron Throne, after deposing her brother with the help of the armies of the Reach and the Vale, the cause of Princess Shireen suffered a terrible blow. Another player, one that they hadn't predicted, had entered the game with strong military power.

This was not their plan.

The purpose of the war was to weaken the Starks and the Lannisters, thus opening the path to King’s Landing… They hadn't anticipated the Vale joining the fight. But this meant that Myrcella Baratheon was settled on King’s Landing, preparing to defend the city from the forces of King Edwyle on the Riverlands. There were even rumors that many lords from the Stormlands, like House Swann, House Tarth and House Estermont were coming to aid the young Queen. She truly seemed to have the heart of the people.

At least, on the far North, Daenerys Targaryen continued fighting the threat of the dead, keeping herself away from the game of thrones.

"The fight she is fighting with the bastard of Winterfell is nothing but a small play on the great scheme of things." Melisandre whispered constantly to Queen Selyse as if trying to convince even
herself of those words. "She is keeping the darkness at bay, but only your daughter will put an end to it when she brings the Lord of Light into this world. I swear to you."

"What are you talking about?" Interceded Edric, not understanding the words of the red priestess. Along the years, he had also learned not to sympathize with the woman, even though he believed in Shireen's cause. At least, that is what the princess wrote in her diary. "We are fighting for the Throne, not against monsters in the snow."

Melisandre laughed, as if he was nothing but a child, and said no more.

"We have lost." Shireen kept repeating to her council. A part of her was relieved, and she truly hoped a normal life could be finally granted to her. "Can we please accept that we have lost?"

But the Queenmakers refused to hear her.

There were many options on the table.

The obvious one was to let the Starks go against Myrcella Baratheon, so they could fight and weaken each other. It meant they had to wait for a month, maybe two. Then, during the aftermath of such a battle, they would knock at the city's gates and easily took control of it. However, often when a cause has many heads thinking, decisions are made at the moment… and Gendry Waters made a decision for himself, believing it would provoke more chaos and that such chaos would serve Princess Shireen's cause. He was by then placed at Harrenhal, miles away from Pentos, and oblivious to the latest plans.

So, acting on his own will, he killed King Edwyle, taking advantage of the moment and place. He did so with a heavy heart because a part of him loved his friend, Arya Stark. But he had to serve a greater good. After burning the child's head to honor his Red God, he tried to frame Robb Stark for the crime, sure it would ruin forever the unity of House Stark. He was also certain that Arya Stark would march anyway to King's Landing, to avenge the death of the ones she had lost, even if he had to convince her to do so.

Nevertheless, this was a poor decision, made by a man without a strategic mind. Even though there were a few skirmishes among the men positioned at Harrenhal, the Stark siblings got over their differences and managed to uncover the Stag Conspiracy.

In fact, they didn't stop and moved hastily. After saddling their horses, the two Starks left Harrenhal to hunt Gendry Waters. They found him three days later, not far away. Tales about that day tell that Arya Stark took her friend to a blacksmith, where she crushed his fingers, toes, ribs, and head with a hot hammer, torturing to extract any truth he was holding. But that was just a tale, sung by impressionable singers.

Gendry Waters was questioned, yes, but the records signed by Robb Stark after such interrogation don't claim torture was used. The bastard told what he knew about his queen's cause, and that will be told and explained in due course here. After that, the bastard received a clean death, his head cut by the sword of Robb Stark and impaled over the gates of Harrenhal. The deed of Gendry Waters brought the downfall of King Edwyle but hardened also the journey of Princess Shireen.

Without an heir to place on the Iron Throne, and now knowing they had been played, the Starks sent an emissary to King's Landing to negotiate a meeting with Queen Myrcella. They had an enemy in common, one that had been playing them, and it was time to remove the evil from the root.

Back in Pentos, the news of Gendry's actions was received heavily.
Shireen cried for her bastard nephew's death, and Melisandre cursed the boy, lighting a fire. But Edric Storm, truly committed to the cause, moved quickly once again, gathering the generals of the sellswords companies, magisters, and resourceful merchants to design a plan of attack. Edric had done a brilliant job: being only an eighteen-year-old man, he was a trained warrior, a loyal husband, and an influential merchant. If he had stayed in Pentos, he would probably become a magister within a decade. Through his efforts, he managed to get Shireen an army of around fifty-five thousand sellswords, from five different companies, as well as a fleet composed by around five hundred ships… and wildfire from the Pyromancers of Qarth. The gold he had produced paid for the Queen's cause, as did some pentoshi magisters who believed in the Baratheon's cause and, more than that, wanted to bring war to Westeros to destroy the woman that had wreaked Essos: Daenerys Targaryen.

Everything was converging as the year approached its end.
War was coming to Queen Myrcella Baratheon.

But not the one she had been expecting.

As the fateful year of 305 AC approached its end, pieces started moving, setting the final stage of the War of the Three Queens. Queen Myrcella was busy at the time, making sure her allies were at her side. She made some decisions in those early days, entrusting the defense of the city to the new commander of the City Watch, Lord Sam Ruthermore, and to her new admiral, Aurane Waters. Herr Queensguard was at the hands of Ser Aerys Oakheart, her loyal knight, that intended to fill the ranks of the guard with knights from each of the Seven Kingdoms. She also named Lord Willas Tyrell as her Hand of the Queen and met privately with me to study the genealogies and make sure her cousin, Martyn Lannister, was the rightful heir to Casterly Rock. The crisis devastating the Westerlands at the time had to be stopped, and that would happen only with a new lordship and Warden of the West.

The Vale and the Stormlands govern was also a question the Queen wanted to solve, placing men she entrusted in the government of those territories. Storm's End had been at the hands of a castellan since Tommen had been crowned and now, that he had chosen to live with his wife at Highgarden, appointed Ser Aemon Estermont, cousin to her father Robert through his mother's side, as the new lord of the Stormlands. The Vale, in the meanwhile, was entrusted to a council composed by House Royce, Waynwood, Hunter, Redfort, Belmore and Templeton: they would govern until her son or daughter, with Arryn blood, had the proper age to take the government. That, at least, were the words said at the time. Queen Myrcella confided in me other plans: she intended to make her child the heir to the Iron Throne and entrust the Vale to another House. But she wouldn't say that yet, fearing a civil war within Vale, when she needed them to fight for her.

Also aware of the threat posed by Daenerys Targaryen on the North, and her Unsullied army that allegedly was sailing to Westeros, Myrcella sent ravens to Dorne and Oldtown. Prince Doran replied promptly, with evasive words, promising to come to the capital to bend the knee in due time. He never did. From Oldtown, the Archmaesters of the Conclave recognized her as queen, even though they didn't show much enthusiasm in their congratulations, well aware that her position was threatened.

Even so, after a peaceful month sitting on the Iron Throne, a raven from Harrenhal reached King's Landing.

It was only a matter of time until war reached the city's gates. The capital walls had been strengthened, as well as the gates. The City Watch had filled its ranks with more men and the armies from the Reach and the Vale were placed on the Tournament's grounds, ready to battle whenever it was time to do so. War machines had also been built and placed at the walls, to fire against men, ships, and dragons, whichever was to come first.
"The child was killed." Her mother, Cersei, came to awake the queen as soon as she heard the news. Myrcella was still abed, at the time in her fourth month of pregnancy. "Those Starks killed my grandson and now want to fill your head with lies. You must not hear them, Myrcella."

Cersei Lannister was deranged, often provoking trouble and tension in the Small Council meetings than actually helping. More than anything, she wanted to avenge her brother and son's death, to the point of arguing every day that Myrcella should send her army to Harrenhal and finish the Northern forces right away. The idea that such confront might never happen, as Robb Stark suggested in his letter, was totally unacceptable to the Dowager Queen.

As of today, I still believe Queen Myrcella was one of the best rulers sitting on the Iron Throne during my service to the crown. I saw each descendant of Robert Baratheon and Cersei Lannister sitting on that chair so I can judge each one of them. Joffrey had been a cruel king, sloppy, with little interest for state matters. Tommen had been a kinder man, but a foolish one, born to fight and to follow his heart. But Myrcella Baratheon, as she had proved by seizing the Iron Throne, had a gentle heart, a deep ambition and the fairness needed to rule.

She had taken King's Landing almost peacefully. Yes, she may have plotted to kill her mother-in-law, her own husband and Lord Baelish… But she never showed a bloodlust character, unlike Joffrey, or difficulty to commit to a decision, like Tommen. So, when word came from Harrenhal, she quickly understood the war she was waiting could be prevented: she had no reason to fight the Starks if what they were saying was true. Lord Willas had his doubts about the grim accusations cast by the Starks but was curious to hear what he had to say and to understand really their involvement in his family's poisoning.

So, confronted with the contents of Robb Stark's letter, Myrcella gathered her Small Council to debate if Lord Stark was setting a trap or not. I partook in those gatherings and, later, on the Council of Rosby so I will shed some light over such events. After six against two, the Council voted in favor of meeting Lord Stark, setting a secret meeting in neutral ground, more precisely in the castle of Rosby, a few miles away from the capital.

"Our fathers were the best of friends." Robb Stark had written in his long letter. "It was doesn't make sense we remain enemies. Let us cry for the dead and cherish for a future with a new dawn."

Those were inspiring words, words of hope.

"No! You cannot lay down your weapons, not so easily…" Queen Cersei was one of the members of the Small council voting against the meeting. Lord Aurane Waters had cast the other vote. "The Starks killed your brother, your uncle and even my grandson. Their forces crushed the Lannister army. Must I remind we owe them the fact that the Westerlands are famished and engulfed in poverty? How can you succumb to his words? Not, not words… Lies! Robb Stark lied about the dead on the North, and is now lying again about Stannis' daughter… You can't believe him."

Stannis' daughter, Shireen, was the piece changing the game. Could it really be true that her cousin, that all thought lost, was alive and making plans to avenge her father? At that time, her informants hadn't any information about Shireen, even though they had reports of seven companies of sellswords having been employed in Essos to a merchant pentoshi family. The seeds of doubt, however, convinced the Small Council to consent in a meeting.

Queen Myrcella wanted peace and prosperity above anything else, so she rode to Rosby to meet Robb Stark, his sister Arya and their uncle, Lord Edmure Tully: the heads of the army that only two weeks before had been ready to march against her. Accompanying the young queen went Lord Willas Tyrell, as well as Lord Harrold Hardying, Lord Aurante Waters, Ser Aerys Oakheart and myself, of course.
"You were still a child last time I saw you." Lord Stark said, setting his eyes on the young Queen when they met on the Great Hall of the castle of Rosby. "I believe it was during your visit to Winterfell."

"Yes, I do remember you, Lord Stark. I'm glad we were able to meet without a sword between us."

There, in that hall, I still remember how Queen Myrcella blushed and smiled as if nothing had happened between House Baratheon/Lannister and the Starks. But many had died, and the pain and mistrust were clear in the eyes of those who had most suffered. Arya Stark, of course, didn't smile and Lord Willas Tyrell greeted Lord Stark coldly, almost ignoring him. Even Robb Stark seemed to be judging the queen before him, asking himself certainly what she could know about the Seven Kingdoms, and about war and the dead rising in the snow.

So, before becoming allies or discussing peace conditions, this small and odd retinue decided to pay their tribute to the dead. Before a weirwood tree, they prayed for the dead, then moving to the small sept of Rosby to resume their prayers before the Seven. After the ceremonies, conversations began, while they made all an effort to let the past stay on the past.

"I truly believe our fathers would be proud of us if they could see us." Myrcella said, raising her wine glass when they dined later.

Many tales were told in those hours. Tales about the wars they had each fought, about the conspiracies that had set them against each other and the ways they could mend the Seven Kingdoms. The first day of conversations was intense. Robb Stark not only reported the Conspiracy of the Stags, revealing all the details he had managed to find out from Gendry Waters' interrogation but linking to Shireen Baratheon and her spies every deed and crime committed. Lord Willas had many questions, trying to get to the bottom of the Crimes of the Figs, as did Queen Myrcella. It was not easy to accept that truth, but after hours of debate, the retinue of King's Landing accepted that Shireen Baratheon was indeed a threat and their common enemy.

Still, tensions were still there, wounds that remained and wouldn't go so easily.

Even after accepting the truth about the Stag Conspiracy, Myrcella confronted Arya directly about her murdering her uncle Jaime.

"Must I remind you that he killed my mother first, my lady?" She replied promptly, refusing to call her Your Majesty. "But that's not why we are here, I believe, is it? Shireen Baratheon and your half-brothers, the bastards your father had all over this goddamned realm, were the ones killing your brother, my sister and our nephew. An entire lineage of royal blood. If you want to point your finger to someone, point your finger to her."

Queen Myrcella nodded, finding herself without words before such remarks.

Even so, I remember how talented the Starks were evading the matter of bending the knee and swearing fealty every time it was mentioned. Besides, it was clear how Lord Willas Tyrell seemed uncomfortable in the presence of Lord Stark as if felt threatened by the attention the Queen gave to the Lord of Winterfell.

"And what about Daenerys Targaryen?" Myrcella asked Robb Stark, very directly, during the second day of conversations. "I know the Dragon Queen is back on Westeros, Lord Stark. Ravaging through the wild North, fighting the dead with your half-brother… who I hear has also a dragon. Are they my enemies… or my friends?"

"I can't speak for them, Your Grace." Robb Stark told her. "But maybe Lord Tyrell can…? I heard
his brother, Ser Loras, is commanding the Targaryen fleet and army to Westeros as we speak…"

That was a bit of information none of them knew. Not even Lord Willas, that hadn't heard a single word from his brother in years.

"But I can send for the Targaryen queen and my half-brother. Maybe they can join us, helping us decide the future of the realm once they are done with their fighting. If you are willing to accept them at your table, of course."

"I want to hear what the so-called Mother of Dragons has to say, yes… But I doubt she would be willing to sit at my table, to bend the knee or even to consider seeing me as her equal."

During the third day of the meeting, they finally made plans and signed a peace treaty that formed the Alliance of Rosby, created to depose Shireen Baratheon and bring her to justice for the crimes committed in her name. The Starks would return to Harrenhal to gather their forces again and would march south to join Queen Myrcella and the army she had back in King's Landing. A raven was also sent to North, to find Queen Daenerys and Jon Snow – who had returned at the time to Winterfell. Rickon Stark was still acting as Lord Regent of the North, and the plague of the dead seemed to be finally under control.

And thus ended the year of 306 AC, with the Stag of King's Landing allying with the Wolf of Winterfell and the Trout of Riverrun, while the Dragon Queen maintained her silence in the North and the Stag of Pentos prepared to bring the war to Westeros, just like her father had done.
At the beginning of the new year, Robb Stark did as he had promised, bringing a force of sixteen thousand swords to King’s Landing, that joined the twenty-two thousand swords at the service of Queen Myrcella. In total, King’s Landing had around forty thousand men and the number would keep on growing in the following weeks, as more men came to the capital.

Robb also sent his sister Arya back to Winterfell, to confirm Rickon was managing well enough and to invite in person the Queen of Dragons, as well as Jon, to a gathering in King’s Landing. Neither of them had answered his raven, which was odd. In this interregnum, however, the fight still happened, and blood was spilled.

News reached the capital on the beginning of the second month of the year about Storm’s End being under attack. It seemed sellswords had landed in secret in the stormy shores of the east, attacking the Estermont’s seat when its defenses were low. A sigil with a stag placed inside a burning heart was hung between the battlements of Storm’s End by the end of a week. Lord Estermont and his son were killed, and the bastard Mia Stone took over the castle with two hundred swords.

The fact that Storm’s End was so close to the capital made the queen act quickly.

Even though he was an ally to Queen Myrcella, Robb Stark hadn’t bent his knee. However, his signature on the Peace Treaty of Rosby granted him a seat at the Small Council, so he made himself heard.

On the one hand, Robb Stark wanted to strike Storm’s End immediately, to get rid of Shireen’s supporters before others came to their help. On the other hand, though, Lord Tyrell advised Myrcella to order the Stormlords to besiege the castle, to save resources and judge loyalties, while an assassin would try to kill the bastards hiding behind walls. This would later prove to be a mistake.

“We could send raise five hundred men from the stormlords. Lord Swann and Lord Estermont would give us the men necessary to besiege the castle.” Lord Willas said, in the Small Council gathering. “The bastards wouldn’t sustain a siege for long, especially during winter.”

"Yes, that may work, and we wouldn't have to send men needed to guard our walls. And maybe my brother Tommen could help." Myrcella said. "He knows the land and the castle. We can help us deal with these rats."

No one was surprised when Queen Cersei opposed this decision. The Dowager Queen asked Myrcella to send Lord Tyrell or Lord Stark instead of her brother. But with their armies placed by the city outskirts, it made no sense to send their commander away to deal with such minor trouble. As it is known now, the Queen Cersei was tormented by a prophecy of a seer that had tasted her blood
when she was but a young girl. The witch had said she would bore three children, to see them all wearing crowns, as well as shrouds.

By that time, ravens also flew from castle to castle, spreading the truth about the Stag Conspiracy and the hideous crimes committed in the name of Shireen Baratheon. That inflamed a war of ravens and words since soon after another letter reached every castle, this time signed by Shireen herself, claiming that Westeros was at the hands of a "young woman born from incest, with bastardy treachery in her veins. A woman capable of killing her elder brother, her husband, and her nephew, after consorting with traitors and assassins."

I still have a copy of one of those letters, and I remember how it ended:

“Will you bend the knee to your true queen, or to an evil creature shaped like a woman?".

The accusations were grave indeed since Shireen also tried to frame Myrcella for all the crimes committed by her men. It was quite ironic, I see today since the Rosby Alliance was built upon the crimes having been committed by Shireen's sake.

During the two weeks that followed, King’s Landing prepared for the attack of Princess Shireen. Reports from across the sea told the Stag Queen had finally sailed from Pentos. As her father had done long before, she wielded a flaming sword on the day of her coronation, forced by her mother to do so.

Meanwhile, Lord Stark’s retinue was given a place inside the city, the Palace of the Lords, an old residence on the northern outskirts of the city. The northern army was camped outside the Dragon Gate, just a mile away.

Much is told about those days. The snow was melting quickly as if Winter was turning already into Spring. And the alliance between Starks, Tyrells, and Baratheons was proving to be a strong one, despite all the odds and intrigues raised by Queen Cersei.

After spending so much time with Lord Willas and Lord Robb, rumors also started about Queen Myrcella’s future. Being still a widow, the Queen seemed to have her heart divided. If she were to marry Robb Stark, she could secure the North. But she had promised her hand to the Reach, and it was thanks to Lord Willas that she sat on the Iron Throne. Besides, it seemed Willas Tyrell seemed smitten by the young queen.

Would she honor her word… or follow her heart?

I also was there during an intimate moment between Queen Myrcella and Queen Cersei. Approaching the end of her pregnancy – when she had reached the seventh month –, Myrcella Baratheon started preparing for the child's arrival. In one of the times she was bed resting, Queen Cersei asked her daughter to abdicate her crown while it was still possible.

"Give me the crown." She asked, throwing herself to her daughter. "Give it to the dragon queen. Or even to those liars, you have surrounded yourself with… But don't destroy yourself, my sweet dove. I need you alive and well, and your child too."

But Queen Myrcella had risked too much to take her Iron Throne, and she was ready to fight for it. Once again, she ignored her mother request, even though a part of her feared what could happen during childbirth.

Meanwhile, more news came to King’s Landing.

Informants back in Pentos confirmed the Stag Queen had finally sailed, with a fleet of five hundred
ships and fifty thousand men, maybe more. Besides hiring seven Free Companies, it seemed many
cities from Essos had sent their own men and sellswords signed to them.

"The reports can't be accurate." Queen Myrcella said doubtfully when she heard the news. "It's quite
ridiculous such a number. The companies she hired, they can't… they can't gather those numbers,
can they?"

"Yes, they may be lying, Your Majesty… But I'm afraid we are dealing with much more than
sellswords and mercenaries." Aurane Waters, the Lord Admiral at her service, said. "It seems Queen
Myrcella is the elected champion of Essos to fight not only you but their other enemy."

“What enemy?” Myrcella asked, even though every member of the Small Council already knew that
answer.

“Daenerys Targaryen.”

That was still the greatest taboo at court.

The Dragon Queen had disrupted the slave trade all over Essos by destroying the ghiscari cities on
Slaver’s Bay and forcing freedom to its people. By those acts, she had made many enemies, enemies
that now wanted to make sure the Targaryen Queen would die, as well as her dragons.

"So, I'm nothing more than a pawn to my cousin." Myrcella concluded, feeling the somber looks of
the men around the table. "Shireen believes she can destroy me and then make war to Daenerys
Targaryen."

“Bluntly, yes, Your Grace.” Robb answered, very directly. “But I believe the reports that come from
across the Narrow Sea are nothing but lies. I do believe we still have the numbers.”

By that time, they had on their side around fifty-seven thousand swords. Every day more lords
reached the city, coming from the Riverlands, the North, the Vale, and the Reach. Even Lord Martyn
Lannister, who had been restoring order back at the Westerlands, managed to rally men to join the
capital with ten-thousand swords. The army was growing day by day.

“Still, we would do better with the Dragon Queen on our side.” She said, for the first time. “If we
have a common enemy, we should fight together. I refuse to fight her war for her, so she can enjoy
the spoils of war when Shireen Baratheon is defeated.”

And so, for the third time, Robb Stark wrote to each one of his siblings back in Winterfell, pressing
them for an answer, urging the Targaryen Queen to at least meet with Queen Myrcella. The raven
would never reach Winterfell in time, because two days later a dragon was sighted from the
battlements of King’s Landing, flying toward the capital.
It was not the dragon queen the one flying to King’s Landing.

Jon Snow landed with his dragon, Rhaegal, two miles North the city. He had been flying for three days, and not alone. His sister Arya had also come with him, on the back of the green dragon. As they reached the city, Lord Robb Stark met his siblings at the Dragon Gate and quickly led them not to the Palace of the Lords, but straight to the Red Keep.

Queen Myrcella was eager to receive them.

"What news do you bring from the North, ser?" The queen asked, unable to hide her fear. She had received her guests in her private chambers, where she had been confined during the last days. Her child was due at any time.

“The dead are resting, but not for long, Your Grace. The threat still remains, far on the deep North.”

He shared some details about his excursion to the lands of Always Winter, about a Nightgrove where the Others slept under tombs of ice, waiting to rise again at the turn of another age. A threat dominated, it seemed, but not destroyed. The godlike creatures could ascend again in a year, a century or a millennium. It was a toss of a coin. He also told how the North was recovering, devasted by the famish and the cold, but making sacrifices to get back on its feet.

Queen Myrcella listened to all those words in silence, but it was clear she was impatient. Her advanced pregnancy made it hard for her to hide her true feelings and cravings. What she really wanted to know was if Daenerys Targaryen would march south, and it was obvious from Jon Snow’s scowl that he didn't appreciate how the queen set aside the troubles he had just reported.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Jon Snow confirmed, heavily. “She is currently flying to Dragonstone, to meet her own army. So, we can say she is flying south.”

It seemed her army of Unsullied had reached the island a week before, after encountering some trouble in the sea against pirates. Personally, after sitting so many of those Small Council gatherings, I still believe the Targaryen fleet was attacked not by pirates, but by the queen’s enemies that were also sailing to Westeros. It was not anything the Queen Myrcella didn’t know already: the ships had been sighted a week ago.

“Queen Daenerys will come to the city in two days.” Jon revealed, after a few seconds. “She consented in meeting you and your allies to talk about a potential truce. As a matter of fact, she has a demand: she will land in the Dragonpit with her dragon. If she is greeted with any hostility, she will not only leave the city but also bring war to your doorstep. Any discussion about a truce will be suspended immediately. Do you accept those terms?”

It was clear the tension in the air. Daenerys didn’t want to discuss an alliance, but only a truce.
"Do I have a choice, ser?" Myrcella asked, furiously. Knowing the queen as I did, I can say she understood the demands of Daenerys Targaryen… as well as the urgency of our time to defend the city and win the war. Even so, it was hard – and risk – to welcome a dragon within the city's boundaries so easily.

But she conceded those terms, after considering them for an hour.

As King's Landing prepared to receive a Targaryen more than twenty years after King Aery's demise, Jon Snow joined his brother and sister preparing for war.

It is important to note that Jon Snow, that we already know was Jaeharys Targaryen, never claimed his inheritance or right to rule the Iron Throne. His claim would be appointed later, but not by him. His siblings knew the truth about his parentage, as did Queen Daenerys and Ser Loras Tyrell, but no one else. At this time, he was still the bastard of Eddard Stark. There were rumors about his ability to ride a dragon, but many believed he had only control over the creature because he was sharing a bed with Daenerys Targaryen. It was a false rumor, I believe, but at the time everyone in the city believed that version.

However, a dragon was a dragon and, naturally, great attention was placed on the Bastard of Winterfell, the very same man history recalls as Wolfrider. So, Queen Myrcella invited him to the Red Keep once again, that very night, to offer him a proposal. This has come to my knowledge only later when the Queen told me in person what had happened in her chambers.

"Swear your sword to my cause, ser, and I will make you a true Stark." She had said to him, after offering him wine. "I will arrange a proper marriage for you, and even make you Lord of the Stormlands once the war is done."

It was a surprising proposal.

But a desperate one.

It was clear she wanted a dragon on her side.

"I'm honored, Your Majesty." Jon Snow trod carefully. "A while ago, I would say that I don't bend the knee to kings or queens. Or that I don't care for titles and lands. But I'm not bound to the Night's Watch."

“So, will you bend the knee?”

“I will bend the knee.” Jon Snow said, slowly. “But not to you.”

I can only imagine how livid Queen Myrcella must have become.

“Have you bend your knee to the Dragon Queen already?”

“Not yet.” He answered. “But I will, one day.”

That was a hard truth, especially to disclose it so directly to another queen.

“Why? Are you to be her consort? Is that it?”

The Bastard of Winterfell actually had the audacity of laughing hearing those words.

"No, of course not." He said. "I will bend my knee not because I'm bedding her, or because I believe in her claim or her quality to rule. I will bend my knee because she fought by my side in the North
He said, grimly. "With all respect, Your Grace, don't delude yourself. I'm here, yes, and we may have a common enemy now, but I will bend the knee to the woman who proved herself by my side… and fought with me."

The fears took control of Queen Myrcella because her next question showed how fearful she was at that moment. She could fight men and ships, but not two dragons. Well, I must correct myself. She could fight the creatures, yes, but the odds wouldn't play in her favor.

"Are you saying then that the Targaryen will never fight for me?"

"I would recommend some humility and caution in your words tomorrow, Your Grace." Jon intervened immediately. "The Queen won’t fight for you, but I believe she will fight with you. We wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t willing to do so." Jon admitted. "But you will have to deserve that honor first."

Queen Myrcella didn’t like what she heard, but she accepted his advice.

"You are a brave man to say such words to the woman sitting on the Iron Throne." She replied.

"You are not sitting on the Iron Throne now, are you?" He said, looking at her surroundings. She was in her chambers, in her bedgown and sitting in a chair with a few pillows. "I fought against sellswords in a city falling in ruins, tormented by fire. And I later fought the dead and killed Others and their generals with my sword. And then, I traveled North to no one dares to go." He gulped, probably fearing he was boasting his acts. "Why should I fear to talk to you, only because you have a crown and a fancy chair?"

"Go away now, then." She retorted. "And get some manners with your brother, ser."

If the encounter with the Dragon Queen was to be like the one with Jon Snow, it would be impossible to Queen Myrcella to seal any truce with Daenerys Targaryen.

And Daenerys Targaryen came to King's Landing the next day, on the back of her dragon. As announced, she landed on the Dragonpit atop the Hill of Rhaenys, but things started going amiss immediately: Queen Myrcella had remained in her chambers. In her place, a herald waited for Daenerys to invite her to the Red Keep.

"No." She said, removing her gloves. "If the Usurper’s Daughter wants to speak, she must come to me."

As soon as he heard Daenerys had landed, Jon Snow rode to meet the queen on the Dragonpit before all the others.

"I won't tell you what to do. But I have an advice to give: be better than your father." Jon told her, as they looked over the city, toward the Red Keep. According to a letter, he wrote that night to his brother Rickon, he saw tears on Daenerys' eyes while she contemplated the city. She had never imagined possible to be in that place. "I have seen Myrcella Baratheon, and she is not so different from you. So, be better than the woman you left behind in Essos, Daenerys."

"You say you won’t tell me what to do… but it’s clear you hope that I fight side by side with the daughter of the man who usurped my father’s throne."

"Well, if we have an enemy in common, why shouldn’t we fight together? Greater things await us. Remember that."

Queen Myrcella, Lord Robb Stark, Lord Willas Tyrell, Lord Martyn Lannister, Lord Edmure Tully,
and Arya Stark arrived soon enough to Rhaenys' Hill, bringing with them the members from the Small Council – except Queen Cersei, once again, who had strongly advised her daughter not to go.

Many criticized the Dragon Queen for her refusal to come to the keep since Her Grace Queen Myrcella was heavy with child. Yes, the Dragon Queen wanted to be close to her dragon, but could she really not understand Myrcella's position? Many said she was jealous because there was a rumor about her inability to get pregnant after losing a baby. Even so, hoping to strike a deal and form a new alliance with the Dragon Queen, Myrcella gracially consented to the request.

It was the first time Daenerys Targaryen met a Baratheon. Initially, it was a cordial meeting, even though the Dragon Queen kept coldness in her voice. After a moment, she said she had only come to see for herself who were enemies were. However, as Lord Tyrell mentioned to me later, it seemed Queen Daenerys, now confronted with her enemy, could see how similar they both were. Jon Snow had been right in his words.

They were only two women, with two crowns…

But only a single Throne.

"I will fight by your side, Lady Baratheon," Daenerys spoke, standing firm by her dragon's side. She was arrogant, I can say that. "I will even let the bad blood between your father and my brother be in the past. Maybe we don't deserve to pay for their crimes. Maybe we have suffered enough." She paused, looking directly into Myrcella's eyes. "But you must bend the knee before I summon my army from Dragonstone."

"I won't bend the knee," Myrcella spoke, laughing lightly. She kept caressing her belly as if insisting on showing how pregnant she was. "Even if I wanted, my body wouldn't allow me."

"Then I'm afraid I have nothing else to say, Lady Baratheon."

"But I have, Lady Targaryen." Myrcella retorted quickly, answering in the same coin. "My cousin Shireen is bringing an army manned by your enemies. She intends to depose me and rally the Houses sworn to me to fight against you. Is that what you want?"

"Why should I stop Baratheon go against Baratheon? It would be the sweetest revenge. I could just wait on Dragonstone, watching from afar the Usurper's descendants destroy themselves against my enemies… Before marching against your ruins and take my sit."

"Oh, have you forgotten your people then?" Queen Myrcella seemed prepared for that. "You may have dragons, Targaryen… But you don't have the people's love, do you? Nor the ability to lead. What you did back in Essos was glorious, yes. I heard your deeds from afar, and secretly I admired your bravery defying the rules of this world. The Mother of Dragons, they called you. However, in the end, you failed your people, the ones who trusted you. Are you willing to fail them again, from the very start?"

I still remember the hurt in Queen Daenerys’ eyes when those words were spoken. It was then, right there, that I read the Dragon Queen for what she was. She was not mad like her father, nor fair like her brother Rhaegar. She was just a little girl, trying to find her home, wherever that was.

"If you don’t join me, the city will likely fall. My people, your people… our people will be raped, killed or put to chains, to be sold across the Narrow Sea by the same slavers you stopped once. Is that your dream, Targaryen?"

"You don’t know me, Baratheon. Don’t pretend you do."
“Then let me know you.” Myrcella replied. “Let your people know you. Put aside your hatred. Don’t fight for me, but with me.” She repeated the words Jon Snow had told her the night before, as the Wolf Rider also wrote to his brother Rickon. “Help me defend this city and its people. Do that, and we may reach an agreement.”

And then something happened, something that was unexpected.

Queen Myrcella removed her crown and gave it to Queen Daenerys as if offering a gift.

“There is more at stake now than crowns and thrones. Help me defend our kingdom from invasion and we will build together the future of this land.”

Daenerys Targaryen took the crown, and stared at it for a few seconds, before finally nodding.

No terms were defined, just a single act was done.

And thus, atop the Rhaenys Hill, two women started healing a wound opened by their ancestors. Another Baratheon and another Targaryen shook hands, sealing an alliance. Dreaming together about the future of the Seven Kingdoms.

They were not friends, but they weren’t also enemies.

They were something else.
Chapter VII

The Corpse Delay

An alliance and a truce.

Events were set into motion as the menace of war shaped itself. As armies were gathered, regiments divided and strategies discussed in tents and rooms of the Red Keep, someone else plotted a few surprises taking advantage of the moment and time.

A secret brewing for a few months came out to light.

This particular secret was terrible, bringing the memory of death and loss, shaking the Alliance to its core on the brink of war. But I will narrate everything properly, as a good storyteller must do.

After sustaining the siege of Storm's End for two weeks, the two hundred men commanded by Tommen Baratheon were taken by surprise by another army, coming from the South. At least, that was the report that reached the capital. A brief battle happened at Storm's End's gates, that ended with Tommen being captured. As if that wasn't troublesome as it was, there was a rumor that the army was composed by westerosi: Houses from the Stormlands, which the bastards had won over to Shireen's cause. Penrose, Mertyns, Buckler, Errol and Trant had allegedly been seen marching by some of the informants the Queen had in the Stormlands.

That meant Shireen Baratheon was getting close.

But the news of Tommen Baratheon's capture shook the court, as it was expected. During the urgent alliance debate regarding Storm's End – in which Queen Daenerys was already present –, it was decided that Robb Stark and Jon Snow would lead an army through the Kingswood to bring war to Storm's End before Shireen's arrival.

Queen Daenerys, who had installed herself on the Dragonpit with Jon Snow and both their dragons, decided to stay behind. Her army was one day away, and she wanted to be there to receive them. Arya Stark would also remain at the capital, commanding and training the northern army with her uncle Edmure.

Thus, preparations were under way for Robb Stark to leave in a day, taking an army of five thousand men to take Storm's End back. His brother Jon would accompany him, as well as Alyn Ambrose, commanding men from the Reach.

The Council meeting, however, was interrupted by an expected event: Queen Myrcella's waters broke. She had entered in labor.

The capture of her brother, and the proximity of Queen Shireen, made the pregnancy end earlier than it was supposed. The baby wasn't expected for a few days. Even so, it was a long labor. Only after seven hours it was revealed at court that Queen Myrcella had given birth to a boy, which she named after his uncle, Tommen Arryn. The Red Keep and the city celebrated the birth of Tommen Arryn, while the rumors of what had befallen the other Tommen spread through the taverns.
Adding to those rumors, there were also others: people kept whispering that Daenerys Targaryen was jealous of Queen Myrcella. As the bells rang in celebration, the Mother of Dragons mounted Drogon to fly for a few hours outside the city.

The queens could have agreed on a truce, but in a truce, there is always a wall. They were allies, but not true allies. They weren't enemies, because it wasn't the time yet to face each other. They could be fighting together now, but an awkwardness divided these two women. Yes, Myrcella could have removed her crown, but she had the Iron Throne, the love of the people and now she had even an heir. It was clear Queen Daenerys felt strange, walking the halls built by her ancestors, wondering if she would ever walk them as the sole ruler of the Seven Kingdoms. But Myrcella was not the only one with points in her favor: she still didn't have a dragon.

But enough of Queen Daenerys' feelings.

Let's take a look now at what happened during that fateful night.

Death paid a visit in King's Landing in an unexpected way.

Finding the protections around her lower than usual, and fearing what had happened to her younger child, the Dowager Queen plotted in the dark, with the help of an old friend: Qyburn. So, while celebrations continued all over the city in honor of Prince Tommen Arryn, the Starks were surprised in their residence by five assassins…

And the reanimated corpse of their mother, Lady Catelyn.

The assassins were quickly subdued, but Lady Catelyn's corpse left Robb and Arya Stark paralyzed in terror as soon as the turmoil of the assassins woken them up. With swords in hand, they confront their mother: but the woman was just a corpse, reanimated by the strange and morbid arts of Qyburn, and not the strange and evil forces from the North. Her flesh was rotten, her bones visible under the skin and her head had been sew back to her body, since it had been severed by Ser Jaime's blade. I had the opportunity to see with my own eyes the corpse, before it was delivered to the Silent Sisters. The woman allegedly tried to speak, but she couldn't say a word. There is a rumor that she even tried to hug them.

It was Lord Edmure who advanced against the rotten woman, setting her to fire, thus putting an end to the reanimated life in the shell that had been his sister. After that, one of the assassins captured was interrogated. It seemed the cutthroat spoke before dying to the blade of Arya Stark: he had been sent by a maester living in Flea Bottom, that had been paid directly by the Queen herself. Immediately, Robb Stark rode to the Red Keep and asked for an audience with the Queen at the middle of the night.

Could Myrcella have betrayed the Starks in such a way?

I still remember the yelling echoing through Maegor's Holdfast, and Queen Myrcella inability to answer the accusations made by Lord Stark while her newborn babe cried at the arms of a milk maid. The Queen was disheveled, tired from childbirth and couldn't made sense of what her ally was saying to her.

The alliance was shaken at its most crucial hour.

The departure of Robb Stark to the Storm's Land, of course, was delayed. An investigation followed next day, led by Arya Stark, Jon Snow and the commander of the City Watch.

The man Qyburn was quickly traced to a workshop in Flea Bottom in less than two hours. Different
proofs were found in the small warehouse, confirming Lady Catelyn's body had been hidden there for some time… and that there were also letters from Queen Cersei, with instructions to set a trap to the Starks. Allegedly, Qyburn had kept the corpse of Lady Catelyn by order of Queen Cersei, to use it so she could avenge Ser Jaime. In fact, when questioned, the Dowager Queen confessed her crimes right away, claiming she wanted every Stark dead.

"My son is dead. Tommen is dead. Joffrey is dead. The valonqar… All these years, I have been wrong about the valonqar. It was the bastards of bloody Robert, all of them. The valonqars. I feel it in my bones now."

It seems this "valonqar" was part of the prophecy made to Queen Cersei when she was a young girl. The Dowager Queen used to believe it meant "little brother", translated from the high valyrian. However, I have studied the arts of translation and valonqar can have many meanings.

Little brother, younger brother, brother of blood.

Bastard brother.

The valonqars, the bastards of Robert Baratheon, were behind the death of Joffrey Baratheon. Could they also kill Tommen, captured at the hands of Mya Stone? And even Queen Myrcella? Only time could tell.

"And I want the blood of the Starks to satiate my need of vengeance. They may not have killed my sons, but they killed my brother." Queen Cersei yelled, taken to a cell in Maegor's Holdfast, stripped from all her livery and comfort.

Cersei couldn't get over the loss of her brother and the fear for her son's fate. In fact, when she calmed herself, she kept insisting she wanted the blood of Arya Stark. Yes, she could accept that the Starks had been played by Shireen Baratheon, just like her… but Arya Stark had killed Ser Jaime Lannister willingly, as she kept repeating to anyone who would hear her.

Qyburn received a brief trial and was executed in public, but Queen Cersei's punishment would have to be postponed.

"I apologize for my mother's acts, Lord Stark and Lady Stark." Myrcella apologized later that day, still tired from labor. "As well as to you, Lord Tully". She added. "But those ignominious acts don't speak for me… or my intentions. I honor this alliance since the very first day, and I hope you still do. The pain my mother is enduring took the best of her, though… it's a heavy burden, so I apologize for this madness. My lady mother will be kept at Maegor's Holdfast until the war is done, and then will leave for Casterly Rock. I promise."

Arya Stark wanted more than Qyburn's head, tough.

"I want the head of your mother for the head of mine." Arya bellowed on the Red Keep.

Even so, that price wouldn't be paid. Once again, maintaining a pacifist position, Robb Stark swayed her sister. Justice would have to be postponed. Once the war was done, they would force Queen Myrcella to judge the Dowager Queen properly. Arya refused to accept that and threw to her brother face.

"Even after all we have lost, you are still the Cowardly Wolf, aren't you?". She left him then.

Could the Starks siblings turn against each other again?

"Don't let these terrible crimes instigate more blood, sister." I heard Robb Stark scream after his
sister, when she walked down the hall to leave the keep. "Our alliance is with the daughter, and not the mother."

Nevertheless, Arya Stark didn't turn to face his brother and disappeared in the taverns of Flea Bottom for a few hours, to drown the terrors of the night on the bottom of a mug, certainly.

Meanwhile, Catelyn Stark remnants were delivered to the Silent Sisters, as I have told you before, and prepared to leave for the North. She would be entombed next to Eddard Stark's empty grave, since his body had never been recovered from the Battle of Wolfswood.

And thus, at a high price, the alliance managed to survive, even though there were still many cracks. Justice had been postponed. Tommen Baratheon was captive in Storm's End. Myrcella Baratheon tired from childbirth. Cersei Lannister deranged by grief. Robb and Arya Stark at odds again.

And, as rumors said, Queen Daenerys was amused, laughing among her soldiers and talking about the Queen on the Iron Throne in high valyrian. I don't believe in those evil rumors, even though the talks about jealousy between the two queens were indeed strong in every anecdote told in the public plazas of the city during those days.

The horrid incident, however, delayed Lord Stark's departure to Storm's End by a day. And even today, after so many years, I wonder: would the outcome of the Battle of the Kingswood been different if Robb Stark and Jon Snow had left the city in time?

We will never know, I'm afraid.

Chapter End Notes

Tome III is done after this. We have only Tome IV left (with 5 chapters, each one per day).

To end this Tome, I want to remember a part of chapter 25 Cersei IV, when she is next to Joffrey and Jaime's bodies and receives a visit from Qyburn:

"Lord Randyll Tarly paid me a visit just a few hours ago to poke around and make questions about Lady Catelyn's body."

"I don't want to hear her name." Cersei snarled, digging her nails into the flesh of her hand. "Well, it's best if we remove her from the keep. Lord Randyll may be in our pocket, but the other ones are not. I'll deal with Tyrion soon enough, but we must prepare. For now, they may be too busy talking about war and making new kings, but soon enough they will start looking for it. So, I believe it's better if the body is taken out of the keep. Hide it somewhere in the city, in a place where you can work and—"

"Your Grace, I can take care of the woman's dead body." He assured. "It's about the ones who live I'm afraid—"

Cersei shook her head.

"No." She insisted, her eyes wide open. "Her body is of the utmost importance, Qyburn."

So, that's it. I was really looking forward for this scene and ending. I'm glad, once again,
to have shared it with you and managed to exploit Lady Stoneheart's twist. Share with me your review, let me know if you liked it.
Before getting to the war, I want to share some light over the events that happened in the Stormlands while the capital was getting ready. According to Maester Gerd, serving at Storm's End during these eventful times, the remaining bastards of Robert Baratheon gathered at the castle, now commanded by Mia Stone and septa Bella. Although the septa had been sworn to the Faith of the Seven, she served the Lord of Light since she had joined Shireen's cause. As it was tradition, as soon as the castle fell and Lord Estermont was executed, Septa Bella dragged the statues of the Seven from the sept and delivered them to the flames of the Lord of Light.

"I was fooled for years." Her words echoed through the courtyard, carried by the wind as the flames leaped high. "But these false idols are nothing but rotten wood and lies. Embrace the Lord of Light before the burning of the world."

As fires were lit beyond walls, riders came five days later through the night, mounting a siege around Storm's End. Tommen Baratheon, now called Lord – because the title of Prince, as decided by the Small Council, could remind the people about who he had truly been for a few weeks – had gathered men from the stormlands, as asked by his sister. The bastards defended the castle from its inside, throwing rocks and firing arrows, but causing little impact against the army waiting in full force at its gates. Mia Stone not only refused to parley or negotiate a surrender with Tommen Baratheon, as she was also convinced by Septa Bella to burn a prisoner a day, on the battlements of the castle, to send a warning to all the men trying to attack them.

“Every night, while I hear the screams from the men burning, I wonder: will it be me on the stake tomorrow?”, wrote Maester Gerd. In his diary, recovered after the end of the war, the Maester lists the names of every man, woman and even child dying under the orders of the bastards.

But the bastards worked also, day and night, to their queen’s causes.

As I have reported previously, ravens were sent from Storm's End, bringing word to the Seven Kingdoms about Queen's Myrcella character. They spread a concoction of truth and lies that little damaged did to the queen’s reputation since she was truly loved by most of her people.

However, a pair of bastards was not at Storm's End at the time: the obscure Phineas and Lewis Waters, twin bastards to Robert Baratheon, were traveling from castle to castle, recruiting the support of the stormlords to their queen's cause. They spread words about riches and justice, promises of
rewards such as titles and lands snatched to the traitors of King's Landing. A few lords refused to swear their swords to Queen Shireen, but many who had fought with Stannis Baratheon joined the cause of their daughter, believing she truly had a chance to win.

Years later, maesters still wonder about how many lords favored the cause of a queen with a claim so weak to the Iron Throne. I remind you that she could have the blood in her veins, but her army was made of sellswords, her advisors were women that trickled with blood magic and her character was almost unknown throughout the realm she claimed was hers. Many of my colleagues of the Citadel, who study the processes of the mind, try to argue that those men were moved by a sense of loyalty. But I don't believe that. Fire tricks and games of shadow: I truly believe the twins knew the ways of the Red God and were able to bewitch, maybe even show, glimpses of what was to come.

Thus, when Tommen Baratheon was at the point of breaking the siege, the men standing the siege at his side took swords against him. Messengers came in the night, ordering the soldiers to turn their cloaks. Tommen was surprised at his tent during the night and captured by his own squire, who put him in chains. The castle gates were open on the morrow, and Lord Tommen was delivered to the bastards as a war trophy. The bastards worked in advance, even to the point of assuring the spies placed by Queen Myrcella would spread lies, assuring that King's Landing wouldn't truly know what was happening.

In fact, many events never reached the capital until the war was done.

“You will burn and cast light for the Lord of the Light’s cause…” Septa Bella screamed on that very same evening, as recorded by Maester Gerd. “Even if I have more royal blood than you.” She allegedly spat on Lord Tommen’s face, before throwing the torch, watching him being swallowed by flames.

And thus, ended the life of Tommen Baratheon, First of His Name, remembered to this day as the Uncrowned. The prince born to be a lord, the man forced to take a crown and also to give it up.

It seemed events were really on the verge of happening from this point onwards.

A small fleet landed on the shores of Griffin’s Roost a day later.

The Queen herself was among that group that was also composed, as we believe today, of twenty-seven thousand swords. With the ones waiting on Storm’s End, that meant the queen had at her disposal around twenty-nine thousand swords. Once again, no word came to Myrcella that her cousin, as well as her lady mother Queen Selyse and Lady Melisandre were installed on Storm’s End. No one knew yet that Queen Shireen had landed, or even where…

The “where” was, indeed, a good question.

Queen Myrcella’s War Council was preparing for two scenarios: Shireen sailing directly to King’s Landing or joining first the bastards at Storm's End to put an end to the siege. So, when news came about Lord Tommen’s capture (but not his death), it was decided that Robb Stark would leave to Storm’s End with an army. What they didn’t know was that Shireen had already landed… and that Edric Storm still sailed, onwards North and along the Narrow Sea, to land other thirty-thousand swords at Duskendale.

Stannis Baratheon had committed the mistake of sailing through Blackwater Bay.

But Edric Storm knew better: he was the mind behind the strategy and had devised a plan to crush King's Landing from both sides. An army would come from Storm's End, through the Kingswood,
as another would descend from the North, down the King's Road. They would force their rival's army to divide, using different strategies along the way, so that the city could easily fall.

Up until he landed in Westeros, Edric didn't know, of course, that two dragons had joined Queen Myrcella's cause. Even so, he was decided to risk putting in motion his idea. The initial plan was that the army marching from the south would appear as an attack surprise, striking the King Gate and the River Gate through the land, while the army led by him would tackle the northern gates.

But the Bastards devised a plan of their own, colluding with Lady Melisandre in their firsts days in Storm’s End. A spy, hidden amongst the midst of the court of Queen Myrcella, sent word about Robb Stark marching toward Storm’s End. The delay Robb Stark had to endure in the capital gave the bastards even more time to prepare. Maester Gerd writes that he saw Phineas and Lewis Waters mounting their horses and leaving the castle, taking with them a carriage filled with what he suspected to be wildfire. Eleven other men left with them.

Little can be said about the Battle of the Kingswood.

Some don’t even consider it a battle. The Trap of the Thirteen, they call it.

Robb Stark rode through the woods with his men, while Jon Snow scouted the way ahead mounted on his dragon. When Snow saw the army out posted outside Storm’s End, with his thirty-five thousand swords, he got back to his brother immediately. They were not prepared to deal with such a force. But if they were to get back, bringing more men, they could tackle Storm’s End and even end that war right there.

“Go to King’s Landing now, then.” Robb Stark told his brother. “You will reach the city in less than an hour. Get to Queen Myrcella and bring me more men. We will get back to the woods’ edge, where I will be waiting for you, brother.”

Jon Snow agreed, hugged his brother and left immediately on the back of his dragon. They would meet again in a few hours, ready to resume their march. Or so they believed.

The bastard twins and the eleven men who had traveled with them were hiding in the woods. As Robb Stark and his men turned back to the capital, the Thirteen set fire to the trees, creating a ring of fire that surrounded the army. Maester Gerd reports that Queen Shireen had brought with her a considerable amount of wildfire, bought from the Pyromancers of Pentos… and I think likely that some of that wildfire was watered down on the Kingswood ground, because the fire quickly took shape and it burned high and bright, painting the night in shades of emerald.

From the battlements of King’s Landing, soldiers saw the woods burning. Jon Snow, gathering more men with Lord Tyrell and his sister Arya, left immediately to aid his brother. Queen Daenerys also mounted her dragon, following her nephew to the flaming forest.

But it was late for Lord Stark.

Robb Stark, the hero of the Small Night and a true Warden of the North, perished in the Battle of the Kingswood. His body was never found, reduced to ashes among the arid and burnt plain that become the wood. Of the ten thousand men who rode with him, only four thousand managed to survive, and most of them scarred.

Jon Snow wanted to bring war to Storm's End, and fire down the castle to pay the crime in the same coin. But Daenerys stopped him in time. She would go with him to claim his vengeance, but not at that moment, not that day. They would never return from such a battle, nor their dragons… and if she had learned something from her time in Essos, it was that nothing could be done with the right
“When we strike against her, we strike to win.” She said, embracing Jon on the edge of the burning Kingswood. “We will hear them scream.”

Yes, yes, it is safe to say that Queen Shireen had been underestimated. The Alliance of King’s Landing didn’t know what else she had upon her sleeve and that heavy defeat had claimed already two lords and many good soldiers. So, the dragons returned to King’s Landing, bringing the grim news of defeat and death.

It really is sad, though, how history often lies.

Let me remind you what I have told many pages ago, about Queen Shireen’s character. Those horrible acts, that ignoble war, all those bloody deeds: it was all being done in her name. The burning heart sigil was her sigil, a symbol that history would remember as a sign of pain. However, I want to get some justice to the young queen: I daresay she was often unaware of what was happening around her. In fact, there is proof that little was told to her to prevent disturbing her poor nerves. Maester Gerd, on his notes, tells that Queen Shireen was not the true queen on Storm’s End since she was confined to her chambers with men placed at her doors.

“Sometimes I think the young queen is nothing more than a pretext to something greater, something that I can understand”, wrote Maester Gerd. He was not far from the truth. “It’s clear that the true queen here is the red woman.”

The enigmatic figure of Lady Melisandre, the red priestess of which we know so little. Keeping always Queen Selyse at her side, she gathered the commanders of Shireen’s army, as well as the stormlords and the bastards, on the feast hall after Lord Robb’s death.

"Look how the woods burn, my lords." She said, before all of them. "How fire purifies this consecrated land and honors the Lord of Light." Her eyes brightened as if a fire burned inside her. That is how Maester Gerd described the woman that night. "This is the M'IIlendom, my lords. This is the time of R'hllor. Let the song of Fire spread through the Seven Kingdoms, and the Shadow bless us with knowledge. Let's make a pyre with our enemies."

And then, the nine Baratheon bastards remaining – Lewis and Phineas had perished in the very same fires they had lit that night - willingly delivered themselves into a pyre of wildfire. And their screams echoed through the castle as the flames still burnt brightly on the Kingswood. After that, more lords from the Stormlands came, bringing more men to fill the queen's ranks. They had heard, of course, about the Battle of the Kingswood and, more than respect or a sense of loyalty, it was clear now why they joined the cause: they feared to be on the wrong side.

And all this time, when men were burned on the woods and bastards set afire on a stake, Queen Shireen screamed behind doors, asking to be released.

“My heart goes to the poor child, locked as a prisoner.” Maester Gerd wrote, referring to Queen Shireen. “I believe she understands now how the red woman intends to engulf this world in flames, and all in her name.” In his diary, the Maester goes even far to wonder what would happen if he were to free the queen and get her to safety. But he never summoned the courage to do so.

When the morrow came, the sky was painted red, ashes falling on the ground like snow. The smell of burnt flesh was carried by the wind. It seemed the world was ending like it had ended to Valyria during the Doom. As new fires were lit along the battlements, the Queen's army prepared to march against King's Landing at last. A raven had come from Edric Storm assuring he had landed on Duskendale and was also ready to march south. Queen Shireen would stay behind, with her lady
mother, but she would join her army as soon as the capital was taken.

Lady Melisandre would accompany the soldiers, though. Last time she had been away from the battlefield, Stannis had died, and his fleet had been destroyed. She wouldn't let the same thing happen again. Even though, strangely, she seemed in no condition to ride: she had grown pregnant overnight when her body had been slender and plain right the night before.
Well, the next chapters are tricky. I'm not only getting close to the end, but I'm also writing scenes about military strength. A few of you have been reviewing about tactics, and I thank you a lot: it's not my strength and I'm learning a lot with you. This chapter I introduced a few elements that George R. R. Martin never mentioned in his books (at least, I don't remember and I haven't found any detail about that in my investigations): The Kingsbridge. I introduced here this bridge only to justify the whole plot and it because it seemed realistic enough to have a bridge so connect both banks.

Regarding the plot of the Barge Bridge, I got my inspiration from an episode of Portuguese History. There was a bridge made of boats, allowing people to cross a river between both banks, during the second french invasion led by Napoleon in 1817. It seemed a clever plan to set yet another trap, and divide the forces of the Alliance and placing Shireen's army almost intact at the gates of the capital. Well, let me know what you think, and be gentle about your reviews.

How many chapters are left? Well, I had to make some decisions today, and I will edit the first page of Grand Maester Yandel's tome, but Tome IV will have 4 more chapters. And guess what... one of them I will update later today.

Chapter II

The Smoke Army

307 AC

There were tears shed for Robb Stark, of course, but there was no time to grieve him. If news about Tommen Baratheon had also reached King's Landing by that time, tears would have also been shed for him. However, at this time, the lord was still presumed to be a prisoner.

The Starks took the blow sorely.

They had lost much since Ned Stark had marched to King's Landing.

Arya Stark, back on the Palace of the Lords, swore to kill Queen Shireen for taking from her so many people: her sister, her nephew, her friend and now even her brother. Yes, she had been at odds with her brother when Robb had left, but she cared for him enough to avenge him. With the promised of vengeance, she left the palace to grieve with the soldiers and northern lords positioned on the outskirts of the city, waiting for war. Many heard howls that night as if the northerners had a pack of wolves among themselves.

Almost naturally, Arya was quickly accepted as the Lady of Winterfell, and commander of the Northern army. Rickon Stark, the male heir, was too far away and Robb Stark hadn't fathered any child… at least, that it was public knowledge at the time. Besides, many of those men had fought with Arya Stark in the name of Prince Edwyle, were willing to now for House Stark, and to avenge all the dead.
"Because the North remembers!" She bellowed that night, in the encampment of her army, raising a mug of beer. And the men howled and cried and screamed with her.

The North remembered well enough.

Jon Snow didn't join the grieving army on their somber feast.

Back on the city, he invaded the War Council room at the Red Keep.

The battle at the Kingswood had thrown Queen Myrcella's advisers in disarray. The city was prepared for battle, the walls properly armed, but the wildfire had brought an unexpected weapon into play. Yes, the Queen in the capital also had at her disposal a few hundred flasks of wildfire, as well as dragons, but Shireen could equal their odds with that. A few catapults launched toward a gate could easily blow it.

"I guess she learned something after her father's loss." Lord Willas said, somberly.

Queen Myrcella was absent from the Last War Council. As I have said it before, only her advisors had been thrown in disarray, since the queen herself was still locked behind chambers with her babe. Although Lord Willas said she was indisposed due to the childbirth, my examinations showed she was recovering pretty well. I don't like to hear the general court gossip, but it seemed the few people that lasted were right: the queen was grieving Robb Stark's death.

Speaking of queens, the Dragon Queen was also late to the Council, but not absent. Her army of Unsullied had finally reached the city, being encamped on the grounds between the Gate of the Gods and the Lion Gate. She had been there, electing new generals and commanders. Accompanying her was Ser Loras Tyrell, the very same man one day called the Knight of Flowers, but who now wore the armor of a sellsword. He was the commander of the Dragon Queen's army. The reunion between the Tyrell siblings was brief and silent, quickly done with the brothers shaking hands like old friends and getting to work.

"It seems she is marching from Storm's End." Said Lord Aurane Waters, passing a note that had reached the Council the night before. An informant had sent a raven. "She is advancing through the Kingswood…"

"But not alone." Told Daenerys Targaryen, passing the news that had reached her ear that morning. It seemed the Dragon Queen had already her informants in the Seven Kingdoms, which told much about her future intentions. "I'm afraid the fool is trying to make a fool out of us. An army sworn to her landed somewhere North of the capital."

An ominous friend of the Queen – that would later be revealed as the Magister Illyrio Mopatis – had heard rumors among his peers about the war devised to bring down the rulers of the Seven Kingdoms. Shireen was allegedly preparing a trap: she would cause a distraction on the south bank of the Blackwater Rush with a small force of men while her true army would march from the North. So, Shireen wanted the army from the capital focused on the battle South… while her other army attacked the city from the North.

It was decided then, during the last council, that they wouldn't fall into Shireen's trap. The forces were then divided strategically. A fleet commanded by Aurane Waters would defend the city from Blackwater Bay. It was expected that Shireen would also bring a fleet of sorts to fight the city and land men somewhere. But if the informants were right, thousands of men would also try to cross the Kingsbridge – an ancient bridge linking the two banks of the Blackwater Rush, built during King Jaeharys's reign.
"We could bring the bridge down." Ser Loras suggested.

"No," Daenerys said. "We must not let them go near the bridge. We must take the fight out of the city's outskirts, to secure its safety."

The Council agreed with that, especially since the city was receiving more and more refugees every day, fearing the war throughout the realm. It should be secured, and part of that safety passed by taking the fight away.

So, Aurane Waters and the royal fleet would defend the city aboard their ships, prepared to launch flasks of wildfire to any enemy ship seen on the horizon. First, however, they would carry the armies of the Reach and the Riverlands to the other side of the shore so they could maintain the fight there. Those armies would be commanded by Ser Willam Whithers and Lord Edmure. A part of the Unsullied Army would also fight in this front, led by Ser Loras Tyrell.

On the other hand, Arya Stark and Harry Hardyng would command the armies from the North and the Vale up along the Kingsroad. Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen would lead the charge from the sky, mounting their dragons. Thus, it was expected that the fight could be easily won.

"We should also close our gates." Willas Tyrell said. "Thieves, traitors, rapists… all sort of scoundrels take advantages of our people during these times. I'm sure the Queen will back me up on this decision."

"The Queen doesn't back you up, Lord Willas." Daenerys intervened, smiling. "Since I'm the only Queen sitting in this council today, I won't hear of closing the gates to our people. The gates will stay open, and anyone asking for help will be welcomed. At least, until the moment I say otherwise."

"Your Grace, with due respect, but Queen Myrcella…" I even tried to sway the Targaryen decision.

"It's not here." Daenerys replied, coldly. "So, if she has another opinion on the matter, she can find me on my encampment and convince me otherwise."

That settled the issue.

Lord Martyn Lannister, with the small army from the Westerlands, would stay in the city, joining forces with the City Watch to reinforce the gates. Even so, this plan was based on the premise that war would never come to the capital.

War was coming, but only three days later.

During that time, food and supplies were restocked, men polished their swords, armies moved to their places. Some fled, too. Hundreds from the small folk left the city, gathering all their belongings and barring their doors so that invaders wouldn't easily break in. Refugees kept coming, but many grew fearful of what would happen to them if the city were to fall. Would they be delivered to the Red God? A few even set fire to their houses, preaching for the Lord of Light, proving the fear imposed by the Stag Queen and the burning of the Kingswood was making its influence even in the capital.

The City Watch acted swiftly, putting in chains any man, woman or even child that praised to the Red God or committed any kind of crime. They would be locked until the battle happened, to prevent the city to fall into chaos. It's no surprise that a day after this order was issued, the dungeons were full to the brim of people brought in by the goldcloaks.

Two days after the Last War Council, the armies moved, at last, to take their places.
First, I must focus on the fight that happened on the south, the infamous plot of the Barge Bridge that inspired so many songs since.

The army of King's Landing had in total around sixty-two thousand swords when the force was divided. Aurane Waters and the royal ship were manned with three thousand men, while around twenty-five thousand were led through the Kingsbridge to the south bank of Blackwater Rush, marching ten miles south into the Kingswood. The remainder of the army, around thirty-five men, had march North with the dragons.

In the smoky plains were once had stood the Kingswood, a battle finally happened when an army of twenty-thousand men advanced against the force led by Lord Edmure, Ser Loras and Ser William. A battle ensued in this charred land, swords clashing against swords. Meanwhile, a small fleet – of around thirty ships carrying the Stag Queen sigil – invaded the Blackwater Bay, so the battle was also happening in the high sea as the War Council had expected.

Aurane Waters managed to board one of the enemy's ships, the very same ship that had wildfire – we don't know how many flasks, but a few of them, for sure – and that exploded seconds later. As flames engulfed both the ships of Queen Shireen and Queen Myrcella, the war seemed to be reenacting a battle from the past: the Blackwater Battle that ended with Stannis Baratheon's cause. However, it was clear Shireen's fleet didn't wanted to invade the city: no, the only purpose of the fleet was to destroy the other fleet.

As green flames engulfed the black waters of the rush, rain started to spplater the ground, revealing something on the battlefield. The army fighting on the Kingswood, calling for the Stag Queen, would be later known as the Smoke Army. While they fought for their queen against the Unsullied and men from the Riverlands and the Reach, those sellswords were merely causing a distraction, as Magister Illyrio had shared.

But not the trap the Council had anticipated.

The battlefield was cleared of the host of soldiers, sellswords, and knights fighting for the Baratheon Queen. As told Ser Loras later, the men disappeared into thin air, as if they had not been there. The men had been made of smoke and ashes, as if the woods had burnt down to shape that shadow army. Only two hundred men, real men, with the burning heart on their armors were found among the dead. All the other had been an illusion, concocted by a witch, likely the Red Woman Melisandre. This was a time of darkness and magic.

It was not random that these events are known today as the Shadow Time. There were shadows dancing and fighting on the shores of King's Landing, produced by light, blood magic and fire.

So, if the army was not there, where was it? On the ships fighting the fleet of Queen Myrcella? It was unlikely, as Ser Loras soon understood. A few men could be there, yes, but they couldn't be the majority of the army that had left Storm's End. The ships couldn't carry such a force. Oh, no.

Well, only later the truth came out: while everyone believed Shireen's forces were marching directly to King's Landing, they took a detour. The true army of Shireen Baratheon had marched West, after leaving Storm's End, and then they had advanced North until they reached the banks of the Blackwater Rush, a few miles down the capital. But how would they cross to the other side?

Not through the Kingsbridge, as expected.

The Bastards, once again, had plotted in advance and even though they were all presumed dead – except Edric Storm – they had left something behind. A legacy of sorts. Their servants were awaiting
the queen's army with a bridge made of boats, knotted together with ropes and chains. The bridge had one purpose only: provide a way for the army to cross the river, silently, where no men should be able to attempt such a cross. After crossing to the other side, the army quickly resumed its march, striking the King's Gate by surprise as night was falling.

A squad of twenty men advanced quietly to the Kingsbridge and did what the War Council had refused to commit: they exploded the bridge using wildfire for the second time, locking half of the force sworn to Myrcella Baratheon on the wrong side of the Blackwater Rush.

As Shireen's men gathered by each one of the gates of the city, Martyn Lannister and the City Watch prepared to defend the city. However, besides their numeric inferiority, they had enemies also behind walls: mobs started rising in Flea Bottom and the sellswords infiltrated in the city emerged from their pits and barracks, striking against the goldcloaks.
Chapter III

The Battle of the Kingsroad

King's Landing was under attack.

But before looking to that, let us focus now on the fight happening on the Kingsroad while all these events unfurled south. It was a brief fight and, unlike the disaster that happened south, the Alliance managed a victory. As you may recall, when the dragons and the major force of the Alliance army marched North, they were sure to encounter the majority of Shireen's army, led by Edric Storm.

And they found them, and it was indeed a great army, but not what they expected.

There was no magic involved in the process… but wildfire and dragons.

The Northern army rode North and met the forces of Edric Storm miles before reaching Rosby. When Arya Stark advanced against the opposing army, wildfire flasks were thrown by Edric's army using a catapult. Some of the flasks landed among the Alliance forces, but others failed completely. According to what Arya Stark later told, many good men were lost to the flames, even though the wildfire was nothing compared to the fire rained down by the dragons.

In less than an hour, the army – mainly composed of sellswords sworn to companies in Essos – disbanded in terror towards the walls of Duskendale or were decimated under the dragon fire. An explosion happened when the flames reached the carriage carting the flasks of wildfire: men, horses, and carriages were blown away through the air.

Edric Storm managed to gather a few men, to strike against the army of Arya Stark that advanced in open battlefield. However, the sellswords were hard to command and many had given up the gold that had been promised. In fact, a few companies got away from the flames early enough, in the hope they could take Duskendale and sail back home after plundering the city.

The offensive led by Edric failed completely in everything, except in one thing: using a giant arbalest, with an iron spike thirty feet long, a soldier that songs would recall as Lenn the Dragondreamer shoot the weapon against Rhaegal. The iron spike was pointed to the creature's breast, but it pierced his left hinder foot instead. A rain of hot blood rained on the soldiers, as the battle came to an end.

The dragon roared in pain, raining down more flames. Fire set aflame both enemy forces, as well as Alliance soldiers. Finally, Jon Snow – still mounting the creature – managed to bring the dragon down to remove the iron spike. Queen Daenerys joined him minutes after, worried with Rhaegal, and helping Jon Snow to successfully remove the spike.

By that time, Arya Stark and her army managed to achieve victory and capture Edric Storm. The She-Wolf of Winterfell had at the point of her sword the very same man that had been behind most of the plans that ruined her family. Even so, she didn't execute him.

"Take him to Duskendale." She said, sheathing her sword. "Justice will be later served to you, bastard."

"But will it really, bitch?" He asked, spitting to her feet. He laughed something that disturbed Arya Stark more than anything. "We will see to that soon enough."
As her army was led toward Duskendale by Harry Hardyng – that would prevent the Sack of Duskendale by fighting the deserting sellswords -, Arya Stark joined Jon Snow and Daenerys, still tending the wounds of the dragon near a cliff.

"You should fly back to King's Landing." She said, as soon as they heard her. "The battle is done here, but Edric Storm said something… I'm not sure this is it. I think something else coming."

She was right.

"Rhaegal is wounded." Jon Snow said. "But he needs his wings, more than the legs. I think he can do it…" He looked to the creature, as Arya later told as if the dragon was indeed his companion. "Can't you, old fellow?"

The dragon blinked and roared, shooting a column of fire toward the sky.

"Go ahead," Arya said to them. "I will gather a few men after make sure Duskendale is properly garrisoned and I will join you back in the city."

And so, Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow got back on their dragons and flew toward King's Landing as night settled around them. Smoke and fire were left behind, scorching the spot of the Kingsroad that is today known as the place where Edric Storm was defeated. Some children still climb those rocks, trying to find stones stained with dry blood from the green dragon.

However, we must now look to King's Landing again and to the last battle of this fateful years.

The Battle of the Seven Gates.
Chapter Notes

Sometimes I wonder: what would become of this story if I had written with the POV’s original structure? Well, I would have needed quite a few chapters to explore the events happening on this one. Some of the ideas have been in my head for a while, so please let me see your reviews. In fact, as we are approaching now the end of the story, its important for me to have your reviews, either they are bad or good. If you are reading in the shadows, say hi and let me know what you thought of all this. I know the are some mistakes and weaker points in the military strategies presented, but despite that I hope you can enjoy this read and the twists.

On the other hand, a lot of you has placed a few questions about a character that has been missing from Grand Maester Yandel's chronicle. You know who it is, if you are paying attention. Is this character dead? Alive? Hiding? Preparing something great? I will tell what happened before the story ends, rest assured.

Tomorrow, I believe I will publish the last chapters.

Have fun reading this!

Chapter III

The Battle of the Seven Gates

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As you may know, the walls surrounding the city of King's Landing had seven gates: facing North, there was the Dragon Gate and the Old Gate; facing West, the Gate of the Gods, the Lion Gate and the King's Gate; facing South, the River Gate, also known as the Mud Gate; and, at last, the Iron Gate, looking East, at the end of the Rosby Road. At the time the battle started, I was behind the walls of the Red Keep, back in the safety of the castle. I stood there until I fled, though I was too much shocked to remember the flight through the tunnels built by Maegor the Cruel.

My personal memories will be shared in the following pages. Besides that, any register about the battle was told to me by the survivors of this bloody and fiery event. I will attempt to describe every scene of this event as better as I can.

When Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen reached King's Landing, they found the city broken. However, to organize my mind and tell this story properly, I will tell the events from the incidents happening at each gate.

Part I
A battle happened in the high sea, as I have told, when the Royal Fleet led by Aurane Waters had met the ships of the Stag Queen. A fight ensued between the vessels, and there are even rumors that a few of the enemy's ships were boarded by men fighting for Queen Myrcella. However, as also previously noticed, the ships of Shireen Baratheon were nothing but a weapon, carrying flasks of wildfire. As soon as the fire was ignited on board of those ships, an explosion echoed through King's Landing.

"So, the bitch has truly wildfire." Queen Myrcella said, in her room at Maegor's Holdfast. She was wearing armor, as I recall, and carrying her little child in her arms. She had also a fever, that proved that childbirth was indeed taking its toll on the woman's body. "But don't fret, my ladies. My cousin is only trying to impress us. We have also wildfire and we will use it to roast the enemy inside their armors."

Even though she tried to seem strong before the few ladies in waiting refugeed with her, it was clear she was frightened. The green light coming from Blackwater Bay haunted her, promising a painful death if the city were to fall. Everyone could read that in her face.

Let me write here also that Queen Cersei, after her horrible deed against the Starks, was not part of the retinue of ladies in waiting making company to the queen in her vigil. The Dowager Queen had stayed in her rooms, locked behind doors. She had asked to be at her daughter's side during the fight, but Myrcella had refused. In that dark hour, though, I wondered how Cersei could have soothed our gracious queen and the fears taking hold of her heart.

Because she had reasons to be fretful.

She believed her army was fighting the Stag Queen's forces far away from the city, but the truth was very different: her fleet was now trapped among the flames brought by the ships of her cousin and half of her army was trapped on the Kingswood fighting men made of smoke and ashes. Two hours after the explosion, when the night was falling and the green flames could still be seen dancing in the twilight, an army knocked at the King's Gate. From there, they divided themselves into three squads with different numbers, to tackle the city at different fronts gate.

An army of around six thousand men marched along the walls of the city in order to take the Mud Gate. However, it was not an easy place to fight at the time and they failed miserably. The gate would later fall, but not when the men first advanced to it. You see, the flaming wreck of the ships had floated to the bank, close to the Mud Gate. There, small fires had started along the structures of the fish market. The wooden warehouses close to the gate had burned to the ground, and its ruins made it impossible for the men to reach the city's entry.

However, the men manning the battlements took charge of this moment to fire arrows and throw rocks from above, managing to kill a few hundreds of the foolish army that had come close to the Mud Gate. The battle there was more like a suicide mission. The Stag Queen's army had hoped to bring down the gate and from there take the Red Keep easily, but they had underestimated the wildfire and the damages it would provoke on the bank. So, it's for no reason that that stretch of the Blackwater Rush is now called the Graveyard of the Foolish Soldiers.

Conquering this gate could have ended the battle quickly, but in the end, proved only to be irrelevant.
Part II
The Gate of the Gods, the Lion Gate, and the King's Gate

My hand trembles when I recall that night, but I must endure the vivid horrors that tormented my mind and make sure this chronicle gets to its end.

As I have said before, the army of the Stag Queen advanced immediately toward the King's Gate after crossing the Barge Bridge. From there, they divided, trying to take the city from three different fronts. The Southern Front composed only by the Mud Gate proved to be a failure to the Stag Queen's cause, but not the Western Front, composed by the majority of the army: fifteen thousand men, trying to strike the city and conquer each one of his western gates. The remaining nine thousand swords marched to the Northern Gates, but I will get to them soon enough.

The City Watch was defending the capital against the army of the Stag Queen, throwing rocks to the armies on their doors. Queen Myrcella and the Alliance had tried to drag the war away from the capital, but they had prepared the walls to resist the fight. And so, the City Watch fought, as well as the Lannister army commanded by Lord Martyn. Arrows were fired, catapults threw rocks to the men striking at the gates and a few charges left each one of the gates to strike down the opponents. From those brave charges, as I have come to understand, no men come back. A few were found years later, confessing to having fled and deserted the battlefield.

Well, you may also be asking: there was not wildfire at the disposal of the City Watch? Why didn't they throw flasks from the battlements? Well, Martyn Lannister was commanding the city's defenses and his orders were strict: the wildfire shouldn't be used, unless strictly necessary. The recently appointed Lord of Casterly Rock didn't trust the substance for his instability, so was determined to use it only if there was not another way to fight.

After two hours defending the gates, it seemed the situation was controlled. The Lion Gate and the Gate of the Gods were defended. Informants traveling constantly between the Western Front and the North Front also reported the defense there was steady. If the dragons managed to return from the North, the battle could be won before the morrow. But it all depended upon the army that would march down the Kingsroad: who would have prevailed in the North?

Well, something else was happening that Martyn Lannister wasn't aware of.

You may have forgotten, after so many pages about war, blood, and strategy… but I mentioned that the sellswords that provoked the Red Tournament had been hired by Queen Shireen. And they had been infiltrated into the city thanks to Lord Varys, and hidden in barracks in Flea Bottom, waiting for the time to strike.

Well, it seemed the time had come.

It's important to notice here that eventually, during the battle, a riot started in the city. The refugees were frightened, and a few houses on the Flea Bottom were set afire, instilling the chaos. Fear and terror spread through the slums like wildfire. That would later ignite events in the Northern Gate, as I will tell you soon. But as the mobs erupted, fighting against each other and lighting fires all over the capital, the sellswords hired by Shireen moved to seize the barrack close to the King's Gate where the wildfire was stocked.
It was there that started another fight.

While the men on the battlements fought the enemy breaking down the city’s gates, the soldiers inside the city clashed swords with the hidden sellswords. The reports are confusing about this bit of the battle since most of the men there died. But according to Martyn Lannister, the Lion Gate and the Gate of the Gods remained controlled…

Nonetheless, a man – that some believe it was indeed a woman – managed to break the defense lines of the goldcloaks that were defending the barrack and threw a torch against a flask of wildfire.

An explosion took hold of the city, as the King’s Gate was obliterated. I don't know how many men died there, but both sides suffered heavy losses. As the wall tumbled down, many men managed to climb the stones and evade the fire, invading the city at last.

"We are losing, aren't we?" Queen Myrcella asked when a soldier came to report the wall had been breached. "We are." She said, after hearing the report.

Her ladies in waiting had stopped their prayers to the Seven to hear the news.

At the time, the report was only about the explosion of the King’s Gate. The news would grow grimmer as the time passed, but at that moment the Queen snapped, talking directly to her ladies.

"The city has been breached, but our men are still defending us." She assured, with a shaky voice.

"But where are the dragons, Your Grace?" Asked Lady Flayse Skoteworth. "Aren't they supposed to be here, fighting for us?"

"They will come." Myrcella said, and I remember on her lips trembled, even though we could feel the heat in the room. "Now, keep on with your prayers, Lady Falyse." She said, angrily. "And can someone take the child away?" She ordered, commanding the milk maid to leave the Holdfast immediately. "The little one's crying is making me mad. Take him to where I can't hear him."

Someone said, there in the dark room, as the queen turned her back to return to her chair, that she seemed more like Cersei Lannister than ever. Well, except in one thing: The Dowager Queen would never separate herself from her children willingly. I heard those words, but I can't say who proffered them.

Meanwhile, back in the Lion's Gate, Martyn Lannister – astounded with what had happened to the King's Gate – gathered his men. Since the wall was completely lost, he had to attempt saving the city with another strategy. The only chance to stop the Stag Queen was by protecting the Red Keep and thus defending the only way up to the castle. So, he retreated at full speed back toward the Red Keep, sending word to Lord Sam Ruttermore, the Commander of the City Watch, to leave the Northern gates and join him.

But that would never happen.

At least four thousand men carrying the banner with the burning heart invaded King's Landing from the breach on the wall. Meanwhile, Martyn Lannister made his way to Aegon's Hill at full speed, escaping the mobs emerging from the hell that had become of Flea Bottom.

Part III
The Old Gate and the Dragon Gate

Let's go back a while again, shall we?

We know so far that the Fish Market was in flames, as most of the Blackwater Bay, blocking the way to the Mud Gate. Meanwhile, I have also shared with you how the barracks close to the King's Gate were taken by the sellswords hired by Queen Shireen, resulting in the explosion of the entire stock of wildfire left inside. So, Martyn Lannister, in the utmost despair, retreated his forces from the Lion's Gates and the Gate of the Gods, hoping to mount a line of defense on the bottom of Aegon's High Hill.

But where were the men led by Lord Sam Ruttermore, defending the Old Gate, the Dragon Gate, and even the Iron Gate?

Well, I reported on previous pages that nine thousand swords fighting for Queen Shireen were sent to attack the Northern Gates, right? And so they did. The goldcloaks fought bravely, repelling the men from the walls. Even when the Old Gate was knocked down with a battering ram, the situation was taken back in control and the entry secured by goldcloaks. The men from the City Watch placed spears on the ground, blocking the space of the gate, and fighting the adversaries on the battlefield outside the city's boundaries.

However, when the King's Gate exploded, the goldcloaks saw from afar the sellswords with the flaming heart banner crossing the ruins of the wall. A man, called Jerome Stone, who had worn a goldcloak for twenty-one years, understood then that the battle was lost. There was no purpose defending a wall that had been breached. Fearing for his life and, as other goldcloaks said later, for his family somewhere in the slums of Flea Bottom, the man Jerome went to Lord Sam.

"King's Landing is lost, my lord." He claimed as the men stopped their fight to contemplate the green flames spreading a few miles away. "There is no purpose fighting for a queen that is losing her head before dawn."

"Are you a coward, ser?" Bellowed Lord Sam Ruttermore, pushing his subordinate. "Or are you a turncloak?"

"I'm telling you the battle is done, my lord… And I'm doing what's best for me and my family."

"The battle is done when the battle is won." Lord Ruttermore said, pushing again Jerome Stone. "So, pick up your fucking sword before I fuck you in the arse with it."

And Jerome Stone picked up his sword indeed, but only to cut Lord Sam's head. As soon as the Lord Commander's head rolled along the ground, chaos installed among the goldcloaks. Men from the City Watch tried to attack Jerome, but other goldcloaks raised their swords to defend their new leader. The Watch that had been fighting so bravely was broken, divided between the ones still decided to fight for Queen Myrcella and the ones now willing to bend the knee to the Queen Shireen.

One of the goldcloaks opened the Dragon Gate, and more men carrying the flaming heart banner came through. The city had, at that point, two points of invasion and soon would have three, when the men managed to remove the spears blocking the way to the Gate of the Gods.

About Jerome Stone, no one knows what happened to the man. Some tales said he survived, and that he is now living in Dragonstone as a stableman, hiding from the truth of his crimes. Others said Jerome was lost among the fires of Flea Bottom, after finding his family lost to the flames. And there is, of course, the tales that say Jerome was indeed a hero and was actually trying to defend Lord Sam.
Ruttermore from another man.

What we know for sure is that the order sent by Lord Martyn Lannister never reached Lord Sam in time. The Young Lion of Casterly Rock advanced toward the Red Keep, with the remnants of his force, without knowing the battle was truly lost.

The fires of Flea Bottom quickly spread, installing chaos through the city. The Palace of the Lords were the Starks had been installed was destroyed. The Dragonpit was invaded by sellswords, who took advantage of women and men that had hidden there from the threats invading their city. Rape, murder, and plunder started.

And Lord Martyn stood there, on the bottom of Aegon's Hill, praying for a miracle, when the roofs of the Great Sept of Baelor were also put to flames.

King's Landing was lost and soon the sellswords would reach the castle… and who could detain them?

There were still no signs of the dragons.

Part IV

Mother

Meanwhile, inside the Red Keep, the informant that had been bringing news to Queen Myrcella hadn't come back for a while. That had to mean something and, as Queen Myrcella said before her ladies in waiting, that had to mean the city was truly lost.

"But don't fear." The Queen ushered to her companions, with a nervous smile. "I will surrender myself to Shireen Baratheon and make sure she pardons all of you, my ladies. I will even raise the drawbridge to assure your protection while I negotiate my surrender with my cousin."

At least, that is what the queen said to her ladies before raising the drawbridge to lock them inside.

"The only surrender my cousin will accept is my head served on a plate. I will flee the city." She said to me and Lord Willas, as soon as the drawbridge was closed. The Lord of the Reach had been on the Red Keep, accompanying the battle unfurling at the gates in the Small Council's room.

"Flee, Your Grace? There is no way out." Lord Willas answered promptly.

"There are paths beneath this castle, paths that can take me away from the city…" Myrcella said, exchanging a glance with Ser Aerys Oakheart, her loyal queensguard.

"Your Grace, this is madness. Even if you manage to flee the Red Keep, you could lose yourself among the chaos. You could be raped." Lord Willas adverted. "But if you surrender now, maybe your cousin will spare your life. I truly believe Shireen Baratheon won't commit kinslaying…"

"Or maybe she will." I said to the young queen, urging her to flee and save her life. "You must flee, Your Grace. The men fighting in our city are no westerosi. They are sellswords. They will take the castle and plunder it. They will rape you and smash your child's head into a wall."
"Yes." Queen Myrcella said, making no effort to hide the tears streaming down her face. "I have to flee, Lord Willas. There is no other way." She paused, holding firm the hand of the Lord of the Reach. "Come with me, my lord."

"I was never a good runner, I'm afraid." He said, smiling sadly before looking to his lame leg. "I will stay behind, Your Grace."

And so, arrangements were made to remove the queen and her child from the castle. I would accompany her, as well as Ser Aerys Oakheart other guards of her Queensguard that were not fighting at the moment on the battlefield. And, of course, despite all the crimes she had committed, Queen Cersei was also allowed to accompany us.

By that time, a battle was already happening on the bottom of Aegon's High Hill. We could hear the screams, and also the clash of swords, as we waited on the Throne Room. The milkmaid and the prince were still on their way from the bedchamber to where they had been moved after leaving Maegor's.

It was the darkest hour.

And even now, remembering the fear in my bones, I can also remember the relief when I heard the flap of wings over the clash of swords. I recall the infamous Ballad of King's Falling, that is sung since the Battle of the Seven Gates and those two verses that still makes me shiver.

_As the city burned like a star,

Two dragons were finally seen from afar._

The dragons had come, after all.

But as soon as they saw the city in flames, Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen understood what Edric Storm had said to Arya Stark. He could have been defeated, but they seemed to have won the war.

Would justice really be served to Shireen Baratheon?

Well, at the looks of it, it didn't seem like it would. The dragons flew high, hiding among the clouds to protect themselves from arbalests or any projectile that could harm them again. And they flew directly to the Red Keep, landing on a courtyard large enough for the creatures, and close to the Iron Throne's room.

"The city is broken." Daenerys claimed, as soon as she entered the room. "We have been fooled again."

"Can't you fight them?" Myrcella asked, throwing herself to the knees of Daenerys Targaryen. The young queen was relieved to see the Mother of Dragons, as if she could save the city, after all. Maybe they wouldn't have to flee. Maybe.

In that eerie moment, Daenerys Targaryen, that had finally the Usurper's Daughter at her feet, couldn't hide her discomfort. Oh, the Dragon Queen was not her father, I can say you that. Graciously, she grabbed Myrcella by the shoulders, to make her stood up on her both feet.

"There are too many men." Answered Jon Snow, who seemed also somber with the heavy defeat they had endured. "And they have arbalests, Your Grace. In fact, we already got a taste of what they can do to us… Rhaegal was hurt during our battle North."
"So, the city is indeed lost." Myrcella said, turning her back to the Dragonriders. "I have to flee, and I have to do it now."

"Wait." Cersei Lannister emerged from the shadows where she had maintained herself, surprising all of us that were present there. "The dragons may not be able to defend our city… But they can save you and the child."

The Dowager Queen said, advancing another step. She was thinner thanks to her days in captivity, and she looked paler than before. As she took another step, she looked directly not to her daughter, but to Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow.

"Take my daughter away from this wretched city. Take her to somewhere peaceful and warm, away from crowns and thrones. Take her to a place where she will be happy. And take also my grandson…” She stopped, falling also on her knees before the Dragonriders. "I ask this of you as a Mother."

Daenerys Targaryen exchanged a glance with Jon Snow, and her eyes relaxed a few seconds on the Iron Throne built by Aegon the Conqueror.

"Yes." She said.

The Dragon Queen extended a hand to the very same people she had seen as her enemies all her life.

"There is no time to lose, then."

The remembrance of that moment is mostly lost to me.

I know I was crying during that time, while saying my goodbyes to Queen Myrcella, suspecting we would never see each other again. I would leave the Red Keep with Queen Cersei and a small retinue of Queensguards. After Daenerys' insistence, the ladies in waiting in Maegor's Holdfast and all the servants at the keep would also leave the fortress through the tunnels underneath the castle.

"I want every single person out of this place." Daenerys instructed Lord Willas. "If they have a chance to survive this, make sure they do."

But I never hoped to survive and to escape through the ruins and chaos of the city.

Strangely, I did.

But Queen Myrcella wouldn't have the same luck

Arrangements were made while the gates at the bottom of Aegon's Hill were finally brought down. Jon Snow took the babe in his arms and mounted Rhaegal once again, to fly toward West. He was head to somewhere far away, perhaps Harrenhal or Casterly Rock. Meanwhile, Daenerys Targaryen helped Myrcella mount Drogon, so they could fly toward East and seek refuge in Dragonstone.

As soon as the creatures flew, we turned to the windows to see them go away.

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**Part V**

**The Iron Gate**

It seems the Iron Gate was never broken.
In fact, I suspect there was never a real fight there since the principal efforts were concentrated on the Old Gate and the Dragon Gate. However, there was a small squad placed at the this forgotten gate, composed by eleven men, who were tending to an arbalest. They had been left behind by other men who had invaded the city, but who had no use for an arbalest when there were no dragons in the sky.

However, that was not true at the moment.

When the two dragons left the Red Keep, the men decided to prove their fortune. They had been away from the battle and were not part of the pillage and fighting happening behind walls. But what if they could really slay a dragon?

They pointed the arbalest to the sky, aimed toward the black dragon flying overhead and shoot to kill. The long iron spear hit the dragon right away when he was mid-flight, and with a roar and a last rain of fire, the creature came down, crashing into the Blackwater Bay with two queens on his back.

I saw the dragon fall into the water and the great wave that emerged from where he had fallen.

"May the Gods help us…" I said, falling into my knees.

And I remember Queen Cersei screaming, and the echoes of that scream will never be silent inside my head.

Queen Myrcella Baratheon, First of Her Name, also called the Dawn Queen, had met her end on the back of a dragon, next to a Targaryen. Her body was never found, but she surely died on the waters of the bay that night.

As of today, I still don't know how I left the Red Keep after witnessing such a terrible sight. The small group on the Throne Room was hastily led to a passage and from there to tunnels and paths that landed us next to the Mud Gate. I recall the screams of Queen Cersei through the dark. The breath of Lord Willas behind me. The choir of sobs of the ladies in waiting dragging themselves along the war. The tears on the face of Ser Aerys Oakheart while leading the way.

Our Good Queen had lost her war, and we had lost her.
Thanks for the reviews. Keep doing it! Only one chapter left after this one. As you will see, this chapter brings a lot of answers.

Chapter IV

Lord of Light

307 AC

Many legends are told about how King’s Landing fell, even though to me the main question is another: why did the city fell?

The Stag Queen army had conquered the capital. Eventually, the sellswords even gave up fighting, understanding they had won. Breaking the Red Keep’s entry, they advanced to the castle and let the remnant of the Lannister army disband. Martyn Lannister managed to escape the bloodshed and flee, surviving to tell the tale. As for myself, I left the city through a passage close to the Mud Gate, keeping close to the small group that had left the castle, advancing slowly toward West. Ser Aerys Oakheart and the sworn brothers of the Queensguard defended us from a few sellswords we met on the way, but they were no real threat at the time. They were drunk with power, lust, and victory and many of them had also succumbed to wine already.

But winning the battle and taking the city was not enough.

I believe we were two miles away from the city outskirts when the first explosion happened. If we looked back, we could see the city engulfed in flames, from the Great Sept of Baelor to the Dragonpit atop Rhaenys Hill. A column of dark smoke raised to the sky, and the smell of burnt flesh was carried by the wind. More than breaking the city, the city seemed indeed delivered to destruction.

Martyn Lannister, as he left the city, told us later that he saw Lady Melisandre of Asshai, surrounded by supporters and faithful people to the Lord of Light, marching down the Street of Steel – one of the few streets preserved from the flames at the time – and singing songs in praise of the Lord of Light. According to a few testimonies, two iron carriages were brought through the gates carrying flasks of wildfire and, carefully driven through the street, Lady Melisandre led them to the Red Keep.

We don't know much about what happened inside the Red Keep when Lady Melisandre made her way in. What we know though, and what I watched from afar, fleeing the Seven Hells that had been brought to the city, was the explosion. The Red Keep exploded, engulfed by a ball of green flames. That very same wildfire would spread from Aegon's High Hill, feeding all the other fires lit, wreaking the city to its very core. Around ten minutes later, another explosion followed this time close to the Pyromancers Guild of King’s Landing – where wildfire flasks were also presumed to be
Why would Lady Melisandre, after finally winning the city to Queen Shireen's cause, destroy it and die herself in the flames? Why would the servants of the Lord of Light embrace death by fire so willingly? Why?

As of today, many still believe Queen Myrcella and her War Council hid thousands of flasks of wildfire in the Red Keep. A backup plan, they say, to blow the castle if the Stag Queen happened to win the battle. Rest assured, though: I partook in all those Council Meetings and I abide by what I know.

There was not such a plan.

The wildfire explosions were provoked by the Red Woman and her fanatic followers only. Once again, I ask: why would the red priestess do such a thing when the cause she had committed all her life was finally achieved?

Unless she had been lying.

Well, I studied religion, myths and also the arcane arts in the Citadael, but not so deeply as some of my colleagues. Years later, when I returned to Oldtown, I debated this topics and fears with fellow maesters and I want to share some of their theories of what could have happened when the Red Woman Melisandre walked among the halls of the Red Keep.

The most likely theory is that she had never truly served Shireen Baratheon or even Stannis. She had been only a parasite, harnessing the military strength those figures could gather to open for her a path to the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms. After all, she had not come to Stannis Baratheon during the first battle of Blackwater Bay because the king had been advised not to bring the Red Woman with him. But what could have happened if he had decided otherwise? I shiver thinking of the possibility. And even now, she advanced alone toward the Red Keep, while Queen Shireen remained locked as a prisoner back in Storm's End.

Why then? Why?

This question has haunted me for years, and it still does.

To understand what the maesters of the Citadael now believe, you must remember first that Lady Melisandre was carrying a child in her belly, when a week ago her body had been plain. The darkness the woman was harnessing inside her should have been feared from the start. And an old testimony, forgotten in the annals of history, gives the account of a tale behind Renly Baratheon's death: about a shadow in the form of Stannis Baratheon visiting Renly's tent to put an end to his life. The Maesters truly believe that the shadow form that killed Renly had been produced by Lady Melisandre in a similar way, most likely a pregnancy.

Putting all the pieces together, and after voicing my own theories with maesters of the Citadael, I believe the Red Woman was serving her Red God from the start. She had never worked for Stannis Baratheon, or even Queen Shireen, but for R'hllor and the Song of Fire. In my dreams, I still imagine a woman in a red dress, sitting on the Iron Throne and opening her legs to give birth to a Shadow before engulfing the city in flames, the last beacon to honor her God. To give him the greatest gift of them all.

The Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms.

It was not Shireen Baratheon the one Melisandre wanted on the Throne. Nor Stannis. Not even
herself. No, she had climbed her way to the Iron Throne to deliver it to the Lord of Light.

A God, or at least what we presume is a God, was the last entity sitting on the Iron Throne before the Red Keep exploded.

A lot about this tale is about mythology, as you have seen. From the Song of Earth that ruled Westeros in the time before the First Men came, to the Song of Ice created by the Children of the Forest to rid all land from humankind.

But if there was a Song of Ice disturbing the balance of the Earth, it’s only natural that there was also a Song of Fire, one that the people of Asshai were weaving for years, shaping it through the Religion of R’hllor. Many still consider the Others, sleeping in the Nightgrove, a kind of God itself, with powers beyond human reach: gods that harnessed their power from the cold and the dark, as the God of Asshai could feed on fire and light.

In fact, a man that managed to travel to Asshai years later reported something the High Priestess of Asshai had confided to him. There had been a long-lost prophecy, known only to the priests and priestesses of R’hllor, that united them in a bond of secrecy: the M’llendom. According to the prophecy, the legend of Azor Ahai Reborn, the hero that would bring down the Others and fight for Dawn, was a lie. According to M’llendom, the Lord of Light would be set free to the world of men when a hero, the Azor Ahai, managed to deliver a Throne to the god, through a feast of fire, blood, and ashes.

For centuries, the servants of the Red God worked in secrecy, spreading the word of R’hllor, but also trying to deliver him the deserved Throne. They worked as free agents, most of the time. And lately, they worked quickly, sensing that the enemy coming from the Ice was rising to fight them.

So, when Daenerys Targaryen came to Asshai, the High Priestess saw in her dragons a way to bring down the Seven Kingdoms in flames and pave the way to the Lord of Light’s coming. The woman said Daenerys would be a champion of Light, truly believing she could be the Azor Ahai. But the Mother of Dragons didn’t fall into the priestess’ words, and her dragons never produced such mass destruction.

Daenerys Targaryen knew better than that.

But Lady Melisandre, banned from Asshai more than two-hundred years before – well, I was intrigued with the news about her age – had succeeded where the High Priestess had not. She had used the Baratheons to set the final stage, playing a game of thrones in the deep shadows, using men as toys, waiting for her time to bring the Lord of Light down to this world.

This is the most popular theory in the Citadel as I write this, and the proofs and testimonies collected confirm it.

Even so, this tale doesn’t end here. Not yet.

I still remember, watching the capital burning from afar, how men emerged from the ruins of the city. No, not men. Creatures. Monsters made of shadow, as if their bodies were nothing but smoke. Some of them were burning. But they were not made of flesh and bone but of ashes and fire. Their eyes gleamed like embers. And they attacked any living form close to them, ripping them apart, making them burn with a simple touch... and then making the dead rise up, to walk as wights, as the dead had risen in the North.

The Ice and Fire, two factions at extreme opposites, two faces of the same coin.
A game of gods in a world of men.

The Seven Kingdoms could have ended that day.

However, many reports close to the Iron Gate, where the black dragon had drifted to the shore, saw a woman rising from the blackwaters. Well, Myrcella Baratheon didn’t survive the fall… but Daenerys Targaryen did and, even though she seemed weak, she stood on her both feet and looked to the ruins of the city her ancestors had built. A few people fleeing the city tried to help the Queen of Dragons, but she refused any help.

She unsheathed her dragonglass sword, the very same one she had been keeping on her waist since she had left the Nightgrove… and the fought the Sons of Fire, the generals made of smoke and ashes, that were resurrecting the dead and producing a new army of fire wights. The creatures dissipated like smoke at the touch of her sword.

Eventually, she walked toward the fiery ruins of King’s Landing. Many who swear they had seen her enter the flames, tell how they feared she had lost her mind after the loss of her dragon, believing she wanted to die in the flames…

But something happened at the burning heart of King’s Landing.

Daenerys Targaryen emerged from the city hours later, when dawn was breaking.

The fire was still burning the Red Keep to the ground, and the column of smoke emerging from the city was thick and tall, but the fighting was done. The plains around the capital were also aflame. The generals of the Lord of Light, that the Citadael had named Sons of Fire, had vanished into air, like ashes scattered to the wind.

Arya Stark and her army finally reached the city at that time, too late to join the fight, but in time to restore order. It was the She-Wolf of Winterfell the one who found Daenerys Targaryen, close to the shore, naked, embracing Drogon’s jaw, crying the loss of her child.

In the aftermath of the battle, many things were already happening. Most of the sellswords who had fought for Shireen had been killed on the flames after the Red Keep explosion, but a few had fled. The brave ones were still plundering the city and its outskirts, trying to find women to rape and gold to take. Others were piling the dead bodies after looting what they had in their pockets. Refugees, who had managed to survive, we’re still hiding or running through the plains. Many stories are told about survivors, like the one about Maggie the Rabbit, a child of five who managed to save herself and her brother by hiding in a rabbit’s hole of the story of Yonn of Flea Bottom, who helped more than a hundred people escape the city, leading them out through the flames and blades of the enemy.

“I will see to the Queen.” Arya said to her men. “Take care of any sellsword fighting for Shireen. Gather the survivors. And make sure this bloody battle is done.”

And Arya Stark went to Daenerys Targaryen, entering on the water to reach her.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Your Grace, but you paid a high price for your life.” Arya said, touching Daenerys on her shoulder. “And I won’t let you die after all that has happened.”

After assuring Daenerys that her men would drag Drogon from the sea, Arya brought the Dragon Queen to a small inn by the road, where they hid for two days, away from the eyes of the world.

Broken by grief, she had drifted on Blackwater Bay for some time, until she had understood what was happening. Managing to swim to the shore, always clasping the sword at her waist, she got
confident about the task waiting for her.

King’s Landing was under fire.

That sight had been revealed to her through the fires of the High Priestess of Asshai. Without a second of hesitation, she advanced to the city, crying for her dead child in the Blackwater Rush and her people, dying to the sword and the flames.

To be a Queen, she had to prove it.

Wielding the dragonglass sword, she sedought the Lord of Light among the ruins.

And she had found him, parading with an army of the dead along the Street of Steel.

“Lord of Light, I defy you!”

The Lord of Light laughed at her, and it was like a log cracking under fire. The fire wights under his control advanced immediately to strike down the audacious woman with an obsidian blade, but the God was feeling generous.

"Don't touch her." He said, still laughing. "It would be a pity if such beauty was to be damaged… I will have her body as it is when I’m finished with her, and she will be at my side, as my Lady of Light, when we leave to preach our word throughout the Seven Kingdoms.”

And so Daenerys confronted the Lord of Light – a figure she described as a shadow, tall as a man, but dark and shapeless as the column of dark smoke rising from the city. The Shadow that had come down from the Red Keep. The entity she had seen in the flames of Asshai months ago. The very same Shadow to whom she was supposed to bend the knee, as the High Priestess had told her.

The Lord of Light.

“And I don’t know how…” Daenerys told Arya, in the seclusion of the inn by the road. “But I killed him. I pierced my blade into his flesh while he laughed, repeating that no blade could kill him… I think he wanted to prove to me that my sword couldn’t do anything. He willingly exposed his chest to let me try… But he was wrong…” She said, revealing the dragonglass sword to Arya Stark. It was not a common sword. White veins spoiled the obsidian since the moment she had craven it on the Nightgrove on the far North. “The blade is tempered by fire, yes… but it is also kissed by ice.”

Godslayer, the sword is now called.

And thus ended the War of the Three Queens.
The Great Council of Duskendale

Chapter VI

The Great Council of Duskendale

307 AC

I won't bore you now with the details of the crisis that ensued after that victory. Of course, there was famine and sickness, as the result of the poverty that stretched along the Kingsroad from North to South. Beggars cried for bread. Soldiers turned their backs to their lords. By the time the year of 309 AC dawned upon us, there was even the Insurgence of the Barefooted Lords that escalated the brief War of Independence in the Westerlands. Though brief, the war claimed a few victims: Lord Martyn Lannister was brutally killed by his own servants, for starters, and a small lord took control of the Westerlands for two months until the Crown managed to end the rebellion.

But I won't be describing those events in this work. I'm only referring them briefly, to prove that the aftermath of the War of the Three Queens was not an easy one. I won't tell you more about those rebellions and social plagues. Other minds – like the ones of Maester Libelyn and Maester Roll - are more capable to do so. I suggest you consult their works to understand more.

How does this tale end, then?

King's Landing was no more, as I have told you. It seems the remnants of the city burned for three weeks until the last snowstorm of the season put an end to the last embers. The Red Keep was nothing but a ruin, and even the imponent Iron Throne forged by Aegon had melted. It would be later found by scavengers, who sold it in pieces as a trophy of war. The Great Sept of Baelor was also ruined, only one of its seven towers stood up. The Dragonpit was nothing more than rubble, entombing hundreds of refugees and sellswords. And Flea Bottom was completely gone as if hundreds of houses had never stood there.

The Doom of King's Landing, some call it, recalling the end of Old Valyria. For many, those weeks after the battle felt indeed like the end of the world. In a way, it was an end of sorts. The world as they had known it had come to an end.

The army that had crossed the Blackwater Rush to fight the Smoke Army returned to the ruins of King's Landing two days after the battle. The force led by Loras Tyrell joined Harrold Harryng immediately, trying to restore order where only chaos ruled. The survivors, either coming from noble or common birth, were rounded up and led to the nearby castles of Darry, Rosby, Skoteworth and Hayford Castle. There were also prisoners – it seemed a great part of the sellswords hadn't escaped after all – and even a few small fights on the outskirts of the city, as the army captured the men still wearing the Burning Heart of Shireen Baratheon. All prisoners were taken to Duskendale.

There was also a brief siege to Storm's End.

The Stag Queen, Shireen Baratheon, still remained there with her lady mother and a small garrison. They had tried to escape when news came about the defeat and the falling of the capital, but by that time an army of Unsullied was already surrounding the castle's walls. The men loyal to the Baratheon Queen tried to defend the fort once again and sustained the siege for three days. But on
the morrow of the fourth, the gates were opened, and Lord Swann delivered the queen and her lady mother in chains.

"They are ungodly women." Lord Swann said, delivering the Baratheon women to the commander of the Unsullied as if they were nothing but dogs. "Take care of them and leave our land."

The women were taken, but so was Lord Swann and all the other stormlords that had joined the cause. They had hoped to be spared by giving up their queen, but to eyes of the realm, they were traitors, all of them. Their pride made them raise their swords again to fight the Unsullied, refusing to be put in chains. But they were easily subdued, and before the day ended, all of them were on their way to Duskendale. Edric Storm was already rotting in a cell by that time, after his capture at the Battle of the Kingsroad.

Meanwhile, Arya Stark was still hiding in an inn close to the capital, taking care of Daenerys Targaryen. A small garrison manned the building, protecting it from any curious eye. At the time, few knew the Targaryen had survived, even though there were rumors about her emerging from the waters of Blackwater Bay to kill the evil in the capital.

The Mother of Dragons had been a hero, but the battle had broken something in her. She had lost all her children except one. In her grief, she had even commanded that Drogon's corpse, brutally attacked and stripped of his scales and horns by greedy scavengers, should be burnt in the remnants of the fire still burning in the city. Arya Stark, who had grown close to the Targaryen, obeyed her orders and veiled her in her convalescence.

I must also share with you what become of me and my group after we escaped the burning capital. After hiding for a day in Crown Village, a farm village a few miles west the old capital, we were found by the northern army. Right there, we were granted protection and the promise of being escorted back to safety, Queen Cersei Lannister included. The men would take us to Hayford Castle, the closest one, where we would be fed, bedded and treated.

Most of our group accepted the offer, except the Dowager Queen herself.

"Take me to Arya Stark."

After enduring the pain of losing King Joffrey, King Tommen and even Queen Myrcella, Cersei Lannister was nothing but a ghost. In a way, she had much in common with Daenerys Targaryen. She had left the city screaming and crying, but she had grown silent, her eyes glassy and even when someone was to talk to her or offer a glass of water or a loaf of bread, she wouldn't react. As if she was deaf. So, to hear her say those words was a surprise to everyone.

"And why would I do that?" Asked the commander of the group, a man wearing the sigil of the Hornwoods. I would find out his name a few weeks later: Daryn Hornwood.

"Because I'm ready to face her." The queen answered, defiantly, managing to express those words in a cold way.

I tried to hold the queen down. I even wrote to Arya Stark, reminding her the Dowager Queen was a broken woman, with no sanity left to her.

But I couldn't save her.

The story came to me later, when lords from the Seven Kingdoms came to the Great Council of Duskendale. It was not Arya Stark who told me the story, but Lord Daryn Hornwood, the very same man that had taken Cersei Lannister to the She-Wolf of Winterfell.
"She is dead." He told me, almost whispering, while men drank wine and bards sung songs about the War of the Three Queens. As of today, I still wonder why he shared the truth with me. I believe there was not evil in his heart or strategic purposes. He was a loyal man, with a soft heart, that took pity of a maester asking for answers.

"How?" My voice was dry as old parchment, but my eyes were already wet.

Tears streamed down my face as I heard the story unspin.

Arya Stark had been surprised by Lord Daryn Hornwood when he had brought to her the woman behind the foul crime committed against her mother's body. They had met in an empty room of the inn. Even though Lord Daryn didn't mention her, I suspect Queen Daenerys also left her bed to receive the Dowager Queen.

"I could say I'm sorry for your loss, but I'm not." Arya had told the broken queen, resting her hand in the pommel of her sword. "Joffrey was a shitty king and a cruel man. He deserved to die. Tommen I didn't know well so I won't say anything about him. That would be just cruel. And Myrcella… Well, she was a fair woman, but I always saw the greediness under that pretty face of hers."

"I haven't come here to be tormented or scorned by you, you stupid bitch." Cersei had said, without hiding the hatred she had for the young lady. "I know you have lost loved ones, too. We had one in common, in fact." The queen could have had her doubts about Edwyle and the threat he had posed to her son's reign, but she had loved the little prince in her own way. "I even cared for your foolish sister." According to Daryn, watching everything in a corner, Cersei started weeping at some point. "But I'm tired and I regret many of the things I did. And I'm here only for a thing."

Arya Stark gulped, and her hand clasped tightly the pommel of the sword.

"And what could that be?"

"Mercy and death." Cersei said, raising her chin up once again. "I and my brother Jaime were one person in two bodies when we came into this world. We shared a womb together." She stopped, looking at the sword Needle at Arya Stark's waist. "I want to die through the same blade that took him from me. We shared our birth, and I want us to share our death too." The Queen looked directly to Arya Stark's eyes, reading the storm of feelings taking place there. According to Daryn, the young she-wolf of Winterfell was taken aback with those words. "And you, Stark… you will get your revenge."

I don't know much more about what happened next, because Lord Daryn was asked to leave the room. He heard Arya Stark unsheathing her sword, though, so it is safe to presume how the Dowager Queen met her end. Her body was delivered to the Silent Sisters by an anonymous man, who treated the queen and carried her remains to Casterly Rock, where she lays between her father and twin brother. The last surviving child of Tywin Lannister was no more, ended thus the lineage of the Old Lion. Well, some still say Tyrion Lannister is alive, hiding somewhere in Essos, but I don't believe in those romantic tales.

This event regarding Cersei Lannister happened somewhere one week after the battle, even though I only came aware of it two months later. Lord Daryn asked me to keep the secret, and so I did, but since he died of a fever two years ago, I must now honor my vows and serve the realm the best way I can. And the best way is by telling you this truth Arya Stark hid for years.

Aside from the fate of the Dowager Queen, matters had still to be debated and decided and I must now continue describing them, as promised.
There were many wounds to heal.

Westeros had no ruler uniting them, and during the aftermath of the battle, many had begun to ask: should the Seven Kingdoms remain united by a single ruler? Aegon had forged the Realm with the fire of three dragons and, even though there was another Targaryen, Daenerys had no dragon. There were a few whispers about Ned Stark's bastard son riding one, but what could he do with a single dragon? Besides, no word had come from the Wolfrider since he had landed in Harrenhal with Tommen Arryn.

The unrest started, especially among those who believed the Seven Kingdoms could be ruled by their own. Many returned their homes and rallied up their men, considering options of independence. However, there were also those who feared civil war and, with it, more death and destruction. Men who had power and who, in fact, had belonged to the Alliance of Rosby. And they were right to fear: after all, the War of Independence still happened a few years later, when the realm was recovering… and the threat of a new conflict remains.

So, Lord Willas Tyrell – after a short trip to Highgarden, to check his sister and his land – traveled back to Hayford Castle. There, he met the surviving lords of the Alliance. After leaving the inn by the road, Arya Stark and Daenerys Targaryen traveled to Hayford Castle, joining Lord Edmure Tully, Lord Martyn Lannister and, of course, the Lord Declarants of the Vale.

I was already there too, in the shadows, almost forgotten. Not a maester, but another refugee. A man that had grown old by the terror he had lived… But close enough to see and hear what was happening. The castle was crowded with people, mostly from noble birth. The common folk was being housed on the nearby castles and farmhouses.

After hours of discussion, it was decided that a Great Council should be called to decide the fate of Westeros. In the meanwhile, the order would be enforced to the land by that group of people, that started calling themselves Lords Paramount of the Seven Kingdoms. I still remember another topic deeply discussed during those first days at Hayford Castle: the whereabouts of Jon Snow and Tommen Arryn, and how late they were to join that sad party. Lady Anya Waynwood, I remember vividly, insisted that the child – destined to be the future Lord of the Vale – should be entrusted to the care of her people and not "a traitor's bastard with a filthy dragon".

At this point, three weeks had passed since the Battle of the Seven Gates.

Ravens left Hayford Castle that night. The messages summoned the lords, either great and small, to partake on the decisions that would shape the realm at the castle of Duskendale. A rider in the night also left during the hour of the wolf, to reach Jon Snow quickly and invite him in first hand to join the other Alliance lords.

Time was a fickle thing these days, as I watched quietly the game being set by the Lords Paramount.

Daenerys Targaryen, the survivor of the battle and the hero that had brought down the terror created by the Red Woman, was believed by many of those living at Hayford Castle as the legitimate queen. After all, considering the fate of the Three Queens, she was alive and not rotting in a cell. But would she be able to unite the realm? She acted like she could, even though a humbleness could be now found in her. Her ambition to rule was clear, but she managed to hide it, waiting patiently for a decision to be made. In a way, that helped her reputation, I believe… and earned her the love of her people, that already feared her. Godslayer, they called her, just like the sword always suspended in her waist.

Other question up in the air regarded – that would certainly be discussed in the Great Council – was Arya Stark's position. Since Lord Robb's death, she had been accepted by the northerners as their
Lady — at least among those who had fought at her side. But by law and blood, Rickon Stark was the legitimate heir to the North, so who would rule the North? The seasoned warrior or the young wolf?

Among the decisions made by the Lords Paramount, there is a long list of measures taken to ensure the people's welfare in the post-war, such as food deliveries to the poor, housing conditions, sickness control and other urgent topics regarding social affairs. But since the capital was gone and the economic crisis was just beginning, it was necessary to cut costs.

A cost that seemed unnecessary was the feeding of the prisoners of war waiting for their sentence in Duskendale. It seems more than ten thousand men were in chains in the dungeons of Duskendale: soldiers of the Vale and the North, guarding those prisoners, had even unoccupied buildings to turn them into temporary prisons. Reports about the conditions of the city mentioned men locked in kennels destined for rabid dogs. So, the Lords Paramount gathered, and after a long debate, it was decided that every sellsword should be released and shipped back to Essos, after being properly punished.

"I agree with Lady Daenerys." Lord Yohn Royce spoke out loud. "There is no need to bring more bloodshed to this goddam land… But we can't let those men go unpunished to torment us again in a few years."

"So we must make sure they will never dare to face us again."

The punishment was then decided: the sword hand of each sellsword would be cut down. The order was issued and sent to Duskendale immediately, to be executed in less than two weeks. Ships lent by White Harbor traveled across the Narrow Sea, to deliver the sellswords to Pentos' gates. Those very same men, at least those who survived, would later form the Handless Company, and partake on new wars in Essos… but never again they dared cross the sea.

To the stormlords, execution awaited. The moment thirty-four lords were executed is now being called the Bloody Dawn. Any stormlord or stormlady that had bent the knee to Shireen Baratheon was executed by sword, their heads later placed on spikes by the gates of the city. They were there when the lords came to the Great Council weeks later, witnessing what would happen to a traitor those days. A few houses were extinct by that time, like the Penroses, the Bucklers, and the Morrigens. But others would survive, though at a great cost, losing their lands and titles.

And what about Shireen Baratheon, and her trusted advisors? Well, they were also executed, after being interrogated and tortured by men under the commands of Harry Hardying. It was from the testimonials gathered during those interrogations that we know so much about what I told you here. The schemes and deception of the Red Woman. The strategies made by Edric Storm. The plot of the bastards of Robert Baratheon. The support and gold from the Magisters of Essos. The help received by Lord Varys to infiltrate sellswords in the city.

It was clear, after a time, that Shireen was nothing but a victim in that game of thrones. A queen made by her mother and a red priestess. Even Edric Storm was partly innocent since he had been instigated from childhood against a world that wouldn't accept him. Their stories were sad, but they were still alive when many had died.

Shireen Baratheon was executed in a painful way: drowned, hanged, quartered and then burnt. She had to suffer one more time to feel the pain of her people. Edric Storm was hanged, ending his life like the bastard that he was. He was not given the honor of death by a sword. And Queen Selyse was forced to watch to everything, as she had watched the red priestess use her daughter during the previous years. She would have been hanged the following morning but being a resourceful woman she managed to bring death upon herself, by setting fire to her cell with the help of a torch. Death by fire was her end: and those who were in Duskendale swear she screamed while the flames to over
These executions were decided once again by the Lords Paramount, who decided not to wait for the Great Council. And those were gruesome deaths. But according to Lord Yohn Royce, who promptly traveled from Hayford Castle to Duskendale to watch the executions, it was necessary to show the traitors of the realm the justice they deserve.

"A lesson taught by pain, and written with blood, so that people don't forget."

Another infuriating matter to me is that this "lesson" was never revealed to the lords during the Great Council. Once again, I managed to dig up some details during my time in Duskendale, tracing rumors and asking questions to the guards who had witnessed those deaths. I'm writing down the truth now so that you can judge these so-called heroes, who as of this day still say Shireen Baratheon died quickly and in an honorable way.

There was nothing honorable or painless in the way she died. A mere child, who the Lord Paramount saw as an innocent girl, manipulated by evil forces.

So, that's it about Shireen Baratheon.

And yes, I know what you want to know, and I'm coming there. You want to know what happened during the Great Council of Duskendale, the decisions that were made there... even though if you are reading this now, it's very likely that you live in this New Age.

So, let's focus on the Great Council of Duskendale, that took place in the city that gives it its name. By the time the gathering commenced, seven weeks had passed since the Battle of the Seven Gates and the realm was growing impatient. Reports from a few fights and struggles for local power had already reached the Lords Paramount, and the time was running thin.

Jon Snow had come to Hayford Castle right before the retinue there moved East to Duskendale. Once again flying his dragon – who had recovered from a wound in his hind leg –, the Bastard of Winterfell delivered the young Lord Tommen Arryn to the Lords Declarant of the Vale, promising them he would like to keep an eye on the child. He had grown close to the babe and, as time would prove, he would maintain a relationship with the son of Queen Myrcella, almost like a father figure to the young lord. Rumors still claim that Jon Snow loved the child in such a deep way that he presented a dragon egg to the Lord of the Vale when he was just four, in the hope that it would hatch. It never did, though.

Many lords came to Duskendale, even those that had been away from the battlefield. From the North, came Lord Rickon Stark and not alone: at his side was Theon Greyjoy, Lord of the Iron Islands, as well as his sister, Lady Asha Greyjoy. The Greyjoy siblings were dividing the ruling of the islands and, after the crisis provoked by their uncles, were fairing good enough. However, there was some surprising news, that would be a topic of gossip among the ladies gathered in Duskendale.

Lady Asha had brought her son, a babe of five months, that soon enough was revealed to be Lord Robb's bastard. We will also get to that child later.

Many Northern Houses came to Duskendale, being well represented by their lords and heirs, even though most of them had been already present at the Crownlands during the last battle.

From the Riverlands came House Frey, led by their new lord Emmet Frey, who had taken control of the Twins after his father's death a year before. He was coldly greeted by Lord Edmure, his liege lord, but well-received at Duskendale by his peers. It seemed it was a fresh change: a new Lord to the Twins, even though he was as wrinkled as his father had been.
Meanwhile, Martyn Lannister – after surviving the battle, as reported – had called for his banners, and many had come also from the Westerlands. The social crisis that spread through Westeros, as I have told, would weigh heavily on every territory, but especially on the Westerlands. By that time, Lord Martyn was already facing riots provoked by people blaming House Lannister for bringing their men to two battlefields, only to suffer heavy defeats in both of them. You must not forget the Battle of the God's Eye and the heavy loss the Lannister force took there.

The Reach was also heavily represented in Duskendale, with most of the Houses sending a family member. Even Lady Margaery Tyrell, that seemed to do better despite being a widow for the second time, came to the city. Her brother Loras, who still looked like a sellsword, never left her side.

The greatest surprise of all, I believe, came from Dorne, when a retinue composed by Prince Oberyn and his niece, Princess Arianne, reached the gates of Duskendale. The Dornish Princes had kept silent during all those months as if waiting for something else to come. The end of the war, maybe? They had no reason to fight for the Baratheons since Elia Martell and her children had lost their lives after Robert's Rebellion. Also coming with the Dornish Princes was someone a few ladies recognized, and that entertained the nights at Duskendale: Modaen presumed dead since the events of the Red Tournament. Apparently, he had escaped the Tournament and sought the Princes of Dorne to give him a new home, a place where his art could be appreciated.

The Council was about to start when another guest arrived, a man many had forgotten. Horas Redwyne, the Admiral of King Joffrey, who had the most fabulous tale to tell: he had been sent to Queen Cersei on an errand's fool, to hire assassins to kill Daenerys Targaryen, but had ended up as a slave in a golden cage.

"I beg your pardon, my lady, but that's the truth." He said, bowing his head to Daenerys Targaryen one night, after the second session of the council. "I arrived at Qarth to hire a few assassins, but decided to get some rest during a day or two… I drank, I ate, and I sought comfort in the arms of a woman… and the next day I was taken as prisoner, questioned and sold two weeks later to a Triarch of Volantis to be what he called… his westerosi slave. Not a soldier slave or, thanks to the Seven, a pillow salve… No, the Triarch Rogerys wanted me to tell him about Westeros, about court and strategies… He treated me like a pet, petting me and keeping me in a golden cage… I tried to escape a few times, but…" He showed his right arm. Three fingers were gone in his hand. "He cut a finger every time I tried to run away."

"So you managed to flee during the fourth attempt?" Asked Daenerys, very softly. She had been amused by the tale as if the idea of being killed by hired assassins was very funny.

"No, I didn't escape, my lady." He said, humbly. "In fact, I believe I owe you my life."

"Oh, do you really?"

"Essos is at war." He told, bringing a new piece of information that would entertain greatly the lords gathered at Duskendale. "Your Thirty-One Ambassadors are igniting war all over Essos, especially now that the Free Companies have lost the war against the lords of Westeros… and a few sword hands. The slaves are fighting for themselves, rising against their masters. The Triarchs of Volants fell a month ago… That was when I was finally freed and managed to sail back home to my brother."

Daenerys Targaryen smiled at those words.

She had been aware of the reports about what was happening across the Narrow Sea. Illyrio Mopatis would send reports weekly, telling her how the rebellion of the slaves was shaping the land. It seemed she had to leave her children so that they could fight for themselves. In the end, they had never truly needed her or the dragons: they only needed to find the will to fight.
So, as news was exchanged, as old friends – and also a few old enemies – met in the city of Duskendale, it seemed almost possible that the realm could be mended. Yes, there was still tension and indecision on the air, but the day the meeting started there was a sense of hope.

The Great Council of Duskendale lasted for seven days.

The gathering was held in the Great Hall of Duskendale and included lords representing six hundred and seventy-four Houses of the Seven Kingdoms. The Lords Paramount of the Realm sat on the dais facing all the other. Once again, I must name the Paramount: Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell, Lord Jon Snow of Winterfell, Lord Willas Tyrell of Highgarden, Lord Edmure Tully of Riverrun, Lord Yohn Royce representing the Lords Declarant of the Vale and Lord Martyn Lannister of Casterly Rock. It had been also decided, to assure the fairness of the decisions made that day, that Asha Greyjoy should receive a seat to represent the Iron Islands, as well as Prince Oberyn for Dorne. The stormlords, once again treated like traitors, were excluded not only from the dais but from the council.

There was also a representative of the Conclave, Maester Ulyn, sent by the Citadael. I had been asked by Lord Willas to join the Lords Paramount, but the Conclave decided I was not capable any longer, believing my mind was not the same since the battle at King’s Landing. To speak truly, I believe some of the Lords Paramount didn't trust me. I had served the three children of Robert Baratheon and Cersei Lannister when they had sat on the Iron Throne… And I suppose they must have found out I was digging dirt around what they had done to Shireen Baratheon and Cersei Lannister.

Well, let's go back to the Council.

The Paramount on the dais would lead the meeting, presenting the matters so that the Lord Electors could vote on the fate of the realm accordingly. It was also decided at the opening of the Council that, in order to facilitate the voting process, those who wanted to vote in favor of a determined matter should move to the right side of the Hall, and those who wanted to vote against should move to the left.

The first matter presented by the Lords Declarant regarded the Traitors.

I won't tell you much about the discussions that took place most of the first day. The Lords Paramount, as they sure did, revealed the fate of the traitors, even though all of them had been welcomed by the sight of those heads on spikes by the gates of the city. A few lords, like Lord Selwyn Tarth, asked questions regarding the interrogatories and the reasons behind the Stag Queen's cause. The Paramount, especially Arya Stark who had taken an interesting fervor in the matter, answered all the questions. The only traitor that hadn't answered justice was Lord Varys, the Master of Whispers, last time seen before the Red Tournament and accused of conspiring to infiltrate an army in the city. If the Spider was to be seen, it should be put to chains and brought to justice, as it was firmed and agreed upon the Hall.

Some small matters, regarding damages and consequences of war, were presented by minor lords. All of them were suffering the same crisis of famine and poverty, but the Lords Paramount postponed that matter for the following day.

So, the second day began naturally with the matters regarding the loss of the war and the reconstruction of the realm. But soon enough, as discussion erupted between the lords, it was decided there was no conditions to debate it so early. The discussion, of course, was fueled by the indecision tormenting all of them at the time. There were still many – a minority, though – that wanted independence. The Iron Throne was no more, as there was no capital.
Why should the people bend the knee to a single ruler?

The tension brought up the second main topic debated during the Council: should the Seven Kingdoms remain united? The first vote of the Great Council of Duskendale took place, after arguments supporting both sides were presented and discussed. On the hall, the lords divided between right and left. Only ninety-one lords moved to the left, which meant that the majority of the realm maintained a position of unity, fearing the cruel times ahead. A division between kingdoms would mean revision of taxes and political borders, which often result in more famine and war. In a land that wants to heal itself, the division would be contra productive. Most of the Lords voting in favor of the division had come from the Westerlands. I remember Houses Myatt, Hawthorne and Lorch were among those who left the Hall after the vote and, thus, the Great Council… and that years later enticed the War of Independence.

Once decided that topic, the lords started discussing something that took three days of debate. If the Seven Kingdoms were to be ruled by a single man or woman, who should it be? Maester Ulyn gave instructions so that anyone with a claim to the "Throne" – the term Iron preceding Throne fell out of grace quickly since Aegon's chair was no more – should step forward to present their pretense and, after, submit themselves to the vote of the people.

Four pretenders were presented.

First, of course, I must mention the claim of Daenerys Targaryen. The Mother of Dragons took the floor and talked for more than an hour, telling the lord electors how she had left Essos to fight the dead in the North and how she had brought down the evil terror Melisandre gave birth during the Battle of the Seven Gates. The lords seemed convinced, but her speech was a long one, and many were seen opening their mouths, clearly bored.

The second lord taking the floor was Willas Tyrell. But no, he was a claim for himself. He spoke on behalf of Tommen Arryn, the legit heir of Myrcella Baratheon and the last person alive of Robert Baratheon's lineage. The Lords of the Vale opposed to that pretense immediately, remembering the lord electors the child was destined to be Lord of the Vale and not a king. He could be the last one of House Baratheon, but he was also the last one of House Arryn.

The third pretense was presented by a small lord, from the Riverlands. Lord Hugh "the Dreamer" Dored, that had nothing but a small county under his protection, claimed to have taken a bastard under his wing more than twelve years ago. A bastard that, according to the man, was the son of Viserys Targaryen and an important courtesan of Braavos. The man was repelled from the floor almost immediately, and his claim not considered when the voting took place.

The fourth one was also about a bastard and was presented not by the bastard himself, but by Lord Rickon Stark. The young Lord of Winterfell, that had taken care of the defenses of the North after the Small Night Battle, revealed before all present the true parentage of his half-brother Jon Snow. He had been truly named Jaehaerys Targaryen, after being born to Prince Rhaegal Targaryen and his aunt Lyanna Stark. Lord Rickon told in detail the story behind the Wolfrider, from his feats on the Night's Watch to his journey to Essos to get the help of Daenerys Targaryen. He had mounted a dragon on the way, defended the North and uncovered a secret that proved the land of Westeros was tainted by an evil that couldn't be destroyed.

I still remember the roars that filled the hall, as the truth seeped in into the minds of the lords. But more than anything else, I remember how pale Jon Snow was, sitting on the dais, with his head low and his lips tightened. Almost as if his secret had been outed to the world without his consent. Even so, the people seemed to believe Rickon Stark: after all, it explained a lot about the Rebellion of Robert Baratheon and the legendary Tournament of Harrenhal.
The day ended after the claims were submitted.

That night, everyone talked about Jahaerys Targaryen and the green dragon flying over Duskendale. The Wolfrider, the man that had caught so much attention for taming a dragon, was seen under a new light. An alternative they hadn't believed possible. I was shaken with the revelation, and I partook on many conversations, and all of them were saying the same thing: Rhaegal Targaryen had a son and heir, a claim stronger than the one presented by Daenerys Targaryen.

Besides, Rhaegal had been loved by his people. His father Aerys could have had the taint of madness, but the Prince was the opposite: fair, talented and lovable. His son was the last dragon rider, and a hero of the Small Night that had plagued the North. For many good lords, the decision was clear about who should rule the Seven Kingdoms.

And in fact, when the lords convened again in the Great Hall of Duskendale the next day, Jon Snow was elected the new King of Westeros by a massive majority of three-hundred and twenty-four. The vote took longer since every lord came to the dais where Maester Ulyn sat alone, tallying the votes one by one. Daenerys Targaryen managed one hundred and ninety-six votes, and Tommen Arryn eighty-two votes. Fifty-one lords decided not to vote.

The Great Council of Duskendale had found a new king and it was willing to crown him that very same night.

But when Jon Snow took the floor, it was not to accept a crown.

"I must thank you for the vote of trust, my lords. Nevertheless, blood and fire can't speak higher in this time of need. Winter is coming, my lords, and I will serve better the Seven Kingdoms with a sword on my hand than a crown on my head."

It was then Lord Jon Snow spoke about the threat in the North and his intention to form the Order of the Knights of Winter. He told the lords a fascinating story many of them had heard already: about the Others, the army of the dead and the Nightgrove created by the Children of the Forest during the Dawn Age. There, entombed in the ice, was an army of Others, dotted with unlimited powers, created with a purpose only: bring down the realms of men. He and Daenerys Targaryen had tried to destroy it, but only the combined fire of three dragons could melt the Nightgrove and put an end to such evil before the Others awakened again.

So, a dragon should remain in the far North, close to the Nightgrove. The solution wasn't building another Wall: it was to tackle the evil at its core. The Order of the Knights of Winter would watch over the Nightgrove, day and night, and train with dragonglass to kill any figure emerging from the depth of the frozen earth.

"Even if what you told is true, Lord Targaryen..." Said Lady Barbrey Dustin. "What use is a dragon, when you need another two, as the prophecy suggests? You would do better ruling the Seven Kingdoms, instead of freezing up your arse on the North with your dragon."

Jon Snow smiled, facing the frankness of Lady Dustin.

"There are two dragon eggs, my lady." Jon Snow said, still smiling. "Two dragon eggs provided by the dragons Queen Daenerys hatched by herself a few years ago." He told, frankly. "I intend to make my duty, finding men or women capable enough to hatch a dragon egg and mount the creature, so that one day three dragons can bring down this ancient evil at last."

He ended by kneeling before Daenerys Targaryen, as he had promised Queen Myrcella he would do weeks ago.
The fourth day started, and a new vote took place.

At the end of the day, Daenerys Targaryen had collected four hundred and twenty-nine votes, against the one hundred and eighty-three votes gathered by Tommen Arryn. The remainder forty-one votes had not been cast.

Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of the Andals and the First Men, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains, Mother of Dragons and the Godslayer of King's Landing was then acclaimed as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.

The Queen announced, then, that she would rise a new city, with a palace with red doors and a place to any lost soul. It was also decided Jon Snow would keep the guard of the two dragon eggs, in the hope that they would hatch and bring to form the Old Prophecy that would put an end to the Nightgrove.

However, as it came to light later, Daenerys Targaryen didn't give up the eggs so easily to the guard of her nephew. It seemed the Queen was not aware of a second dragon egg, the one Jon Snow had found among the rubble of Meereen and hidden in the crypts of Winterfell. He had only told her one night before the revelation on the Great Council. Feeling betrayed by Jon Snow's omission, she allegedly refused to give him the egg in her possession right away. She would keep it with her for three more years, hoping that it would hatch. Her maids saw the queen place the egg among the flames and caressing it as a pregnant woman does to her belly. But the egg never hatched, and eventually, the Queen did what she said during the Great Council and sent the egg to the Tower of the Night, where Jon Snow was building his Order.

I am getting ahead of myself again, aren't I?

Well, back to the Great Council, a new queen had been elected. She had announced she would build a new city, restore order. But where was the gold to manage that? That, of course, brought up the matter discussed during the beginning of the second day. The loss of the war and the reconstruction of the realm was estimated in thousands of golden dragons, and that cost didn't contemplate the edification of a new city. However, it was agreed that three ambassadors would sail to Braavos to ask a considerable loan of a hundred thousand golden dragons to the Iron Bank.

Even so, that wouldn't suffice, and the royal coffer had to be replenished to repay the bank with interest. So, taxes had to be imposed, to which many didn't agree. In fact, the arguments were so loud that the session ended earlier than usual. During the night, there were even rumors about breaking the Seven Kingdoms, even if the lords of the Great Houses were still decided to support unity. The taxes and the fact that they should be ruled by a woman infuriated a few lords with closed minds. Three lords were imprisoned at dawn by the Unsullied, after being caught plotting to declare independence on the Riverlands.

The fifth day dawned with a wave of tension.

The news about the imprisonment of the Lords of the Riverlands – Lolliston, Keath and Shawney – shook the Lord Electors, making them more willing to consider the taxes.

"A few years of sacrifice and starvation for the good of the realm." Said Lord Jon Umber at the beginning of the fifth day. "Stop whining about money, you lazy southern lords."

The Lords Paramount – they would still maintain their positions until the end of the Council, from which point Queen Daenerys would take the lead – proposed taxes adjusted to the income of every land and their production. The debates and discussions regarding this matter occupied the entire day.
and extended to the following one.

The Castle Tax was also imposed, to be applied to every lord that intended to expand their castles or mansions during the reconstruction of the realm. Many other taxes were applied to merchants, cattle breeders, farmers and even to septons. The Septon Tax was one of the most controversial of the time, since it taxed directly the septons all over Westeros, requiring them to deliver a quarter of the riches decorating their septs or personals jewels – being them gold, silver or gemstones. It would be a way for the Faith of the Seven to sacrifice their own good for the good of the people.

It is not surprising that the militant orders of the Faith, under the orders of High Septon Loubard, were armed illegally in the year of 309 AC, providing to the cause of the Barefooted Lords great support during the War of Independence in the Westerlands.

But during that sixth day, on Duskendale, after long debates and considering many options, the Lords Elector finally agreed on a Bill of Taxes, that managed to get four-hundred and twelve votes in favor.

It was also discussed in this day the matter concerning the wildlings. Since the Small Night – and the destruction of the Wall, that had fallen at a few points along the frontier – the wildlings had been living in the territories of the Gift, proving their loyalty to the North fighting alongside northern soldiers. Rickon Stark and Jon Snow were among the main defenders of the integration of the wildings in the realm. A hundred and seventeen lords electors voted against it, claiming the wildings had no place in the Seven Kingdoms. However, almost all the lords from the North voted together in favor, insisting their land had survived greatly thanks to the help of the people from beyond the Wall. Having not to find consensus, the final vote regarding this matter was postponed to the following day, when other smaller matters and, of course, the question of Succession, were to be discussed.

So, we reach the seventh and last day.

After a final vote, that had been preceded by the Lords of the North swearing to protect the land from any crime or vile act committed by the wildlings, the Lords Elector finally agreed to admit the Free Folk into the Realm, as long as they bend the knee to the Queen and to House Stark. A year later, this decision was revised by Queen Daenerys' Small Council, that brought up the Wildling Crime Tax: if a crime was committed by a wilding, they should pay with their life, but the Lord overlooking his acts should also pay a fine of five golden dragons to the Crown.

Among the smaller matters discussed and put to rest, I will name only two or three that seemed important at the time. Well, it was agreed that the Lord Declarants of the Vale would take Lord Tommen Arryn to the Eerie, where the boy would be brought up and serve as a squire reaching the proper age. The retinue of the Vale left Duskendale two days later.

It was also decided that the Red Faith of R'hllor would be banned from Westeros from that day onwards, to prevent further incidents like the ones that had culminated in the destruction of King's Landing. Any man or woman caught praying to the Lord of Light would be executed without the right of a trial.

Concerning the North, the lordship was officially given to Lady Arya, after her brother Rickon agreed on stepping down from his duties as Warden. According to the last son of Eddard Stark, he had never been born to rule, and his sister had not only the love of her people, but she had also proved her worth fighting for the honor of House Stark.

"Besides, the ruling is incredibly dull." Rickon said while cracking another nut in the palm of his hand.
Still, about Northern politics, it was founded a new House, the Greystarks, that would take the lordship of Deepwood Motte. This decision was made after the end of House Glover, a fact that was confirmed two years later, as I have previously reported. The young bastard of Robb Stark and Asha Greyjoy, Rodrick Greystark, was nothing but a babe but already a lord, uniting thus the North dominion and the Iron Islands like it had never happened.

At last, I must tell about the Order of the Knights of Winter, that was officially recognized. It would serve as the Night's Watch had, receiving men – and also women – from every corner of the Seven Kingdoms: however, not criminals. Jon Snow was against that decision, but the Lords Paramount insisted that such a delicate matter shouldn't be trusted to men without honor. A Tower would be built by the Nightgrove, as well as a wall surrounding it, giving form to the well-known Tower of Night.

But the most fascinate detail about this Order was also decided there: the two dragon eggs that were still to hatch would be protected in the Tower, by the Order of the Knights of Winter, to whom would be given a chance to try and hatch an egg to become a dragon rider. Of course, dozens of young knights gathered immediately in Duskendale, agreeing to leave with Jon Snow when he decided to march North again.

Regarding the new capital, Queen Daenerys decided it would be built over the ruins of King’s Landing. A more magnificent city was promised, where anyone could be accepted and be a free man. A city that would serve as a beacon of hope, like the city of Bhorash never had been. A city that would honor the traditions in which House Targaryen was built.

The capital city of Dragonlair.

The construction, of course, still happens today, while I write this. The Queen remains at Duskendale, where she has installed herself and gathered her court temporarily until her new castle is finished – if it will ever be.

At last, I'm must tell you about the matter of succession that ended the debates of the Great Council. Presented with that topic directly, Queen Daenerys refused to agree on a marriage proposal for the time, even though many of the lords insisted she should marry sooner than later. Only Arya Stark, among the Paramount, came to the queen's defense.

"The land is wounded, and we need time to heal," Daenerys said as all of the presents could hear. "I will tend to those wounds first, and then I will consider marriages proposals and heirs."

Even so, the Lords Paramount were not content with such an answer: if something were to happen to the young queen, civil war could engulf again the Seven Kingdoms. An heir should be named at least, even if it was only an heir apparent, a name the lords could follow in the improbable cause of something happening to the queen. After a few hours of discussion, different names came up, from great houses as well as small. But the obvious choice, even though he didn't love it, was that Jon Snow – that was, after all, Jaehaerys Targaryen – should take the throne. If Jon Snow happened to die before the queen, then the throne would be delivered to Myrcella Baratheon's lineage: Lord Tommen Arryn.

The lords agreed on those terms and signed the Treaty of Succession.

The Great Council of Duskendale ended with a prayer to the Seven, asking them for brighter days.

That night a feast took place on the courtyards. Some lords started even to organize a Tournament – a simple affair, without monetary prizes – that is still known today as the Poor Tournament of Duskendale. A few Houses stayed to celebrate the Council and their new queen by jousting, but the
majority left within days. For a time, with a new queen, a dragon flying over the sky and the promise of unity, it seemed order could be restored, and also peace. The tension felt just a few days ago was gone.

"To Daenerys Targaryen!" Claimed the men, raising their glasses filled with wine. "To Jon Snow!" They screamed in praise. "To the New Age!"

And what a New Age it was, soon to be stained again with blood, treason, and famine: the perfect ingredients to breed more war.

As for myself, I went back to the Citadel, to live among my fellow brothers, studying the history and politics of the Seven Kingdoms. I managed to survive to tell the story, even though my chronicle ends here. My hand hurts, and the ink has stained my skin, but the journey was worthy. I'm glad the truth can now be known, the truth many wanted to cover: traitors are among those who rule our land. Be aware.

I believe there will be many tales to chronicle in the times ahead. After all, we have an heirless queen on a new throne: how will she provide an heir, since she is past the age to give birth and never married? And will Jon Snow, and his Knights of Winter, succeed hatching those dragon eggs? As of today, not even one has hatched, even though seventy-eight men have been knighted… Are they going to hatch, or will the Others soon resurface from their frozen tombs?

Only time will tell.

I just hope I will be here to witness it.

Chapter End Notes

Wait, it's done?! That's it? But where is Sansa? Where is the bard Modaen? Was he really on the Council of Duskendale? Does that mean Sansa is truly dead?! And Edwyle?

Well, Grand Maester Yandel is done, yes. But the story doesn't end here. From the very start, when I was playing with the ideas of mythology that had come together in the previous chapter, I knew how I wanted to end this fanfiction. However, I couldn't place that story in the chronicle of Grand Maester Yandel. I tried at first, but it wouldn't fit. Besides, I really imagined it to be on the original structure.

So, here is a little surprise: there will be an epilogue, with the POV structure again, giving the answers you want and tying all the loose ends. I hope to upload during the weekend.

Keep reviewing! I'm so close to the end, and I want to know how you think this is going to end.
Her heart was beating in her chest like a drum.

All her life was about to change.

With her eyes fixed on the ships approaching Salt Shore, Lady Rhaella Lyend recalled the heavy book in Maester Zed's rooms. She had grown hearing those stories about monsters that had risen from the snow and the ashes and the heroes who had defeated them. Even now she remembered her father's sweet songs and the promises he had made to her about the future. How they would one day leave Dorne to explore the Seven Kingdoms from North to South. He even promised to her they would visit the Order of the Winter Knights in the Tower of the Night.

Promises the wind had swept away.

Her father was no longer there, taken by some strange disease less than a year ago. Since that day, and despite her heart aching for her father, something had emerged within her. A discovery about the true Rhaella. The invisible walls her parents had built began to break, unraveling a new world, built on the very same dreams of her childhood.

*But children's dreams are often the parents' nightmares.*

The young lady had learned her lessons. She knew her chance to be set free had arisen in that very same moment when everyone else was grieving Lord Lyend. Daringly, she had made her first move, acting on her mother's back… and throwing herself into the spiderweb.

“The game of thrones, my child, is a dangerous thing.” Uncle Varys had told her, smiling mysteriously. He lived in the Salt Shore Castle, a guest of the Gargalens along with the Lyends. But he rarely left his chamber, since he had had a falling out with father years ago. “But you are meant to play it since you came into this world.”

That encounter had been more than seven months ago.

She had thought things would happen faster from that moment onwards.

But the days had dragged on, and Salt Shore Castle slowly transformed itself from her home into her prison. In fact, lately, the cursed towers of the castle seemed like gnarled fingers, trying to choke her
every time she was awake. Losing her youth and beauty at its prime. Rotting like a winter rose in a
dark and smelly cellar.

Not for much more, said that little voice in the back of her mind. The wind caressed her face softly,
bringing to her the sweet almond scent of the leafy trees embracing the Summer Bay. Was that the
perfume of freedom?

"Are you still sure you want to get on with this?" Her mother asked, standing next to her. Lady
Lyend would always be afraid for her children, as much as Rhaella kept repeating there was no
reason for her to be worried. But what are words compared to the red and black sigil of the
Targaryens? The dragon with three heads was clearly visible on the sails of the approaching ship,
taking to their home the intrigues mother wanted to keep at bay.

Time had been generous to Lady Lyend.

Still, the sorrows of the past had left their toll on her. The wrinkles surrounding her eyes were deeper
since father’s death and the silver threads that painted her hair seemed to grow each day, erasing her
beauty slowly. Either way, she smiled nervously, squeezing Rhaella's shoulder with a trembling
hand.

"I've never been so sure in my life, mother." Rhaella answered sharply, allowing her mother a brief
quick look. The shadow of a smile touched Lady Lyend’s lips. A smile that was nothing but a mask.
More than fear, the mother also tried to hide something else: a feeling of guilt.

The roar of the dragon caught her eye.

Rhaegal.

The ship approaching Salt Shore rippled the banner of Queen of Dragonlair, Queen Daenerys
Targaryen. It was not her first visit to Dorne, of course, but it was the first time she had come to meet
them. But the most impressive thing was not even the ship, but the green dragon that flew overhead,
leading the vessel toward the coast.

Rhaella looked out of the corner of her eye to the small group waiting for the entourage of the
capital. Lord Rullin Gargalen was there, beside his wife, Lady Nyna, both sheltered under an
umbrella. Rhaella had grown to admire those two as if they were her grandparents, even if they were
nothing more than friends to her father and their hosts. They were the lords of Castle Shore, even
though they didn’t look like it.

Further down on the dock, keeping the twins under an eye, was Sandy, always ready to step in. The
boys wanted to run back to the tower to see the dragon from a higher point.

And yes, there he was.

Lewyn Martell.

I'll have to deal with him later, Rhaella said, feeling her guts twisting. The young Martell had
ignored her orders once again when she had been perfectly clear. He was supposed to be away,
hunting on the woods or visiting his mother in Sunspear. But there he was, as a loyal pup. He had
infiltrated the small entourage of Lord Gargalen's personal guard. Sneaky little boy.

Rhaella looked back at the twins, alarmed by Daeron’s cry. Her brother was pointing indiscreetly to
the sky.

“Look how huge the dragon is!”
Her brothers were too young to realize the importance of what was happening. They had been restless since the news had come that the Queen would pay them a visit, as well as Lord Jon Snow the Wolfirider. Nevertheless, it was to be praised that, for once in their lives, the twins were wearing ceremony garment and not the usual trousers stained with dirt and mud.

"You know it's going to change everything from now on," Said her mother again, grabbing her hand now. Her touch was cold as ice, even though the day was hot.

"Shall we talk about this again?" Rhaella asked, whispering between her teeth. "You said you would manage to live with my decision, Mother ... and this is what I intend to do. Can you settle down for a little while, please?"

Lady Lyend sighed but said nothing more.

Sometimes, Rhaella wondered if her mother could actually see the daughter she had raised. With that thought in mind, she immediately turned to kiss her on the cheek.

"Don't fret, Mother. Everything will be all right. Can you trust me?"

Mother nodded, but she was not entirely convinced.

At last, the dragon landed on the dock, a few feet away from the entourage awaiting. A hot, dusty wind embraced them, waving their robes and forcing them to half-shut their eyes. Rhaella's blond hair combed with the help of one of Lady Nyna's handmaids, fluttered wildly. She tried to straighten it, ashamed at the thought that the royal entourage would first meet her in such terrible condition.

Lord Jon Snow came down from his dragon and watched them from where he stood. Rhaella was not sure what to expect from the Commander of the Order of Knights of Winter, but the man standing before her was undoubtedly distinct. His hair was black, punctuated here and there by white locks. His face was hardened by the cold northern winds, but his gaze was gentle. He wore a sword at his waist, with the head of a white wolf in the pommel, just like Maester Yandel had written in his book. He also wore a white armor, with the Order symbol engraved on the chest: a white sword, pointing north, and an emerald dragon with its tail wrapped around the blade.

*He is not an ugly man for his age,* Rhaella thought, blushing.

As he approached, stripping off his black gloves, Jon Snow kept his eyes on the group waiting for him. The twins, surprisingly so, had finally shut up. They seemed so intimidated by the presence of that legend of old stories like Rhaella. Still, they did a fine job opening their mouths in a very uneducated way.

Sandy, behind his helmet, must be laughing.

But Jon Snow's eyes were full of tears, and as he approached Rhaella's mother, he fell to his knees.

"For years I thought your story had ended during that bloody Tournament," he said, as Lady Lyend laid her hand on the top of his head.

"Stand up, brother. There is no need for that. The days when men were to kneel at my feet have long gone by."

Jon Snow sighed and stood up immediately, enveloping his sister in a long hug.

"Sansa," he said, his voice muffled by her mother's hair. "You really are alive."
Dorne’s hot wind caressed them for a few seconds when no one spoke. The seagulls screamed, anticipating the ship that was docking. No other sound could be heard at the moment. Everyone stood in silence, from noisy Daeron to the maid holding Gargalen’s parasol.

"A part of me is still alive, yes," said her mother, also succumbing to tears. Rhaella was close enough to hear them. "But I’m no longer the woman who left Winterfell more than twenty years ago or the scared queen who was taken prisoner at King’s Landing."

Time could heal a lot, but certain wounds were impossible to appease. From the cold voice her mother used, Rhaella wondered again if she had made the right decision sending Lord Varys to the capital. Allowing Lewyn to do what he had done. Stepping out of the shadows.

There is no turning back.

Rhaella had believed the secret about her identity, and that of her brothers deserved to finally come to light. Yes, father and mother had decided to hide the truth for years, deafening out all the voices that advised them to do otherwise. Lord Varys, of course, had been one of them. But also, the Princes Doran and Oberyn, and even Lord Gargalen. All of them had advised her father to step further, but he had never done so.

Yet her father was no longer there.

This is the right thing to do.

Rhaella was a woman made.

She was sixteen years old and already bleeding. That meant decisions regarding her future would soon to be made. But what future could she hope as the daughter of Lord and Lady Lyend? Marry a smaller lord, bore him a few children and govern his household. That idea made her shiver.

No, she had been born to something much greater than that.

At least, that was what Lord Varys had told her so many times. And she was not going to let her parents cut off her wings. Her mother, of course, still opposed to her decision, but without father’s support, it had not been impossible to convince her. It had only taken a little longer.

But what wounds am I going to inflict upon mother by bringing back these ghosts of the past?

She had never met her half-brother, but she would always be haunted by the memory of the young king.

Edwyle.

Sansa Stark had lost a son in that stupid war years ago, a child of five years forced to wear a crown on his head. But more than resentment against the people who had used her son as a pawn, Rhaella knew mother was especially resentful that the North had turned her back on her when she needed them most. Her own people. If her brother Robb had fought for her instead of marching to fight the Others in the North, Edwyle might be alive... but at what price?

Rhaella shook her head, pushing away again the questions that Grand Maester Yandel’s chronicle had put in her head.

The hug between Sansa and Jon finally broke, and an awkward silence surrounded them for a few seconds.
"Let me introduce you to my daughter, Lady Rhaella Lyend," said Sansa, gesturing towards her Rhaella.

Lyend.

Even her name was a lie.

"Lady Rhaella," said Lord Jon bowing his head. He was indeed a fine strong man. "It's good to meet at last."

"Likewise, my lord," she replied, lowering her head.

Next the docked ship, a board was already being set up for the crew to descend to the dock. It was remarkable that Sansa was still managing to smile.

"We were very glad when we heard that you..." Jon Snow began the sentence but hesitated again. He looked around, clearly looking for mother’s approval. "Well, that you existed."

Rhaella tried to smile back, but her lips betrayed her.

"And my sons..." Sansa intervened again, clearly not knowing what else to say. "Sandor, please bring them here."

Sandor Clegane had been on the Salt Shore since Rhaella remembered, but it had not always been so. The knight had found her mother, hidden in Dorne, two years after the end of the war. At that time, everyone believed Queen Sansa had died in the Red Tournament, but Sandor Clegane knew better. He had been there when Rhaella’s father, pretending to be a bard named Modaen, had rescued Sansa to take her to Dorne. Sandor had supposedly come to free mother and take her back to Winterfell or Duskendale, but by the time he had arrived Sansa Stark had already decided not to return home, not after having lost so much in that war. So, Sandor Clegane – the man many knew as The Hound - had sworn his sword to Sansa and remained at her side ever since.

Sandy was the nickname Rhaella had given him when she was only three years old, unable to say his name. The Hound still smiled every time she was to call him in such a way.

"Behold my children, Eddard and Daeron Lyend."

The twins bowed before Lord Snow, with smiles on their faces, before asking if they could pick up his Valyrian steel sword.

"Yes, you can." Jon said, laughing. He was clearly emotional with something else. Maybe Eddard’s name, who had been called after her grandfather.

Even so, Rhaella laughed with the others when her uncle drew his sword to show it to the children. The green dragon watched them cautiously from afar, threads of smoke arising from his nose.

At last, the plank bridging the ship to the dock was safely mounted, and the procession went down to the quay.

Rhaella had to hold her hands to hide how much they shook.

She was more excited than ever, especially after recognizing the figure of Daenerys Targaryen among the guests climbing down from the ship. The Mother of Dragons had lost two of her sons, including her mount, but had won much more since then. She had founded the capital city of Dragonlair, where she sat now in the Dragonglass Chair. Her heart had hardened with her loss,
according to her subjects, but she was praised by her capacity to rule. With light, almost white hair, she wore an equally white gown with little gold details forged after the Targaryen symbol. At the age of forty, she was known in the Seven Kingdoms by many names, but in recent years people had grown used to call her the Lonely Queen, for having refused to remarry or produce an heir.

An heir.

According to rumors, that was one of the reasons why she was there.

"Your Majesty," said Sansa, curtsying before the queen.

"Queen Sansa, I've heard a lot about you over the years... but I never expected that we would ever be face to face."

Rhaella looked up to observe the queen once again when she referred to her mother not as Lady, but as Queen. It was not only a sign of respect but also a predisposition to know her.

She seems like any other woman, Rhaella thought, nervous, while looking to the queen closely. Another old woman, after all.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Sansa said, still using her cold tone.

"I'm sorry we have only been able to meet now," Daenerys said docilely. "But I believe there are good reasons for your exile..." The queen's eyes darted toward Rhaella for the first time, and a smile immediately tinged her lips. "And you must be Lady Rhaella."

"Yes, I am, Your Majesty," Rhaella said, curtsying after her mother.

"You are beautiful, young lady." Daenerys said, raising Rhaella’s chin with her hand. "And you are so much like…" The meaning of her words was lost forever. "Yes, you would do well at court, if you ever have the chance to travel."

Sansa moved uncomfortably, and Daenerys understood it better than anyone. The Mother of Dragons was not a fool, and Lord Varys had told her a lot of what she would meet in Salt Shore, for sure. Gracefully, the queen moved her attention from Rhaella to the twins.

"And who do we have here? You must be the infamous twins the Spider told us about."

Rhaella noticed her mother was not even looking to the queen anymore. Her attention was craved on another woman, stepping from among the royal entourage. The group that had come from Dragonlair consisted of about fifteen people: a maester, some soldiers, a knight of Queensguard, Lord Varys - who seemed to have returned to Salt Shore as a prisoner, with his wrists chained together - and of course, the woman her mother was staring at so hard.

Sansa Stark advanced to a short woman, who wore a black armor like a common soldier and kept her hair black and small. From the look they exchanged, Rhaella understood who she was. Arya Stark.

"Sorry," said Aunt Arya, bursting into tears, hurling herself into her sister's arms.

Sansa Stark returned the hug, but once again there was ice in the way she treated one of her siblings. Still, both sisters gave in to tears immediately.

“Sorry?” Sansa asked, loud enough to be heard by her daughter. "But I'll never forgive you." She
continued, sobbing as she clung to her sister.

Rhaella touched her mother's arm, trying ease the harshness of those words in some way. It was uncomfortable to see those two women weeping and sobbing like that, and right in front of the queen. As most of the present there on the dock looked with curiosity to that encounter, Lord Gargalen extended his arm to Queen Daenerys and invited everyone else to follow him into the castle.

Sandor took over the guard of the twins, pushing them toward the staircase, while Jon Snow signaled to the remaining royal entourage to proceed inside. Lord Varys seemed hesitant, but he acceded and followed the group to the castle. The knight of the Queensguard kept close to him.

*It's good to see you have not lost your head,* thought Rhaella, exchanging a look with the Spider. She would make sure he would lose his chains before dinner.

Sending Uncle Varys had been a risk since he was considered a traitor of the kingdom after the revelations of the Great Council of Duskendale. He had briefly collaborated with the cause of Shireen Baratheon, even though he kept swearing he had never known the true purpose of her claim. But time had passed and, as the Spider had told her before leaving, he had friends in both Dragonlair and across the Narrow Sea who would defend him before the queen.

He had been right because he had returned in one piece.

On the dock, as the summer sun began to assume its reddish twilight tinge, the only family remained. Rhaella looked around, exchanging glances with Jon Snow. The knight seemed utterly lost.

There was nothing he could do.

His sisters had to resolve their differences on their own.

"I failed," Arya continued, sobbing. "Sorry, I failed him. If I knew you were alive, I would never have had fought for Edwyle's cause without your blessing... I would never have..."

"But you did." Sansa interrupted. "And my son's blood is in your hands, Arya." Sansa said, breaking her embrace to take her sister's face between her hands. "It was *you* the one placing a crown on his head. You threw a five-year-old child into this damn game of thrones. And now you're here again, with your Dragon Queen... and for what? To take my kids again?"

"We came only because your daughter invited us..." Arya tried to defend herself immediately, looking to Rhaella, trying to find some help there.

"Sansa, you're being too hard on her..." Jon interjected, reaching out to touch her shoulder. His sister gave him a pointed look. "Our sister only did what..."

"I know what *she* did," Sansa replied, keeping Arya's locked between her hands. Fear had taken possession of her. "You failed my son, Arya."

"And every day since then, I suffered." Arya insisted, still with tears in her eyes. "Do you have any idea what it's like to live with that burden? Even after avenging him and making sure Shireen Baratheon suffered in her death, I never managed to calm this sense of guilty burning on the pit of my stomach. It only grows worse, because now I can’t do anything else to bring justice to your son.” She gulped, pausing for a few seconds to catch her breath. Mother didn’t relent holding her face.

“But what alternative did I have? Were you expecting me to sit, doing nothing, watching your son being robbed from everything that was his by right? Is that what you would have wanted? "
"I just know I wanted my son here with me and alive," Sansa retorted, still struggling with her fears. "Still, yes... a part of me is grateful, Arya." She continued, to the surprise of everyone around her. "You were the only one who came to my rescue when Joffrey put me behind bars. At least you tried to fight for me and Edwyle. " The queen finally removed her hands from her sister's face. "But do not apologize for failing my son, because a mother will never be able to forgive that."

Sansa stepped back and watched her sister from head to toe.

"And I will not let you take my children back to this bloodthirsty world of yours. Not after everything I have done to protect them ... "

"We just came because your daughter called us," Arya repeated defensively. She wiped the tears with the back of her hand, before glancing at Rhaella once more. There was an odd mixture of feeling in that glance. Curiosity, maybe, but also fear.

Rhaella averted her eyes and blushed once more.

Before Arya could say anything else, she reached into her trouser pocket and pulled out a small wooden figure in the shape of a deer. A toy, carved with a knife on a piece of wood.

The symbol of the Baratheons.

Sansa bit her lip, again letting a shy tear trickle down her face. Slowly she reached for the wooden figure and grasped it with her trembling fingers, bringing it to her lips.

"You loved him. I never doubt that." Sansa said, still holding the toy close to her lips. Rhaella did not understand the meaning of it, but she supposed the toy had some meaning. Maybe it had belonged to Edwyle. "And I'm grateful for that too, Arya." She gulped dryly. "But cordiality is the maximum I can guarantee for the future of our relationship."

Sansa kept the little toy hidden in her closed hand, before turning her back to her siblings and advancing toward Salt Shore castle. The royal entourage was already far off near the entrance.

Feeling lost and at the same time guilty, Rhaella Lyend stared at those two familiar faces, and at the same time unfamiliar ones. Arya Stark was still staring at her, her eyes half-glazed, as if lost in a sea of nostalgia. Jon Snow approached her and touched her lightly on the arm, awakening her from whatever stupor had taken control over her.

"Maybe we should head back to the castle," Rhaella said, lowering her eyes. Her mother was already striding away. "Dinner will be served soon."

*

The dinner that followed lightened up the tension in the air, but only briefly.

Thankfully, the twins were too excited to dine with the adults and were taken to Lord Gargalen’s private solar to dine. Meanwhile, a small dinner party assembled in the dining hall. Beside Lord and Lady Gargalen, there were a few other guests around the table. Queen Daenerys, being the distinguished guest of the night, sat at the head of the table in the place of honor. She seemed regal in her white dress, but not the powerful figure Rhaella had always imagined. It seemed something had really broken inside her.
Jon Snow sat at the queen’s side. He had removed his armor and was now wearing a simple garment that suited him well enough. Arya Stark, on the other hand, sat on the other side of the table and had not changed clothes. She seemed somber in her seat, remaining silent during a great part of the dinner. Varys sat next to them, free of his chains at last. Rhaella sat at his side, with her lady mother right next to her at the other head of the table, right in front of Queen Daenerys.

*What an odd and sad party dinner.*

The conversations were very elusive for most of the meal.

Lord Gargalen led the conversation, like the good host he was. He had many questions about the political status of the Seven Kingdoms, and his wife had also two or three words to give regarding gossip. There was a talk about the Riverrun Tournament, held on the occasion of Lord Edmure’s second marriage: it seemed young Rodrick Greystark had won the mêlée. They also mentioned the crisis of the Westerlands, and how young Lady Joanna Lannister - daughter of the late Lord Martyn – was doing a fine job ruling the land, despite being only thirteen-years-old. And at last, they mentioned Princess Arianne Martell, who had sent blood oranges for that very same dinner, and who had become a grandmother two weeks before. Her eldest daughter had given birth to a little boy, called after her late father, Doran.

But the topic that really caught Rhaella’s attention was Tommen Arryn, Westeros' most eligible bachelor, and the five marriage proposals he was considering.

"It's important that the lad is well-guided on the matter," said Lady Nyna, wiping her mouth with the corner of a napkin.

*That was a wrong choice of words,* Rhaella thought, feeling sorry for Lady Gargalen's lack of filters. The Lady of Castle Shore was too fond of gossip for her own good.

Even so, she was right.

Tommen Arryn, as they were all well aware, was the heir to the Dragonglass Chair, however much it might displease the Lords of the Vale. And it seemed the Lord of the Vale himself was already quite firm in the likelihood of such a future. After all, Daenerys would never have children of her own, and it was unlikely that Jon Snow would also produce an heir.

*The most eligible bachelor of Westeros,* Rhaella said to herself as she brought a fork with kidney pudding to her mouth.

It was quite hilarious. Westeros’ most eligible bachelor was rumored to be a bastard of Petyr Baelish and not the legitim son of Robert Arryn. That Queen Myrcella had done her whoring quite well. Her son had at least inherited a name and land. But inherited the Realm? Well, that had to be prevented and it was quite clear Daenerys Targaryen had that in mind.

Finally, the boring conversations faded.

The night had already come down by then, and a few candles dripped wax along the wooden table. Lord Gargalen, knowing that the queen was there to discuss other matters, bid farewell and left the room with his wife.

Sansa had spent most of the dinner spinning between her fingers the wooden figure her sister had given to her. Arya, on the other hand, looked as uncomfortable as her, averting her eyes whenever Rhaella looked at her. Still, it was Arya who began to speak as soon as the doors of the hall closed, finally leaving them alone.
"Sansa, I know you're not glad we came, but now that we are here, I think we deserve to know what happened to you all this time." Arya said, making an absurd effort to keep her eyes fixed on her sister. "The war ended fifteen years ago. Even if you were hurt by what happened to your son, you could have said something, given some sign that you were alive...

Daenerys Targaryen sighed, shifting in her chair.

"I'm sorry if your sister is being too keen on you, Queen Sansa ... But we're tired of our trip and your family is curious." She said very quietly, very softly, resting her hand on Jon Snow's. "And according to what Lord Varys has told us - and that is the only reason he is alive at this moment - there is something you are still hiding from us. Something that can change the course of the Seven Kingdoms. Was he right?"

Rhaella lifted her head to see how her mother reacted to those words.

Sansa Stark kept her eyes fixed on the toy, like a stubborn child.

"Sansa, please help us understand what..." Jon Snow began to speak but was interrupted immediately by his own niece.

"This is not an easy matter for my mother." Rhaella said, realizing from the corner of her eye that her voice had been enough to force her mother to take her eyes off the accursed wooden stag. "Especially after my father’s death." She swallowed, feeling the glint in Queen Daenerys's gaze, and the subtle smile that touched her lips. Almost as if she was amused. "It was me the who instructed Lord Varys to seek you in the capital so that he could invite you here and we could tell the truth..."

"The truth," Sansa interrupted, putting the toy on top of the table. Mother sighed and reached for her glass, taking a long sip of wine. "And what truth is that that you seek? Well, Lord Varys, go ahead, since it was you the one whispering these dangerous ideas into my daughter's head. " She set her glass down on the table with a thud. "Go ahead, then."

"My lady, I never whispered into..."

"Enough. I'm tired of hearing your lies." Sansa snapped, raising her hand to shield herself from Varys’ words. Rhaella closed her hand in a fist under the table. Mother had promised to be open-minded about the matter, but she had drunk a little bit much and was just embarrassing her before the queen. “I should have gotten rid of you when I could have done it.”

Lord Varys was rarely nervous, but this was one of the times he was. His life hung at the tip of many blades and his own survival depended only on his ability to justify himself.

"I never wanted to bring pain to anyone." Began Spider, his eyes on Sansa. "Much less to you, Lady Sansa. But the cause that brought me to Westeros so many years ago spoke louder... and I had to manipulate this game in order to succeed. It was greater than me, you or any of us sitting at this table. The future of the Seven Kingdoms and of mankind itself depended on what I had to do."

"How dramatic," Arya said, ironically, also drinking some wine.

"You jest, my lady... But it is dramatic indeed." The eunuch replied.

"Lord Varys, can you go to the point?" Daenerys asked quite directly.

The shadows cast by the small flames on the candles danced around Varys.

"When I was just a child, a red priest cut my balls and burned them before my eyes.”
"Seven Hells." Arya said, filling her glass again with more wine. "Why would you tell us that?"

"That is how this story begins, my lady." Varys spoke, and this time he seemed to have little regard for his life because it was clear he despised Arya Stark as much as she despised him. "I still remember how the flames rose high on the priest's brazier when he threw my parts into the fire… The pain was unbearable, and I believe I was feverish… But I am sure I heard the voice clearly. A voice emanating through the flames. My skin crawls with the simple memory of that night. More than the pain that tormented me for weeks, what I heard through the fire marked me, like a hot iron branding my skin... "

"You told me this story before," Jon Snow said coldly. He too was not a friend of the Spider.

"But I didn’t tell you what I heard in the flames, did I, Lord Snow?" asked Varys, raising a finger. "And what motivated each of my steps up here."

“So, get to the bottom of it once and for all, Spider.” Daenerys cut again, irritated. “We have no time for charades.”

“If you don’t interrupt me every time I speak, I may manage to come to the end of my tale.” Told Varys. After assuring no one else would talk, he continued. “The voice in the flames said... well, how do I explain this? The voice said that the Song of Ice and Fire resided in my blood... And that I had born with a single purpose: mend what had been broken. Forge a future with fire and ice, and make sure the God of Death would be killed.”

"Use me as a mere brooding mare," Said Sansa, attacking Varys openly.

"My lady, you are being unfair ..." Varys said, hoarsely.

"It's true," Sansa replied, pointing a finger in his direction as if accusing him of a crime. "Lord Varys believes that my children were born with one purpose only: save the world, as the prophecy says. Three heads have the dragon, and my children represent each of these heads, having in their veins ice and fire."

"Ice and fire." Daenerys said, exchanging a look with Jon Snow.

_That means something to them_, Rhaella noticed, feeling her heart leaping once again.

"I suppose you're familiar with the Blackfyre Rebellions, Your Majesty." Varys said again, trying to get back to his story.

Of course she was, like all the others around the table.

The Blackfyre Rebellions had started many years ago, in the year of 196 AC, when Daemon Blackfyre - a bastard son to King Aegon IV - rose against his older and trueborn brother, King Daeron. A civil war ensued, as did many others after that first rebellion, which one led by different bastards and descendants of Daemon Blackfyre. The whole Blackfyre Rebellion had only ended when Ser Barristan Selmy had managed to slay Maelys the Monstrous during the War of the Ninepenny Kings.

Or so it was presumed.

"Well, there was a Blackfyre left, one that no one believed it would be relevant." Lord Varys said. "Lady Rhaella Blackfyre, daughter of Daemon III Blackfyre to a pentoshi whore." Daenerys whispered something to Jon Snow’s ear again. "I don’t know much about this woman, only that she would later have children of her own, a pair of twins... Unfortunately, she died during childbirth, and
her children were sold by Rhaella’s own mother to be slaves. After selling her own grandsons, the woman had enough gold to live the rest of her life without selling her body again. Before parting from the children, however, she lied to protect them. They were Blackfyres, but they wouldn’t last long if the Targaryens were to uncover that two children of bastard lineage were still alive… So, she called them Lyend. A lie to hide their true lineage."

"How do we know this is true?" Daenerys asked, interrupting Varys once again. "It very could be a lie."

"Well, I'm the living proof, Your Majesty." Varys said, managing a sad smile. "Since I am one of those twins. My brother Daeron Lyend was the other half."

Arya Stark laughed, and this time it was clear she had had too much to drink.

"That does not prove anything."

"I have the blood of kings in my veins." Varys said, anticipating. "That was why the red priest wanted me. He wanted to burn my private parts to summon his Red God and hear what he had to say. That was how he understood how important I was, and did his best to save me from the pain he had inflicted upon me. He even helped me discover my twin brother after telling me the Blackfyre blood lived within me."

"That doesn’t make any sense." Daenerys said again, suspiring once more. "The Red God wanted to destroy our world. Why would he share with you a prophecy destined to save it? The three dragons are destined to bring down the Nightgrove."

Varys smiled as if he was already waiting for that question.

"I despise the Red God as much as you do, Your Grace. They elude us, casting false light into our eyes, making us believe in what we shouldn’t." He said. "The blade that cut me was moved by the hand of the Lord of Light, remember. I have every reason to despise him. But we are just playthings to these evil gods. The Lord of Light wanted me to bring to form this ancient prophecy, yes, and make sure the world could be saved from the threat of the Others… But that time I didn't know that. I only knew there were supposed to exist three dragon riders to save the world of an unnamed threat. The God of Death, as the voice told me. But I was just a pawn. You understand me, Lord Snow. I know you do."

Jon nodded, understanding what the old Master of Whispers was trying to tell.

"The old prophecy of the Three Dragons was given to us by the Children of the Forest. It is more than a prophecy, I believe. It's a way to truly defeat the Others." He said. "The Nightgrove can only be destroyed when three dragon riders rain their fires over the icy slopes on the far North. But the Red Priests used that prophecy in their own way, taking appropriation of its meaning… And making us believe we were following the Lord of Light’s commands to save the world. But no, the red priests only shared with us such a prophecy because they believed it was the right way for their Red God to come."

“Yes, my lord.” Varys said, nodding. “I still believe they had hoped the dragon riders wouldn’t only bring down the Nightgrove and the threat of the Others, but also engulf the world in flames as Lady Melisandre did in the end. Of course, by that time I didn't know all this too. I just knew the prophecy of the Three Dragon Riders had to be brought to form…The Red Priests wanted to bring it to form so that the Others could be destroyed, the world set ablaze and, finally, so that their God could emerge from the sacrificing fires lit.”
“Unfortunately, they failed.” Jon said. “There were three dragons, but the three dragon riders supposed to led them were brought down.”

“Yes, yes… But they didn’t fail completely.” Varys said. “Two of those dragons fought the Others in the North, making sure the threat was controlled. That was not ideal but was enough. Enough, at least, for the Red Priestess Melisandre to step further and summon her god, casting her own fires. Still, the Red God has been dealt with, but the Nightgrove stands, and the Others will come again if not stopped. The prophecy of the Three Dragons remains to be fulfilled.”

Varys set his eyes on Sansa Stark again.

"Before the events of the War of the Three Queens, I didn’t know what I know today. I didn’t know the three dragon riders existed at some point, and that the prophecy could have happened if things had aligned properly.” He sighed. “I kept on trying to bring to form this song of ice and fire, bringing into this world men or women capable of riding a dragon. So, long ago, when the Targaryens still ruled, I tried to join a daughter with the blood of the First Men and a son with the blood of Old Valyria. Ice and fire joined together, forging a lineage to rule for three thousand years."

"This is ludicrous." Arya said, shaking her head. "We should rip his tongue out."

"No." Daenerys said, raising her hand. "Go on, Lord Varys."

The Spider nodded, smiling his thanks.

“Prince Rhaegar was a fascinating man.” He started. "And very different from his father. It's a pity he died so soon because I am truly sure he would have been a great king." He gulped. "In my early days at court, I managed to get close to him and told him what I have now shared with you. He became not only fascinated with the Prophecy of the Three Dragons, but also curious. He traveled to the Citadael to study ancient books about divination and prophecy… And when he returned, he smiled and told me he was destined to bring the prophecy into its form. That, I still remember today, happened the night before he left to Harrenhal’s tournament.

“When news reached me about him kidnapping Lyanna Stark, I knew what he had done… And I was glad, even though the war was soon ripped apart in war. But if Rhaegar and Lyanna were to have a child, they could bring to form the old prophecy.” Varys looked toward the table to Jon Snow. “Well, for years I believed Rhaegar had failed. I have kept many secrets, but not this one. When Prince Rhaegar was killed on the Trident, and news came about Lyanna Stark also being dead, I knew I had failed. I didn't even suspect the bastard Lord Eddard had brought to Winterfell, so sure I was about my failure. How could I bring the prophecy to form if there were no Targaryens left?”

“This brings me back to my brother, Daeron Lyend.” Varys said. "I met him when I was seventeen-years-old. It wasn’t easy to track him, but I did it before leaving Westeros to try my luck with the Targaryens. My brother was fighting as a sellsword in the Golden Company, so I went to him, prepared to convince him to fulfill the prophecy since I couldn't. My brother laughed at me when he saw me for the first time, surprised to see a reflection of himself. He knew he had a twin, but he had never hoped to find me. However, when I told him about the voice in the flames, he laughed again and told me to stop chasing the Red Gods. We took our separate ways then, and I traveled to Westeros, sure I would find here another way to fulfill the prophecy... I climbed my way to the throne room, and worked, extending the web all around the Seven Kingdoms, combing bastards everywhere to find someone with silver hair. I tried my luck with Rhaegar and saw him fail. I was truly desperate then, sure I would never succeed. If only I had known Rhaegar had had a son…

But then, on the aftermath of the war, when I got back to work, something happened. A friend of
mine, that had become Magister in Pentos, sent me a child. A young little man, no more than six years old, that had been sent to him by a dying man that looked just like me."

Sansa sniffed, at the end of the table, holding back her tears.

"The boy was called Daemon Lyend." Varys said, smiling. "And he had been sent by my brother. I found out later that Daeron died with greyscale not long after that, and wanted to save his child and make my wish true. Make my son a king, he had told my friend Illyrio. So, I took the child under my wing and sent him here to the protection of Prince Doran. Prince Doran knew about him, of course, harvesting through years the possibility of marrying to his own daughter to the young bastard child... And Daemon grew, an educated little man, taught to fulfill a prophecy one day.

"I had only to wait for the right time."

Varys stopped for a few seconds, to sip a bit of wine.

"And then Jon Arryn died, and the Realm was without a Hand." He continued, placing again the cup on the table. "And I knew the time had come. When Robert Baratheon departed to Winterfell to invite Eddard Stark to be his new hand, I send for little Daemon. I hid him at court as a kitchen boy and then later moved him to the court, placing a harp on his hands... "

"Making sure he seduced me." Sansa told, coldly. "So that ice and fire could lay in bed, and forge the dynasty to bring your damn prophecy." She retorted, drinking again. "I was never a queen. I was a mere brooding mare."

Varys opened his mouth, but no word came out of it for a moment.

"In the end, he truly loved you, my lady." He said. "And so did you."

Sansa looked at him sternly.

"Do not ever tell me again that he loved me in the end." She said, furious. "He may have loved you, Spider, but I do not. I have kept you here to honor Daemon's memory, but if you say that again... I swear I will let my sister rip your tongue."

"I will gladly take the fall for it, my lady. As I told you many times." He said, smiling, and his eyes turned then to Rhaella. "Because my mission is finally done."

Sansa gulped, stretching again her hand to the cup.

She knew he was right.

"A prophecy." Arya mused, astounded. "I cannot believe this."

"But I can." Daenerys said, nodding. "I saw the true prophecy when I visited Asshai. The High Priestess showed me the flames, too. And I saw there the three faces that should ride the dragons. I saw Jon, myself... and the boy I never had the chance to meet." Sansa looked across the table at the Dragon Queen. "Brandon Stark."

"If Victarion Greyjoy had not taken control of Viserion, we could have done it." Jon continued at her side. "The Nightgrove could have been destroyed and the peace secured. But he could not do it." Jon traded a glance with Daenerys once again. "And for many years we have feared the prophecy cannot be mended. We have two dragon eggs, but they never hatched."

Rhaella had always imagined herself hatching a dragon egg. Riding the dragon. Becoming a legend
of this New Age. That's why she had sent Varys to Dragonlair, and why Mother insisted so much on keeping her behind walls.

Her dreams were coming true.

"They may hatch now." Daenerys said, looking again at Rhaella with curiosity. "Your children have the blood of the dragon, Queen Sansa. It's their destiny."

"No." Sansa said, shaking her head.

This is enough.

"Yes." Rhaella stepped in over her mother.

"No." Sansa repeated, loudly. "This was not supposed to happen. Me and your father have sacrificed a lot to prevent this."

"Mother, please, do not humiliate me now... You said you would accept my decision."

"To let you die?!" Sansa said. "You will lose yourself in their games. You will die, Rhaella..."

"Or I may win." She replied, before turning her face to the other side of the table. "I want to claim my inheritance, Your Grace. I want to do what my father should have done. I want to have a chance to hatch a dragon." Her breathing was fast, and her heart was ready to jump out of her mouth. "This is why I sent Lord Varys."

Daenerys smiled, triumphantly.

"You are an ambitious little child, Lady Rhaella. But I don't want to meddle between you and your mother."

"I'm a grown woman, and I can decide for myself." Rhaella said. "Please, Your Grace, let me have a chance to prove myself. My father and mother tried to protect me for years, because of what happened to my half-brother. But I cannot live on the shadow of a ghost, hiding behind walls. Not knowing that I could be out there flying a dragon, destroying the Nightgrove and even ..."

"Getting a crown upon your head." Daenerys said, to Rhaella’s surprise. The Queen could read her like an open book, and still smile amused with her ambition. "That's what your father was destined to do, wasn't it, child?"

"Don't you dare talk to my daughter that way." Sansa replied again. "And do not talk about my husband."

Daenerys maintained her smile, but she did not open her mouth again.

The Mother of Dragons was right, though. Varys should have told her that bit of the story. Many years ago, after fleeing King's Landing with mother, father had traveled to Sunspear. That was where Rhaella would be born later, while her father was still preparing to march to war. That had been part of the plan all along. While the Three Queens fought among each other, father was busy gathering an army for himself - the Golden Company had even traveled to Dorne to swear his swords to the cause. He even had the support of the Dornish Princes. After the death of Trystane Martell to the fires of Daenery's dragons, they had decided to support another cause, another dragon.

But her father would never march.
The news of Edwyle's death had taken mother down into a spiral of grief and fear. Finding out the truth about who her lover really was, she also felt betrayed and hopeless. And there, when Rhaella had been born to this world, she had asked her husband: "Do not let war and crowns take you away from me, Modaen. Do not pull my children to these bloody battlefields. They do not deserve it. Promise me."

For the love and respect he had for her, he put his sword down.

Lord Varys, of course, would beg him to ponder his decision again in the following years, as well as most of his friends in Dorne. But Daemon had made a promise, and he lived by it. Later, he would travel to the Great Council of Duskendale - posing again as a bard - to see with his own eyes the game being settled. When he returned home, he had simply said: "You were right. These bloody games will only end in more blood."

They married a few days later, and father never left mother’s side again.

Even so, that was their story.

Not Rhaella's.

"Sansa, we would like you to return North." Jon Snow said, after a few seconds of awkward silence. "We know you are wounded, and you felt betrayed by Robb when he did not fight for you, but ... Winterfell will always be your home. You would not be alone anymore. Rickon is eager to see you again, too… and your children could grow with their cousins, as we did long before. We could mend our differences and even ... "

"The North is not my home since father said yes to Robert Baratheon."

"And yet, this is not home too." Jon said. "Not if you are living in the shadows."

"In the shadows, no one sees me." Sansa said.

"But I see from the shadows." Rhaella said. "And I still want more. I want to go to Dragonlair, to dance in a ball and get a flower from a knight in a Tournament."

Daenerys kept smiling each time Rhaella opened her mouth. Her mother, though, was done with the evening. Sansa stood up in that moment and made a gesture toward her daughter so she would also get up.

"We will resume the talks tomorrow." Sansa announced, bitterly. Her hand danced through the table, catching the wooden stag. "If you will all excuse me, I will retire for my chambers."

Sansa did not even say her goodbyes, moving out of the room quickly.

"With your excuse, Your Majesty." Rhaella said, curtsying before the queen as Lady Nyna had taught her. "Lord Jon. Lady Arya."

"You seem a lot like your mother when she was younger, child." Arya said, looking at her from head to toe. "She also wanted to be part of something greater, to travel to the capital and fall in love... Maybe you should heed her words, girl. She may be right in one thing or two."

Rhaella smile faltered a little, but still, she managed to say a few words.

"I will, Lady Arya. Now, if you will excuse me..."
Her mother was waiting for her in the corridor, outside the dining hall.

"I know what you're trying to do." Sansa said, coldly. "You think the Targaryen Queen will make you her heir. I saw how you looked at her."

Rhaella raised her chin.

"I'm the blood cousin of Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen. I have the blood of Daemon Blackfyre on my veins, mother. That makes me, and those little dragons that I call my brothers, the next of kin to the queen. You know it. Even father said it one time. We should be heirs to the Throne, not that Arryn bastard ruling the Vale as if he is already the Lord Protector of the Seven Realms."

Sansa slapped her.

"You are a stupid, little girl, Rhaella." She said. "I wish someone would have slapped me when I had those dreams in my mind."

"You slapped me…" Rhaella said, touching her face. Tears prickled in her eyes. “Even after you said you would respect my decision…”

"Your life is over the respect I have for your decision, girl.” Sansa replied, bitterly.

Sandor Clegane appeared at the end of the corridor, certainly attracted by the sound of their voices.

"Go to bed now.” Mother ordered, averting her eyes from her. “We will talk again tomorrow."

Rhaella returned to her quarters immediately, feeling tears streaming down her face.

As soon as she opened the bedroom door, she realized that her day was still far from over. Lewyn Martell was waiting for her by the bedroom window, staring at the bay and the green dragon sleeping right where he had landed.

"What are you doing here?” Rhaella asked through gritted teeth.

It was the last thing she needed.

Lewyn turned. He was a handsome young man, with Martell's dark skin and light green eyes. Her hair, equally black and curly, melted like waves whenever Rhaella touched them. Two years ago, when Princess Arianne had sent him to serve as a squire to her father, he had been a true gift to the boring daily life of Salt Shore. In half a dozen nights, Rhaella decided she would surrender her virginity to him if only to irritate her parents. And so she had done, always in secret, allowing him to climb to her bed often.

But since her father had died, Lewyn had become a liability.

"I wanted to know how dinner went." He said, approaching her. He noticed the tears on her face and grew serious immediately. “What happened?”

"You could have waited for tomorrow." Rhaella mumbled, locking the door behind her. "You know very well that Sandy is starting to grow suspicious about us. The last thing we need now is to get caught in bed while the royal party is around."

Lewyn rolled his eyes and threw himself onto the mattress.

"What matters if they find out? Soon, you will be able to do whatever you want."
Rhaella watched him with irritation. Could she have a quiet night? That was the only thing she wanted at that moment.

"I still cannot do everything I want, though," she said, sitting cautiously on the edge of the bed. "Do you want to risk my future when we're so close to having everything?"

Lewyn sat on the bed, his arms surrounding her waist, just as vigorous as chains.

"Your future ... or our future?" He asked, kissing her on the tip of his nose.

He still thinks I'm going to marry him.

"Our future, yes," lied Rhaella, averting her face to escape his kisses once again. "But lately only I have been fighting."

"Did you see the size of that dragon?" Lewyn asked, changing the topic of conversation. "You would be the most powerful woman in Westeros if you could have your own dragon. Even if Queen Daenerys decides not to take you to court and name you her heiress, you could burn her in her own castle and steal her throne."

Rhaella laughed with the idea. Lewyn was incredibly stupid sometimes.

"We'll never get to that much, my sweet Lewyn," she said. "I am sure that with the right incentives, and the whispers of Lord Varys, she will make me her heir very soon." She looked at her lover, allowing him to kiss her on the lips. "Although I wouldn’t say no to a dragon ... Of course, I would have to go with my Uncle Jon to the Tower of Night to try to hatch a dragon egg ..."

"Or you could claim this dragon." Lewyn replied, smiling. "If anything happened to your uncle..."

"Are you jealous of my uncle?" Rhaella said, slapping his chest. "I won’t shed any more blood."

"You did not complain when we poisoned your father."

Rhaella hit him again, but this time she slapped him in the face.

"What did I tell you about it?" She said, plucking a finger into his mouth. "You want someone to hear us? We may well end up with our heads on spikes, you fool." She inserted another finger in his mouth, catching his tongue. "Even my mother would want me dead."

Lewyn grimaced when she pulled his tongue.

"Is that what you want?" Rhaella asked, pressing her body against him. She could already feel how hard he had grown in his pants. "To have us killed?"

She freed his tongue, pushing him away back to the bed.

"You are mad, Rhaella." He said, touching his lips.

His tongue may hurt, but he was smiling.

"I'm your most faithful vassal, Your Grace..." Lewyn sitting on the bed again. He started to loosen up the ribbons of Rhaella's dress. "And I am here to serve you as you wish."

Rhaella sighed. She had not that in mind for the night, and was not truly on the mood... But maybe it was the thing she needed.
"In that case ..." She said, allowing a smile to touch her lips. "Prove the value of your tongue, my faithful vassal, or I might ask Sandor for your filthy tongue before it's the end of us."

And so Lewyn proved, his mouth sliding along the dress, his hands finding their way to her breasts, as his head disappeared beneath her skirt.

Rhaella stared at the ceiling of her bedroom as Lewyn kissed her as only he could do.

The roar of the dragon outside made her even more excited.

Powerful.

It was her time to play.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** It’s done.

I first published this story in May 2016. Three years later, it ends. It’s not how I wanted to end it, but at least it’s done. The final part of the story is summoned up in around 120 pages and 60K words. I believe I would have needed more than 300 pages to actually write all of this with the original POV structure. And at least 10 years, right?

Most of the ideas and twists that I have now shared with you have been on my mind since the very beginning of this story. Some of them I managed to write down better than others, but the final result makes this a story I would like to read. And that is the reason why I started this.

I always wanted to explore the mythology around the Others, as well as the one behind the Red God of Asshai. Since the book series is named *A Song of Ice and Fire*, I wanted to create an enemy equivalent to the Others, but that played with fire. The dragons are meant to be the fire, I think, but I wanted to exert the power of the red faith of Melisandre and the legend of Azor Ahai. I don’t know if you liked it.

I know some plots are off, there are holes in some storylines, but I tried to do my best with the time and resources I had to finish this. It's hard to write down about so many complex characters, placed in a world just as complex and managing the time and patience to write and rewrite and rewrite again all the tale. I made a lot of research, especially regarding the military points. Some of the numbers of the armies, as some of you pointed out, were off, but I wanted to give you the greatest battles and prove that Shireen had enough power to strike against all the others united. She was, after all, representing not only her cause but the magisters of Essos who wanted to get rid of Daenerys.
Adding to that, I have struggled with my English writing, as I told and apologized constantly, so managing to write a tale with almost 200 000 words has to be an achievement, right?

But putting this story down to rest, I can finally focus on other stories, original stories, and reflect how good it was to write this one: how much I practiced my writing, how much I learned and got better thanks to your reviews, and the pleasure I had from all of it.

And I must confess: writing this last chapter, this epilogue in Rhaella’s point of view, I started wondering: how would it be her story? In fact, how would it be a story set in the future, with the sons and daughters of the characters of this fanfic? Well, let me know if you are interested in reading something like that. I can always try it if I have the audience.

Rhaella and her twin brothers are meant to be the answer to a prophecy, but the young princess, as you have seen it, is tormented by her past and has an ambition that led her even to kill her own father. I believe she has a touch of the Targaryen madness. And it was the perfect character to give you a bittersweet ending.

A lot happened in three years. I have lost my father, and then my grandfather, both important pillars in my life. I have moved from my home to build a new one. I started and finished my master’s degree. I changed jobs. And now I finished this. I feel relieved, and I’m now ready to write something else.

So, to all of you who have read this story, who have accompanied me in this journey, either expressing your love or hate…

Thank you.

A COURT OF LIES

I'm also considering writing another AU fanfic about what would have happened if Renly hadn't died. A few years ago, I read amazing fanfic called The Parliament of Fowls by Silver Phantom 2 (check it out, it is really good) that explored this AU, but where the future of Westeros was decided with a kingsmoot called by Catelyn Stark. I would like to explore what would have happened if there
was not a kingsmoot, but war resumed.

Here is a little sneak peek of what would this story be:

*Renly defeats Stannis during the Battle of the Peach.*

*Robb turns against the Iron Islands.*

*Daenerys sails to Dorne after leaving Qarth.*

*The Lannister plot their survival.*

*Jon’s vows are shaken.*

If you are interested in reading something like this, let me know.
Hi there. After a few weeks of pause, I have updated my new story for all of you who might be interested in it. You can find it through my bio. I have decided to postpone my story about Renly surviving, because I don't feel prepared for it at the moment. Instead, I'm writing an AU about what would have happened if Cersei had married Rhaegar as Tywin intended. I expect this to be a shorter fanfiction, with smaller chapters. Here is a first look.

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**ACCURSED CROWN**

AU. What would have happened if Cersei Lannister had married Rhaegar Targaryen? Would her love for Jaime survive? And how would have the Tournament of Harrenhal played out? And Robert's Rebellion? And even Maggy's prophecy? This work tries to give an alternative story considering all this questions.

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**PROLOGUE**

276 AC

"I want to tell you a secret, my dear."

The words were almost lost in the din filling the room.

It was not only the music that echoed through the great hall of Lannisport House, but also the sound of over a hundred nobles eating and drinking, retelling the events of the first day of jousting. Even Cersei had retold how Prince Rhaegar had defeated uncle Tygett so bravely during the jousts. Her friend Melara had been afraid to see blood.

"A secret, aunt? How mysterious." She said, very quietly, barely raising her eyes to face Aunt Genna. Fortunately, they were some places away from father, far enough not to be heard.

"You have to promise you won't tell anyone. Especially your father." Her eyes glinted in amusement, as if in possession of all the secrets in the world.

Cersei Lannister nudged her head forward, getting closer to her aunt.

"You don't need my word, aunt. I would never betray you. But perhaps you should lower your voice." Her eyes darted around them.

It was a great feast, not so grand as the one expected for the end of the tourney. The laughter hovered in the air, the ladies whispered with their eyes set on the prince, and they all seemed to revel in the happy, warm days ahead of them, even though summer was fading away.
The Tournament in honor of Prince Viserys' birth was all she had ever wanted. The first day of the tournament had just ended, and a feast had been waiting for them inside doors, as well as music and wine. Guests from every corner of the Seven Kingdoms had come, following King Aerys and his heir to celebrate the royal birth in the West. Her father himself was at the head of the table, as the host of such an event. He was smiling to whatever the king was saying. Not actually smiling.

Faking it.

"Actually, I should save it to myself, but I'm finding it hard keeping my lips sealed every time I look at you." Aunt Genna said, amused. "I have noticed how you blush whenever the Prince looks at you."

Me and all the other women, Cersei thought to herself. Even Aunt Genna looked at the Targaryen Prince with lust.

Her eyes returned to Rhaegar Targaryen, briefly. He was beautiful, with deep purple eyes and silver-blond hair, like the old tales Septa Sarnella had read to her about the Targaryen kings. She had even noticed the prince's fingers, so long and elegant, caressing the strings of a harp in the shape of a dragon, as if he were actually touching a woman's body. Whenever he looked at her, she blushed, yes. A weakness. Once, he had even dared to smile, making her smile back like a fool.

But it was inevitable.

"Yes." Cersei replied, blushing again. Immediately, she felt slightly irritated. "I'm afraid I'm not doing my best hiding my feelings."

"Hiding? Seven help me, my dear, must I remind you that you are only eleven years old? Don't be so hard on yourself."

I must be hard on myself, a voice said in her mind. After all, father had great plans for her future. And to be worthy of them, she had to be a lioness, just like Tywin Lannister.

Even so, she simply smiled, before looking directly into her aunt's eyes.

"So, will you go on teasing me or will you finally spill your secret, aunt?"

After mother's death, aunt Genna had become a mother to her and Jaime. And even to the little creature in the nursery. Although she had married that oaf of House Frey, she was truly the sister of Tywin Lannister. They shared the same cunning and wit, perhaps in different ways.

"Your father will announce your betrothal to the Prince during the ending feast."

Two days.

Cersei eyes glinted, and a smile touched her lips.

Inside her chest, her heart raced again.

Could she be truly nervous? Well, yes, she could. An announcement would change everything. Make it official.

Jaime.

Oh, he wouldn't like it, especially if father were to take her to King's Landing upon his next departure.
But it wouldn't be entirely a surprise.

A part of her had known for a long time that a crown awaited for her in the future. Since she was seven years old, actually. The day father had confided to her that one day she would be queen.

"Are you sure?" She asked, finding it hard not to smile like a fool.

"I heard it from your father, my dear." Genna said, smiling as much as her. She got closer to Cersei, her eyes darting toward the prince. "He is good, yes. He will be a very good husband... And a very good king, I daresay."

And I will be queen by his side.

"You must prepare yourself for the announcement, of course." Aunt Genna said, placing a hand upon hers. "Your father gave me instructions to gather half a dozen dressmakers. We shall arrange a new dress for you. It's important you look your best, my dear. Maybe a golden dress or..."

Cersei shook her head, pulling her hand immediately.

"Not gold." She said, raising her chin. "Red, aunt. I'm a daughter of Casterly Rock, and I shall wear red."

Genna looked at her for a few seconds, her mouth open. But then she laughed.

"You are your father's daughter, my dear." Aunt said, patting her hand softly. "Red it will be, then."

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